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Empowering the Parking Lot Parent

A CATECHIST'S GUIDE
TO COACHING
FAMILY SPIRITUALITY



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INTRODUCTION

COACHING LENDS STRENGTH TO OTHERS UNTIL THEY FIND THEIR OWN POWER.

Catechist coaches empower parents by leading them to find their own voice, to name and to claim their personal spirituality, and to be comfortable in passing it on to their children. Catechist coaches are encouragers. They give courage and share vision.

Catechist coaches become catalysts of grace in two ways: they equip parents with tools that promote a culture of spirituality in the home and, in so doing, they foster parent confidence and self-reliance. Stated another way, the goal of catechist coaching is to develop within parents the qualities and competences that they require in order to fulfill their mission as “first heralds of the faith” for their children (*Lumen Gentium*, 11).

Faith is a God-given grace. Though not the authors of faith, parents are uniquely positioned to awaken the sense of God, to nourish the seed of faith, to introduce their children to prayer and prayer ways, to facilitate age-appropriate growth, to integrate faith within the daily context of family life, and, thereby, to help children give expression to their faith. Many contemporary parents desire help in order to fulfill the catechetical nature of their parent

vocation. A catechist coach can be the answer to their prayer.

Family catechesis is key to evangelization. Seared into our catechetical souls is Pope John Paul II’s 1979 insight:

Family catechesis precedes, accompanies and enriches all other forms of catechesis....Encouragement must be given to the individuals or institutions that, through person-to-person contacts, through meetings, and through all kinds of pedagogical means, help parents to perform their task. The service they are doing to catechesis is beyond price. (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 68)

Subsequent Church documents, particularly the *General Directory for Catechesis*, 227, and *Directory for Catechesis*, 228, repeated Pope John Paul’s call to catechists to create pastoral initiatives that support parents in their educational task.

You, the catechist, embody the Church’s hope for family evangelization. You are a witness to the living traditions of the Church and a mediator who enables, prepares, and inte-

grates new disciples into Christ's ecclesial body, the Church. You received "a particular call from God that, when accepted in faith, empowers [you] for the service of the transmission of faith" (*Directory for Catechesis*, 112). You are positioned to empower parents to fulfill their vocation/mission with confidence.

With this book and through your efforts to coach family spirituality you will empower parents to provide for their children a Christian education that is "more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more on-going and daily than structured into periods" (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 255). You will become an instrument of casual catechesis for families.

Under optimum conditions your role is helpful. Under contemporary conditions your role is crucial and challenging. Why? Some parents are more comfortable providing transportation to a religious education program than in assuming the role of "first heralds of the Gospel for their children" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 39).

This book, *Empowering the Parking Lot Parent: A Catechist's Guide to Coaching Family Spirituality*, focuses on ways to equip parents to be the spiritual leaders in their homes. It includes reproducible parent handouts that are self-explanatory and, therefore, useful even if merely delivered to cars in the parking lot. It presents practical, spiritual, and inspirational insights that lead parents to an awareness and experience of Catholic traditions that feed the spirit.

Varied Uses of the Handouts

Versatility is encouraged. Though the material, handouts, or exercises are intended for the parent community, sometimes you may choose

to have children be bearers of the message. The ways to achieve the goal of coaching family spirituality are limited only by your imagination, time, and energy. Methods include, but are not limited to, the following ten options.

1 BOOK CLUB

Launch a Family Spirituality Book Club, wherein small groups of parents gather monthly or periodically to share insights that a handout evokes. Accommodate the complicated schedules of parents by eliciting sufficient volunteers to host sessions at various times, in person or via a digital forum.

2 SOCIAL MEDIA EXCHANGE

Set up Facebook groups or other social media sites that are more likely to invite younger parents to share ideas, information, and practices on the focused issue.

3 VICARIOUS LEARNING EVENT

Use the material provided or invite parents to submit their own insights in advance of the event. For example, spiritual practices to incorporate at home. Choreograph a session where the ideas are read aloud with pause time in between. This provides a glimpse into the spirituality of other families and may lead the listener to gain insight and/or validation. End the presentation with a period for silent reflection before inviting participants to share thoughts either aloud in the general assembly or within small groups.

4 PANEL DISCUSSION

Host a pre-planned/ pre-practiced panel discussion where panelists speak to the given topic. Using the material on the handout, they might

express what resonates with them, what is a new idea to them, and what they wish to add to the topic. Open the discussion to audience participation. The event could be in person or by means of a video conferencing platform.

5 EVENING OF REFLECTION

Create a quiet, restful atmosphere in a candlelit room or church. Position volunteers (parents or children) at various spots throughout the space so that recited parts will bounce from here and there. Use the material provided in the book or engage parents to submit their own reflections. Appoint significant pause time between each recitation. Begin and end the session with music.

6 MASS MEDITATION

Some activities are appropriate to use as a post-Communion reflection at Mass. Some lend themselves to multiple speakers or, at least, two voices alternating.

7 IN-CLASS ACTIVITY

Some activities, particularly liturgical season ideas, may become the focus of a student lesson. Commission the student to replicate the lesson at home and to take digital photos of the family that illustrate the lesson. Combine the photos into a class digital presentation and make it available to families. In this way families in-service each other.

8 STUDENT CHORUS

Children like to perform, and parents usually support performances by attending. Several handouts easily adapt to student recitation, demonstration, drama, or parent imitation. Arrange for the students to perform the mes-

sage either by sticking to the printed material or contributing their own examples.

9 PARKING LOT DELIVERY

Hand-deliver the handout or newsletter to cars in the church/school parking lot.

10 PARENT SURVIVAL GUIDE

It has been said that faith builds on nature. Likewise, physical, emotional, and psychological development precedes spiritual development. “Parent Chat with Sister Pat,” a 7-Episode Video Series, addresses foundational issues of child-rearing. Topics include building blocks of self-esteem, raising self-reliant/resilient children, parent authority style and self-discipline, connecting human needs with behavior, establishing a home climate for character development, and raising children of ethical character. The series is available at vimeo.com/ondemand/parentchatwithsisterpat or via Bayard Faith Resources @ 1-833-865-7819.

Chapter 1

Christian Child-Rearing Practices

Grandma and five-year-old Brennan were exploring Grandma's bedroom. Grandma pointed to various objects and explained their meaning or history. Eventually she pointed to the wall crucifix and said, "Brennan, this is Jesus." With a hint of exasperation in his voice and a gentle huff Brennan replied, "I KNOW, Grandma. He's in my house too. He's God's son." Catechesis had occurred in Brennan's home, by way of a casual comment.

With fourth-century Saint John Chrysostom, I ask: "What is equal to training the soul and forming the mind of one that is young?" I am compelled to respond: "Nothing else comes close!" Authors both ecclesial and secular agree with Catholic educator Catherine McNamee:

A parent influences the physical, psychological and religious development of a child initially and powerfully. A parent is the fundamental role model

and first teacher whom the child experiences. Simply by living in the family, a child observes and begins to imitate the parent's actions, attitudes, beliefs and values. Children will have many teachers in the course of their lifetime, but the role of parent is unique. (*Momentum*, 22, p.3)

Indeed, parents are, the "first and foremost educators of their children. [Their] role is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it" (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 3). Let catechist coaches support parents in their efforts to fulfill their vocation.

Echoing *Lumen Gentium*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, *Familiaris Consortio*, and *Evangelli Nuntiandi*, the *General Directory for Catechesis* recognized parents as "the primary educators in the faith." Each document emphasizes the home as primary in passing on the faith. Most recently, the *Directory for Catechesis* reaffirmed

those teachings and, like the earlier *General Directory*, named four essential and privileged elements of child-rearing: “the awakening of the sense of God; the first steps in prayer; education of the moral conscience; formation in the Christian sense of human love, understood as a reflection of the love of God the Father, the Creator” (DC, 227).

Like a sacrament, Christian parenting leaves an indelible mark, a decisive trace on the soul of a child. Reaffirming *Catechesi Tradendae* (68), the *General Directory for Catechesis* proclaimed:

The witness of Christian life given by parents in the family comes to children with tenderness and parental respect. Children thus perceive and joyously live the closeness of God and of Jesus made manifest by their parents in such a way that this first Christian experience frequently leaves *decisive traces which last throughout life* [italics mine]. This childhood religious awakening which takes place in the family is irreplaceable. It is consolidated when, on the occasion of certain family events and festivities, “care is taken to explain in the home the Christian or religious content of these events.” It is deepened all the more when parents comment on the more methodical catechesis which their children later receive in the Christian community and help them to appropriate it. Indeed, “family catechesis precedes...accompanies and enriches all forms of catechesis.” (GDC, 226)

Child-rearing requires patient, steady care over time. Whether trying to provide a foundation

for security, positive self-esteem, social awareness, a work ethic, or awakening the sense of God within a child, it takes time for formative education to take root. Nineteenth-century English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray summarized the process in a four-line verse:

Plant an act; reap a habit.

Plant a habit; reap a virtue or vice.

Plant a virtue or vice; reap a character.

Plant a character; reap a destiny.

Pope Francis reduced this quatrain to a single thought: “Virtue is a conviction that has become a steadfast inner principle of operation” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 267). We can apply the word “virtue” to spiritual or secular matters. Regardless of the focus/issue, it is true that “good habits need to be developed. Even childhood habits can help to translate important interiorized values into sound and steady ways of acting....The strengthening of the will and the repetition of specific actions are the building blocks of moral conduct” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 266).

A moral life is a life of love. In his exhortation *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis explained that “moral education has to do with cultivating freedom through ideas, incentives, practical applications, stimuli, rewards, examples, models, symbols, reflections, encouragement, dialogue, and a constant rethinking of our own way of doing things; all these can help develop those stable interior principles that lead us spontaneously to do good” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 267). The goal of family spirituality is to create a culture of child-rearing practices that likely lead to freely chosen habits and dispositions that become personally chosen, interiorized values that define the child for life.

Child-rearing is a challenge, to say the least! And Christian child-rearing calls forth an additional skill set. Pope Francis commented:

Parents are also responsible for shaping the will of their children, fostering good habits and a natural inclination to goodness....Moral formation should always take place with active methods and a dialogue that teaches through sensitivity and by using a language children can understand. It should also take place inductively, so that children can learn for themselves the importance of certain values, principles and norms rather than by imposing these as absolute and unquestionable truths.

(Amoris Laetitia, 264)

Infusion is the goal, not mere external observances. Christian parents strive to create a culture of spirituality within their home where awareness of God and godly ways are like the air we breathe, second nature to us, relaxed, casual, and spontaneous, not rigid, imposed, artificial, or afterthought. Of course, this implies that the parent has a spiritual history or is open to discovering faith. That is where you, the catechist-coach, and this book enter the picture.

What follows are suggested ways to coach parents in Christian child-rearing:

- Kerygma Parenting (Part 1): Recollections of the Lorenc Family Catechesis—trace the ways that one couple provided family catechesis from pre-school years to adolescence;
 - Kerygma Parenting (Part 2): Ten Home Practices that Promote a Culture of Spirituality;
 - Kerygma Parenting (Part 3): Classroom Practices that Easily Translate into Home Practices;
 - Building Blocks of Heart-Centered Spirituality—reflect on the potential of environment, rituals, customs, and personal example to be instruments for catechizing children.
- These practices combine to create an ambiance, atmosphere, or climate of spiritual awareness within the home. They foster a culture of Catholic family spirituality.

Vicarious Learning

(See Information Sheet 1)

Vicarious learning is knowledge experienced in the imagination through the feelings or actions of another person. This allows us to gain new information or to examine our practices without feeling threatened or defensive. Vicarious learning enables parents to imagine new parenting possibilities and to re-envision their family life.

There are various ways a catechist coach can offer vicarious learning: a pertinent article or newsletter, a helpful parenting video or

film, observing a panel discussion or talk show, reading the thoughts of other parents, and listening to other parents share their experiences and insights.

Arrange a gathering to share the wisdom of parents. Follow the sharing with a period for silent reflection before inviting participants to share thoughts either aloud in the general assembly or within small groups. Use social media to achieve the same goal or present the material as a post-Communion reflection at a Sunday liturgy, ideally on Holy Family Sunday.

With this last scenario in mind, ask two questions of “30-something” parents: (1) How did your parents transmit/communicate/pass on faith (in God) to you? (2) What advice can you offer to first-time parents to help them pass on the faith to their children? Similarly, ask grandparents: (1) How did you try to pass on the faith to your children? (2) What advice can you offer to new parents?

You might use these or questions of your own choosing with the adults in your parish. Promise anonymity, if that is appropriate. Let them know that you want to share publicly their words of wisdom.

Consider adapting the parent wisdom in one of three ways:

- Have various adults each read aloud one of their contributions. Pause between each reading for conversation;
- Distribute Information Sheet 1. Provide time for private reading and discussion;

- Invite parish parents and grandparents to respond to the two questions and to be ready to share their thoughts to an audience.

Silent Witness

Ralph Waldo Emerson quipped: “What you do speaks so loudly, I cannot hear what you say.” Here are some ways that parents can intentionally witness to their faith without using words. With other catechists, brainstorm ideas to add to this starter set of ideas. And/or engage the adult community in identifying ways that parents can *intentionalize* their faith witness. Determine a way to coach parents with these kinds of ideas.

Kerygma Parenting

(See Information Sheet 2)

Kerygma, explained Pope Francis, “needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 164). Kerygma begins in the home, and parents assume the privileged role of serving as kerygma agents.

Kerygma (“first announcement” or “principal announcement”) proclaims:

**Jesus Christ loves you;
he gave his life to save you;
and now he is living at your side
every day
to enlighten, strengthen,
and free you.**

(*Evangelii Gaudium*, 164)

Vicarious Learning

Ideas for Passing on the Faith to Children

In what ways do parents pass on the faith to their children? The following recollections from the lives of real-life parents provide some insights into this process. Take time to read through each one. Then reflect on your own experience. What advice would you add to first-time parents to help them pass on the faith to their children?

New Father, Age 32

(Brian Lorenc)

"My parents were very active in their faith and made sure it was part of our everyday life. They regularly attended Mass with us, prayed before meals and bedtime, read us Bible stories as children, and encouraged my sister and me to participate in activities such as altar serving and youth choir. My mom, in particular, was very active in the church and served as our youth minister and confirmation director for many years."

ADVICE TO FIRST-TIME PARENTS ■ *"Make your faith part of your regular life, and it will be passed on to your children naturally."*

Single Woman, Age 35

(Erin Straw)

"We four kids and parents always sat together as a family for dinner without TV or radio, and we said grace before

meals. At bedtime my mom or dad would say prayers with us. One of our First Holy Communion presents was a children's Mass book so that we could follow along and start to learn the meaning of what we were saying. I loved that book and brought it with me to Saturday evening Mass. We went to Catholic school starting in kindergarten, so we learned even more about our faith through school."

ADVICE TO FIRST-TIME PARENTS ■

"Bring faith into everyday conversations by describing the good deeds and actions we are doing that God would like. Hang a cross in every room and explain what it stands for. Go weekly to Mass, and help your child participate in a way appropriate to their age level. Send them to Catholic school or a parish catechetical program so that they receive teaching both at home and at school. Offer bedtime prayer every night. And make sure that you tell your children how much you love them every day."

RCIA Dad, Age 38

(Jabin Kille)

"Growing up in a household with a Baptist minister as a father, faith in God was everywhere. We ate almost all of our meals together, and each meal was preceded with a blessing. Every evening, we were serenaded to sleep by our mother's favorite gospel song from her time in the church choir. In addition to these daily routines, we attended various faith services—Passover, Taiko Drumming, talks by the Dalai Lama—all of which were presented without a Christian framework. For me, the true formation of faith in God came through these faith services. I came to realize that, just like all others who practiced their individual faith, I too had a calling deep inside that only felt satisfied when I professed my faith and began to walk through life with God. As an adult I participated in the RCIA at my parish, and I entered into full communion with the Catholic Church."

ADVICE TO FIRST-TIME PARENTS ■

"Support your child and his/her path. Have faith in your children. Through your faith, they will learn to live with

their beliefs. If you treat their beliefs with openness, they will learn to listen to God and be open when God calls."

Mother of Three, Age 41

(Claire Ralph)

"Every Sunday we attended Mass, even while on vacation. On Christmas Eve, the five of us would go to confession. I remember loving the quiet of the church and seeing the manger scene at the front of the church. We always said prayers before we went to sleep. It wasn't together as a family, but mom or dad would pray with me individually in my bedroom. I remember having discussions about faith with my parents and how they made me feel that I could ask them anything or come to them with any questions."

ADVICE TO FIRST-TIME PARENTS ■ *"Start bedtime prayers with your children at an early age. Talk about God and encourage questions and conversation. While they are learning prayers or learning about saints or the Rosary, etc., tell them what you learned about the topic. Talk to your children about God and explain*

"A parent is the fundamental role model and first teacher whom the child experiences. Simply by living in the family, a child observes and begins to imitate the parent's actions, attitudes, beliefs and values." MCNAMEE, MOMENTUM 22, P.3

to them that God is always right there wanting to hear from them and wanting to help them with their day and that God is their biggest supporter. Help them to experience a closeness with God in all aspects of their life, even in the little, everyday things.”

Grandmother & Mother of Six, Age 70

(Mary Baumel)

“I think we passed on our faith by example. We did participate always in Mass on Sundays, daily during Lent, and as part of special religious events. When we were out of town or on vacation, we always found Mass at the nearest church. The kids saw how important that was to us. We said prayers with them every night, at our meals, when we started on a car trip, etc. It was just a part of our family life. When we saw an ambulance go by or heard a siren, we would say a Hail Mary for whomever they were racing by to help—little daily, ordinary things.”

ADVICE TO FIRST-TIME PARENTS ■ *“Establish traditions such as lighting candles on the Advent wreath or doing something extra for Lent.”*

Grandpop & Father of Three, Age 59

(Vic Steel)

“Passing on faith was largely through actions, explanations, ritual, and community (church or school) involvement. I made conscious choices to ensure that my actions matched the ethics of Catholic teachings (honesty, integrity, faithfulness, love, forgiveness). During play or work (school) with my children, I would model and then explain, when needed, the choices I made and put into action. I tried to remain consistent in my actions and words so that my children would see patterns. I was fortunate to have our parish priest as a personal friend. I was a teacher in the local Catholic schools. This combination ensured that many of our interactions with our parish and school communities had a decidedly personal element to them. This made the faith real, personal, and authentic.”

“Children perceive and joyously live the closeness of God and of Jesus made manifest by their parents in such a way that this first Christian experience frequently leaves **decisive traces which last throughout life.**”

POPE JOHN PAUL II,
CATECHESI
TRADENDAE, 68

“Christian parents strive to create a culture of spirituality within their home where awareness of God and Godly ways are like the air we breathe, second-nature to us, relaxed, casual and spontaneous; not rigid, imposed, artificial or afterthought.”

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ADVICE TO FIRST-TIME PARENTS ■ *“Keep the lessons simple by making them actions you can explain and repeat. Talk with your children about what you are doing as a faithful person and why you are doing it, but be careful that the conversations are real and not pedantic.”*

Tell stories of Jesus and the great saints. Participate in projects that help the less fortunate. Teach them the basic prayers of our faith and the meaning of the words. Together as a family pray the Rosary. Encourage your children to be altar servers, lectors, or greeters.”

Grands and Parents of Three, Age 65+ *(Tess & John Ucovich)*

“We passed on our faith by basically praying and attending Mass and religious services together. We enrolled them in parochial schools and encouraged them to join organizations such as church youth groups and the Legion of Mary.”

ADVICE TO FIRST-TIME PARENTS ■ *“Pray and attend Mass together. Encourage watching movies that are life-giving.*

What advice can you offer to first-time parents?