

Refresh Your Faith: Casual Catechesis at Home

So you're doing faith formation at home this year. Maybe it's a temporary solution while formal religious education at your parish or school is suspended. Or maybe you're considering a home-based approach indefinitely. No matter where you are with this, you might be wondering where to begin. This resource can give you some guidance, encouragement, and practical ideas for how to make this work for your family.

Whether you're following a school or parish program or going it on your own, there are just a few things you need to remember. The first is that you are the best, most qualified person to pass on the faith to your child. You might disagree with that. Maybe you don't feel very close to God these days. Maybe you're a little fuzzy on what you learned in Catholic school or faith formation classes. Maybe you even question some of the Church's teachings. But it's your own personal, unconditional love that qualifies you. "The love of parents is the means by which God our Father shows his own love," says Pope Francis.

Every time you stayed up all night with your sick child, sacri-

ficed something you wanted for your family's sake, listened to your child's concerns, hugged your child in forgiveness, or simply looked up at the night sky in wonder with your child, you were showing them what God's love is.

Those are some pretty amazing religion classes you've led.

Now I know it's going to be challenging this year, especially if you're already juggling school distance learning, your job (or a job search), childcare, and all the stresses of the world right now. That's why the second thing to remember is that you are not alone. You have the support of your parish and/or Catholic school behind you. In fact, you also have the whole Church on your side. You are supported and lifted up in prayer by people around the world who are praying for you.

One of the most important documents you'll never read

Another way the Church supports you can be found in a new papal document that lays out how we share and teach the Catholic faith in the twenty-first century. It's called the *Directory for Catechesis*, or the DC for short. This pontifical document is heavy on theory and theology, but it gives direction and guidance for how the whole Church passes on the faith. That might not seem very earth shattering, but considering that this is only the third such document published since 1971, and that we have it *now*, when so many families are taking on the faith formation of their children, I'd say that's more than a coincidence. That's God showing us he's got our backs. Remember what Jesus promised? "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

The DC does several important things for you. First, it calls on the whole Church to support you in passing on the faith.

The Church is called to cooperate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives, assisting them in the fulfillment of their educational mission to become above all the first catechists of their own children. (*Directory of Catechesis*, 124)

For the people at your local parish or Catholic school, this is like getting a note from mom in their lunchboxes reminding them to play with everyone at recess, because after all, they are the leaders, and it's up to them to set the tone for the whole class. So throughout the world right now, religious education leaders, Catholic teachers, and catechists are putting their heads together to follow the directives of the DC to help families like yours. And that's good for all of us.

In Your Corner

This new document also supports the unique role families have in passing on the faith. Even better, it greatly relieves some of the pressure parents can feel about this. You may have heard from Catholic teachers and parish folks (and yes, even the pope himself) that parents are the first catechists for our children. That's true, but the Church makes it clear in the DC that you don't have to teach courses in theology to your kids, or keep a closet full of Sunday school crafts in your home. You are already teaching the gospel by your very life. The kind of religious education that happens in our homes doesn't happen at tidy little desks or in long lectures.

It is, indeed, a Christian education more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more on-going and daily than structured into periods. (DC, 227)

In other words, if you've got a full schedule already, don't agonize about adding religious instruction on top of it. Do things at your own pace. Be aware of the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction in your

life. The DC even gives this kind of everyday faith formation sort of a hip new name (for a pontifical council anyway): *casual catechesis*. You might hear this a lot in religious education circles over the next few years. Casual catechesis means that all of the things you're already doing to help your kids grow into responsible, good, kind adults who follow Christ's teachings are exactly what you should be doing.

Encouragement should be given to...catechesis in different places: the home, the office, educational, cultural, and recreational environments... These places, which are often more loosely focused than those of the Christian community, are suitable for casual catechesis because they create more familiar relationships, and in this more visible connection with everyday life catechesis can turn out to be more compelling. (DC, 223)

Roughly translated into plainer English, this means that when it comes to faith, you get to do the fun stuff. The real, living stuff. You can snuggle up with your kids on a winter night and read the *Chronicles of Narnia* to them. You can create family traditions of going to Sunday Mass and getting doughnuts or breakfast afterward. You can have a picnic on the floor and say grace together. You can show your kids what it means to share the love of Christ by taking them on a window visit with grandma or by collecting PPE for your local hospital. Your job isn't managing or teaching. Your job is witnessing: that's loving God and others together, in an intentional way—by the way you live your life.

“This is all very nice, but I'd really like some help with the textbook.”

Of course, you are probably looking for a little bit of formal guidance. Again, the pretty awesome DC can give you that. It offers four

simple, time-tested, Catechism-backed guidelines for families to follow casual catechesis (or more formal catechesis, if that's your thing). This is what the DC has for you:

On this human base, Christian initiation is more profound: 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)

Within those guidelines there's a lot of flexibility and respect for individual families, what works for you, and what you're going through. In other words, the Church respects that you are the parent. You can decide the best way to share the faith with your family. Here are those four guidelines again, stated a little more simply.

- Awaken the sense of God
- Take first steps in prayer
- Form consciences
- Understand Christian love as reflection of God's love

We'll talk about these in a little more detail next. So on those days when you wonder if your kids are getting anything out of faith formation (whether at home, school, or your parish), or if you ever wonder if you're doing this right, look to these guidelines.

One quick word of advice. Don't look at the individual ideas under each heading here as a sort of checklist you have to accomplish. Any how-to ideas here are merely suggestions for ways you *could* do this. Again, you know what's best for your family. As long as you have an understanding of the guidelines above, and you're doing your best to live them with your family, you're doing just fine.

Guideline 1: Awaken the Sense of God

Everyone feels a sense of God, whether we're aware of it or not. Because God has created everything and is everywhere, we experience him at every moment of our lives, right down to a cellular level. Before they're born, babies experience a sense of God's love in the warmth and protection of the womb. As parents, we nurture that sense when we hold our babies, feed them, and snuggle up close with them. As they grow into toddlers, our kids expand their world and we get lots of new opportunities to boost those God experiences—taking your child on a fall hike and commenting on God's glorious creation, for instance.

But awakening a sense of God isn't a one-and-done experience. And it doesn't only happen when they're little. We need to be grateful for that, because, like everything else with kids, these experiences don't always turn out the way we expect them to.

I learned that the hard way one Christmas many years ago, when my husband and I took our nearly three-year-old son to a family event at our local historic center—a reenactment of a typical early California Christmas. Inexplicably, a trained monkey was part of

the festivities. As you might imagine, our preschooler was far less impressed by the candle-making demonstrations or even the historic Christmas tree than he was by the live monkey that interacted with him. Later that evening, feeling very educational, I snuggled up with my son and read him a lovely picture book about the first Christmas. I showed him Mary and Joseph and the stable. Then I pointed to my big belly and loftily explained that our family was expecting a baby soon, just like Mary. “But of course, our baby isn’t Jesus,” I said. “No, mom,” my son assured me excitedly, pointing to my belly. “That’s not Jesus. Because Jesus is a monkey.”

So my preschooler’s awakening sense of God was...a monkey? I suppose I should have been glad that he connected Jesus with the Christmas event that day, but still, one reason why we keep plugging away. No sense of God is ever complete, and sometimes it’s a little, um, skewed. But we get all kinds of chances—practically every day of our lives—to awaken this sense for us and for our children.

We might not always see direct results, and some awakenings are merely getting the soil ready for God to go to work. For instance, you could count signing up your child to be baptized as one of the prime ways you awaken the sense of God. The same goes for signing up your child for summer vacation Bible school or deciding on a religious education program, or even shopping for Christian books and videos to share.

But as every parent learns, once you awaken something, you don’t just leave it alone. So you talk to your kids about God. Maybe you’re uncomfortable with this. Maybe this didn’t happen in your own family, so it feels a little weird. That’s okay. Everyone finds their own way. As long as you’re paying attention and giving your kids lots of opportunities to experience God, you’re doing okay.

Still, nothing beats getting out into God’s creation. As St. Paul says, “Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and

perceived in what he has made” (Romans 1:20).

Whether it’s regularly spending time in the backyard or a park, taking a family camping trip, or just going for regular walks, you’re communicating how you value God’s creation. You don’t have to turn these experiences into long sermons or object lessons. A casual comment or short prayer of thanksgiving once in a while might be all you need. If you do want to get into conversations, use language kids can appreciate. In her book *How to Talk to Kids about God*, Allie Connors Johnston offers this wise advice for talking with young children:

When you talk with your child using the language of God as Creator, you will activate natural curiosity and creativity, sparking wonder about and appreciation for the world and God’s divine design. Use these descriptive words as you talk with your child about God as Creator: artist, designer, builder, maker.

Teens and pre-teens

If you aren’t in the habit of talking about God regularly and you suddenly spring this on your older kids, well, you can imagine the kind of response you might get. On the other hand, even if God is part of your regular family conversation, at some point, many kids will clam up. So, how do you talk about your faith to older kids?

Carefully. And you do a lot more listening than talking. Just listening to a teen’s thoughts and opinions about what’s happening in the world or at school (without judging or offering unasked for advice) can help you see how they’re experiencing (or not experiencing) God. If you really want to talk, though, it never hurts to share your own faith story once in a while. Did you ever question your faith? Did you meet someone who influenced you in your faith—negatively or positively? Respect your child enough to share age-appropriate stories of times you faltered and later found God.

Other practical ways to wake everyone up to God

To build awareness of God, we can look within too. I mean, within our homes. Take a look around your living space. How is God expressed? Do you keep fresh flowers around? The rocks you collected on a nature walk? Good for you. You're building an awareness of God through creation.

To share more traditional images of God in your home, you don't have to go out and buy an expensive hand-carved crucifix or work of art if that's not in your budget. So why not proudly display your kids' artistic expressions of God? Hanging in my office right now is a drawing one of my sons made of a nativity scene on a piece of lined paper. (By the way, there is no monkey anywhere to be found in that artwork.)

How is God expressed through your family's entertainment options? Do you watch any movies with Christian themes? How is God's name expressed in your home? Is his name always used with reverence? Just some questions to think about here.

And remember, we're talking about *families*. Not just kids. What about your sense of God? Does it need some sense of awakening? Have you been feeling cut off lately? Why not talk to God today about that? Remember that new experiences of God happen well into adulthood. For instance, a few years ago at my parish, one of the folks baptized into the faith was a widower in his eighties, who said he never really felt God's presence in his life until after his wife had died. At his baptism, he wept copious tears. He passed away only a few years later, but during that time, he kept everyone in the parish on their toes, asking hard questions about the faith, sharing his struggles with forgiveness, and getting involved in the parish food pantry. Truly, God finds new ways to talk to us all our lives. Which brings us to the next guideline...