

HomeWord

Vol. 4, No. 2 A newsletter dedicated to household harmony & family faith

In This Issue

This issue goes to the core of what *HomeWord* is all about: seeking the connections between household harmony and family faith. The first article offers the insights of Merton Strommen and Dick Hardel based on research in their forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Children, Youth, and Family*. Highlighted in this article are four contributors to close family relationships and four contributors to close God relationships. In effect, Strommen and Hardel give us an eight-point agenda for staying close to one another and growing closer to God.

In the second article, Jean Buell explores some of the practical challenges for intentionally bringing faith into the home. Her analogy to a nice restaurant meal is quite engaging. Enjoy!

Close Family, Close to God

by Leif Kehrwald

In their forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Children, Youth, and Family*, Merton Strommen and Dick Hardel apply their wisdom and experience to pertinent research data on faith maturity of young people, and effectively outline the interdependence between family harmony and household faith. They go on to articulate "Four Contributors to Close Family Relationships," and "Four Contributors to Close God Relationships." In effect, Strommen and Hardel offer families an eight-point agenda, based on sound research, for growing closer to one another and closer to God.

Four Contributors to Close Family Relationships

Parental Harmony. When both parents are on the same page, the whole family functions more smoothly. This is a nonconfrontational version of the old adage that Mom and Dad need to present a "united front" to the children. Strommen and Hardel also point out that the more support parents receive from their community, church, school, and other parent networks, the easier it is to find that harmony.

Effective Communication. You could have predicted this one. When families communicate, they get along. Families run into trouble when they lapse into expecting others to just know stuff or to be able to read each other's mind. What seems obvious to one family member (mom) may be completely oblivious to another (son), and vice versa. Few families go wrong by communicating too much with one another.

Wise Parental Control. When it comes to discipline, the emphasis must be on "wise" rather than "control." Strommen and Hardel point out that both overly authoritarian and overly permissive parenting styles increase the likelihood that children and teens will engage in high-risk behaviors. However, a balanced parenting style rooted in faith increases the likelihood of healthy maturity.

Parental Nurturing. In her book *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*, Mary Pipher says quite simply, "Families are about love, relationships, and time."

Parents nurture their children and the whole family when they invest their best efforts and energies in these three things. A dear friend of mine recently offered a similar philosophy, "In the end, everything comes down to relationships."

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Write to *HomeWord* at
Saint Mary's Press
702 Terrace Heights
Winona, MN 55987-1320
Phone: 800-533-8095

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What's On Your Plate?

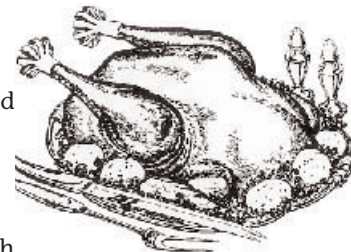
by Jean Buell

"Family Catechesis" is a daunting name, like an item on the menu of an expensive restaurant. What is it?

Several years ago, our parish began to offer family catechesis. The opportunity included wonderful resources with readings to help parents understand the Sunday Scriptures, activities to help families live according to the Gospel values, and workbooks for children at every age level.

When we started, I never questioned its success for our family. I had always dreamed of bringing faith to the forefront of our family life. I was hungry for this opportunity, and those resources satisfied me like the menu for a multicourse meal.

But I never got a taste of what I thought that meal should be. Once school and extracurricular activities start, who has time to eat? I wanted to serve those multicourse



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Tips for Family Ritual

Prayer and ritual are key activities to nurture family faith growth. Noted author on family prayer Dolores Curran suggests the following guidelines:

- Let the ritual serve your family, not your family serving the ritual.
- Initiate at least one annual religious ritual in your family.
- Rediscover and retain the ethnic religious traditions that are your heritage.
- Give your family rituals time, space, and planning.
- Get a book or two on family prayer and ritual. (Suggestion: *Family Prayer for Family Times: Traditions, Celebrations, and Rituals*, by Kathleen O. Chesto, Twenty-Third Publications).
- Share responsibility for celebration and ritual among all family members.
- Open your family celebrations to a wider family, such as extended family members, neighbors, and friends.
- Overcome awkwardness and embarrassment by celebrating first with those who are comfortable with prayer and ritual.
- Help other families learn to celebrate God openly and lovingly.



(“Close Family, Close to God” continued from page 1)

Four Contributors to Close God Relationships

Alongside the contributors to close family relationships, Strommen and Hardel offer four factors for families to use in their efforts to grow in faith and live in closer relationship with God.

Be Gospel-Oriented Parents. Guess what? When parents live as genuine believers, their children tend to do the same, even after they grow up.

Communicate Moral Values. Hearken back to the communication factor mentioned previously. When families articulate their values and beliefs, and parents model them in a spirit of love and care, then the whole family tends to be more “faith-full.”

Get Involved in Service Activities. The research that Strommen and Hardel have conducted among teens indicates that this activity is a better predictor of faith maturity than regular attendance at church. Of course you should continue worshipping on Sunday, but you might also consider some works of mercy and works of justice.

Share Faith at Home. Religion and faith are not always easy to talk about at home. How do you bring it up? How do you avoid the snickers or even outright ridicule? How do you make faith relevant to all the other activities going on? In the second article of this *HomeWord* issue, Jean Buell has attempted to address those very questions. Be sure to read “What’s on Your Plate?”

Strommen and Hardel point out that the four contributors to a close family and a close relationship with God must be lived out and supported beyond the family; in congregation, community, and culture. Their book will be published by Saint Mary’s Press and will be available in 2000.

(“What’s On Your Plate?” continued from page 1)

meals, but ended up serving fast food instead. Some weeks we were lucky to have a piece of bread.

Even when we tried to have that multicourse meal, it didn’t taste right. It felt like I was serving a school lunch in our dining room at home.

I liked the idea of family catechesis, but I worried. Are we doing it right? Are we doing it often enough? Then I realized that I had never identified what “it” was. So I asked myself, “How do we see ourselves as a household of faith?”

We worship each weekend. We celebrate holidays such as Christmas and Easter. We pray as a family at mealtime and sometimes at bedtime. We also help others.

When I answered that question, I started to understand “it” better. I had identified the faith experiences that already feel natural to our family life. They are the main course! Then I could see how to add a few side dishes of learning and education. For example, I could simply tell my boys what Scripture stories to listen for at Mass. We could complement the holidays by emphasizing the Bible stories that go with them. We could say bedtime prayers more regularly. And we could point out that we help others because Jesus taught us to love our neighbors.

Even after several years, we are still exploring what “it” is for our family, but our goals remain simple and concrete. We stick to the main courses, but the side dishes have become well seasoned. The rest of those multicourse meals will come over a lifetime. For now smaller helpings are easier to digest. Realistic goal setting has been one of the most important steps for me to feel like we are doing “it” right. “It” will depend on what is right for each family, and “it” will take time and thought to discover.

Family catechesis is a way for families to grow in faith. It is a way for parents to share faith with their children without formally teaching it, but by making it part of everyday life. It’s like Thanksgiving dinner; no one teaches you what to serve, you learn it because you live it. Family catechesis is also a way for parents and children to share their faith. We learn from one another.

One way to start family catechesis is to gather for a family meal at least once a week. Experts say that sharing a meal is one trait of healthy families. Then in the months ahead, create a small menu for catechesis in your family. Set goals that you can accomplish, and savor your success. If all you can share is a piece of bread, do that. Remember, you are sharing the Bread of Life.

Let it sustain you.