

HomeWord

Vol. 4, No. 8 A newsletter dedicated to household harmony & family faith

In This Issue

Our homes and our families lend themselves to rich faith encounters but not always in ways we expect. Sometimes our holiest encounters take place in rather unlikely places and at unanticipated times. One thing is for sure: faith and household harmony go hand in hand. When we spend time together, build healthy relationships with one another, share meals with one another, and solve conflicts and reconcile with one another, we grow not only in health but also in faith.

As you read the articles of this *HomeWord* issue, try to imagine how your family can create an atmosphere that will allow the Spirit to move a little more freely in your home and among those you live with.

A Personal Family Retreat

by Leif Kehrwald

When my wife, Rene, mentioned the idea, my eyes rolled, my brow furrowed, and my first thought was *That idea will never fly with the kids* (our two teen sons). My second thought was pretty selfish:

I don't want to give up a day of my vacation to do something like that!

With my third thought, I realized I was being much more logical and reasonable: *Rene has deep parental wisdom that has earned my respect over the years. She's probably onto something.*

Sticking with this thought, I responded, "Let's give it a try." Her idea was to spend a day together as a family in retreat, or what some might call an extended family meeting or family fun time. She pitched this idea to me shortly before Christmas last year and suggested Holy Family Sunday as the perfect day to try it.

My first thought was nearly right. Our boys were not enthusiastic about the idea, but surprisingly, without too much cajoling, they agreed to begin the day.

Of course, the day proved to be a terrific success and a great bonding experience . . . otherwise I wouldn't be telling you about it. So let me share with you some of the details. Perhaps your family could do something similar.

We began with a brief prayer and then moved into a period of reflection and discussion about the future. All of us have major changes and transitions looming: Luke, thirteen, must choose a high school to attend next year (with a little help and a lot of direction from his loving parents). Nicolo, sixteen, wants to travel to Brazil, and he must also begin looking at his options for college (with a lot of help but less direction from his loving parents). My work situation will be changing, and Rene is determined to tackle her health problems. Our purpose was to reflect, discern, and talk about these issues in the context of how each impacts the whole

family. (See the sidebar on page 2 for the reflection questions that facilitated our discussion.) It seemed such a luxury to have all this time for meaningful conversation. My third thought was right on target: my beloved is truly a wise soul.

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Family Treasures; Faith Treasures

by Leif Kehrwald

A few years ago my grandmother died, so I traveled back to my hometown in Wyoming for her funeral. After the funeral, my mom took the four of us "kids" over to Grandma's apartment to go through her things. I don't believe any of us had ever been in that apartment without Grandma also being there, yet this task I dreaded turned into something magical.

All of Grandma's things—furniture, pictures, knickknacks, and keepsakes—came alive, particularly through my mother. As we sorted, Mom told us one story after another—some sad, but most happy. She answered all of our unasked questions about our family history. We each traveled home with a few treasures reminding us not just of Grandma but of the rich history we have as a family. God had graced us once again.

We didn't talk much about God or faith in my house when we were growing up, unless it related to a religion assignment from my parochial school. We didn't talk about God that afternoon in Grandma's apartment either, yet God was present . . . and still is when we all get together.

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Reflection and Discussion Process

For our personal family retreat, I developed a little worksheet to help facilitate our reflection and discussion. First, some personal reflection questions:

- What is your definition of fulfillment for yourself? for our family?
- What are you already doing to contribute to this fulfillment?
- What is one thing you could start doing or stop doing to contribute to this fulfillment?
- What are some things other family members are already doing to contribute to this fulfillment?
- What is one thing other family members could start doing or stop doing to contribute to this fulfillment?

After everyone had sufficient time to jot down some thoughts on these questions, we then reflected on our future, both personally and as a family:

- What do you see as the most important concerns for yourself and for our family in the next four to six weeks? in the next six months? in the next two to three years?

After some reflecting and writing, we had a long family discussion, giving each person plenty of time to express his or her needs, hopes, and desires.

churchy activities to do at home. We must also help them create an atmosphere in the home in which they can discover God's genuine presence. It might happen as they share Bible stories at the dinner table or sing around the Advent wreath. Many believing families deliberately choose to express their faith and values at home and look for creative resources to assist them. Yet many other folks are not in the habit of making those deliberate choices, but God is still present and active in their lives. This activity, I believe, is discoverable in the regular stuff of life: in discussing a movie or commiserating over Grandma's death. In the right atmosphere, God's grace can explode.

Where can God's grace be found in your life and household? Take a few moments for reflection. Recognize that God is fully present in all things. Look around your home. Where do you sense that presence the most? Bring to mind the members of your household. Get a clear image of each person in your head and heart. How is God revealed to you in each one? How is God calling you to change and grow?

In our personal and unique responses to questions like these, we begin to develop a spirituality for everyday life, a home-based spirituality.

(*"A Personal Family Retreat," continued from page 1*)

We then took a break and all of us spent thirty minutes cleaning the house. It was a pit after Christmas, but we were all amazed at how nice it looked after just half an hour!

Our next session was a discussion about household chores and such. You probably haven't seen this in your family, but we've noticed an inverse proportionality between our boys' increasing abilities to take on additional responsibilities and their actual completion of tasks. In a spirit of open negotiation, with give-and-take on all sides, we came to some new arrangements that still seem to be working.

We took another break for thirty minutes so each person could write at least one Christmas thank-you letter. I'm pretty quick, so I fired off three of them! After that, we concluded with one of our traditional family prayers in which one family member leads the rest through a ten- to fifteen-minute devotional experience. Nicolo guided us through a lovely Native American reflection on family relationships. Finally, we rewarded our efforts by going to a movie.

Unless my intuition is off, it seems we've begun a new family tradition. I think I know where we'll be next year on Holy Family Sunday. Yet this family retreat doesn't have to coincide with Christmas or the New Year. In fact, as you come to the end of the school year, you might find just the right Saturday or Sunday to have your own personal family retreat. (See the sidebar for more details.)

(*"Family Treasures; Faith Treasures," continued from page 1*)

Family life and household experiences provide a continuous stream of faith opportunities. Family encounters reveal indelible truth, profound wholeness, and deep roots . . . when we keep our eyes and ears open.

This, of course, means family life and household life are holy. Your house is holy. Not "churchy" holy, but "earthly" holy. That's family spirituality in a nutshell. Amid the chaos and clutter of everyday living, amid the confusion and brokenness of strained relationships, or perhaps amid the solitude of a single-person dwelling, God is present and active.

Jesus spent thirty years preparing for his ministry, living with his family in an ordinary Jewish community. His parents were faithful to Yahweh and participated in a community of believers. Jesus' formation as a child was not unique, but because he faithfully carried out his mission to bring us salvation through his Passion, death, and Resurrection, he legitimized the holy and sacred nature of family living.

God is present and active in *all* families, not just those that practice religious activities at home. God does not discriminate between churchy activities and secular activities. As Creator of all things, God sees all as holy and sacred. God is just as present at the Sunday breakfast table and even the Saturday evening argument over curfew as at Sunday Mass. God can only be *fully* present.

In developing family spirituality, we err when we give folks ideas only for God's genuine presence. It might happen as they share Bible stories at the dinner table or sing around the Advent wreath. Many believing families deliberately choose to express their faith and values at home and look for creative resources to assist them. Yet many other folks are not in the habit of making those deliberate choices, but God is still present and active in their lives. This activity, I believe, is discoverable in the regular stuff of life: in discussing a movie or commiserating over Grandma's death. In the right atmosphere, God's grace can explode.

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