

Parents *and* Schools *in* Partnership



A Message for Parents on Nurturing Faith in Teens

Leif Kehrwald

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Saint Mary's Press®

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Introduction

Dear Fellow Parents,

It's no small decision to send your son or daughter to a Catholic high school. What are your reasons—strong academics? a strong sports program? a safe and secure neighborhood and school environment? a values-based education? Perhaps you went to a Catholic high school and it is the choice your family has always made. What about faith and spirituality? Is that a factor in your choice?

At this writing my son is starting his junior year at LaSalle High School in Milwaukie, Oregon. It's a great school for many reasons. My son is part of a terrific community of fellow students, dedicated teachers, and caring staff and administrators. Along with excellent academic formation, he receives powerful spiritual formation, not just through religion class but also through campus ministry programs and service-related activities. His school is not only a community of learning but also a community of faith.

Yet, as you well know, there is a high price to pay. Tuition, books, and fees are expensive. His school is more than ten miles from home, and transportation is a continuous hassle. As a family we are spiritually rooted in our parish, and we are not keen on our son's school becoming a replacement for that primary worshiping community.

We make a conscious choice to send our child to a Catholic high school. So do you. We weigh the costs—literally and figuratively—and make the choice that we believe is best for our son. You do the same for your son or daughter.

Try this simple exercise. Bring to mind your son or daughter who is attending a Catholic high school. Now close your eyes and imagine him or her at age twenty-four. In your mind draw an ideal picture of how you would like your son or daughter launched into young adulthood. What does he do? Where does she live? Who are his friends? Does she participate in a faith community? Take a moment to imagine the best-case scenario.

Here is part of my vision. I picture my son sitting around a table with others in a church hall. It is the coffee and donut hour after Mass. He plays bass guitar in the music group and is talking with parishioners of various ages about music, the homily, and where the best coffeehouses are located. He is a “regular” at his parish, and it is an important community in his life.

Adolescence is a key time for young people to learn more about God and our faith, to grow into a deeper relationship with God, and to be challenged to serve others. As believing parents we naturally want our children to grow deeper in their faith, come to own it in a personal way, and take it with them when they launch into young adulthood. We want them to “know it, pray it, live it.” Along with the parish as the family’s primary worshipping community, the Catholic high school can play a key role in that process. So can parents and family.

The Dream . . .

Because you likely received this booklet from your child’s Catholic high school, you may be thinking that all this is just a ruse to get parents to volunteer more hours and help out more at school, which of course every school can use. We know that the more parents are involved in the school community, the better education our children receive. However, quite frankly, the attitude of “How can we get parents more involved in our school?” is not part of the dream or vision.

The dream is one of mutuality and partnership. If the school community does what it can do best for the faith formation of its students, and the family does what it can do best for the formation of its children, then both will want to be involved with each other.

When it comes to belief and spirituality, we as parents must do two things while our children are still in high school if we want them to take their faith into young adulthood. First, as a family we must be (or become) a community of faith. Staying connected and involved with our parish community is crucial in this task. Second, we must partner with the Catholic high school as a faith community. This booklet addresses both tasks, and offers practical ideas and suggestions for fulfilling them.

Will reading this booklet and practicing its suggestions guarantee that your dream will come true? No. (If that were true, you would have paid a lot of money for this little booklet!) However, the likelihood that your son or daughter will successfully and faith-FULL-y launch into young adulthood certainly is heightened if you practice what is suggested here.

Chapter 1

Three Dimensions of a School Faith Community

All the activities of a Catholic high school—academics, sports, clubs, liturgies, retreats, drama . . . everything—should be filtered through three interconnected dimensions:

- *teaching theology*—the importance of learning about God and the things of God
- *nurturing spirituality*—the experience and expressions of an interpersonal relationship with God
- *promoting service*—the loving response to others' needs

The booklet titled *The Catholic High School as Faith Community* maintains that though they are distinct, these dimensions cannot be separated; they need to be integrated within each person's faith journey and within a school seeking to cultivate faith community (adapted from LaNave, p. 15).

I believe that we as parents can and should expect this relational faith formation approach from our Catholic high school. Most schools are striving toward this vision, but that requires a partnership with parents and families—a partnership in which parents and families play a key role. Chapter 3 outlines that partnership in greater detail.

Teaching Theology

Theology taught well stirs up questions. As young people move from the “received faith” of childhood to a personally chosen faith of adulthood, their questions reflect a personal search for meaning and answers that actively engages their faith development. Both parents and teachers should encourage the questions, avoid immediate pat responses, and invite the young person into a journey of inquiry. If the young person's questions stir up wonderments of your own, all the better. You've been gifted with an opportunity for personal faith growth.

“Teaching theology can be described as creating the conditions for students to recognize and articulate their experiences of God and the things of God within the framework of the Catholic Tradition” (LaNave, p. 16). The content of theology for high school students is not to be minimized in its importance. Students should learn how to read and interpret the Scriptures. They need to understand specific teachings of the Church, and the richness of our sacramental beliefs. As with any other academic discipline, we can expect students to demonstrate an understanding of Catholic theology appropriate to their age level (adapted from p. 17).

Ideally the role of the Catholic school is not primarily “dispenser of information,” but rather “midwife of meaning”—helping to give birth to the work of the Spirit. As we will see in chapter 2, parents and families are called to exactly the same role.

Nurturing Spirituality

“It is a sin to bore kids with the Gospel!” Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life, is credited with this popular saying. Rayburn believed that Jesus Christ is the most dynamic, attractive person who ever lived, and that any person who had a genuine encounter with Jesus would respond enthusiastically to God’s unconditional love (adapted from LaNave, p. 20).

Spiritual activities help to create an inner space where students can listen freely for the movement of God’s Spirit in their life. “In sharing the gift of **prayer** with students, [the school offers] experiences and teaches skills that help them open their lives to God—honestly and completely. . . . **Liturgies** are opportunities to remind students of the power, strength, and loving energy that are created by God’s action in community. . . . **Retreats** invite the faith community to powerful encounters with Christ and to a deepened understanding of who we are and where we are going as Christians” (LaNave, pp. 22–23). **Other forms of faith sharing**—Bible study, prayer groups, spiritual direction, speakers on spirituality topics, and so on—“complement and support the learning and formation that happen in all dimensions of building faith community” (p. 24). And within these experiences that nurture spirituality, students should be given opportunities to lead and minister. Some schools offer **leadership formation** for students, strengthening their ability to be spiritual leaven throughout the community on a daily basis (adapted from p. 25).

Promoting Service

The liberty and justice of one is bound up with the liberty and justice of all. This is what young people learn when they engage in service opportunities.

Service involves both works of mercy and works of justice. Generally our culture praises acts of charity, but does not always appreciate acts of justice. “Doing acts of charity can lead students to ask about underlying causes of injustice, opening them to learn about and respond to sinful social structures. Studying causes of injustice and providing opportunities for students to respond are critical faith-formation experiences” (LaNave, p. 27).

“At its deepest level, a service experience can be an encounter with Christ” (LaNave, p. 28). “As service becomes more integrated into the school’s programming, it will be experienced not simply as something Christians ‘do on occasion,’ but rather, as ‘a way of life’” (p. 29).

Building faith community in the Catholic high school is not simply an event, a class, or a program—it is truly the work of God in our midst, certainly in school, but also at home. For the Catholic high school to effectively teach theology, nurture spirituality, and promote service, parents and family members also must contribute to the broad-based faith formation of their teenage daughters and sons.

Suggested Reading

Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart. *Know It! Pray It! Live It! A Family Guide to the Catholic Youth Bible*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2000; 800-533-8095, www.smp.org. This book leads you and your family on a tour through the Scriptures, where you will see what God’s word has to say to life’s most puzzling questions.

John Rosengren. *Meeting Christ in Teens: Startling Moments of Grace*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2002; 800-533-8095, www.smp.org. In his eleven years teaching high school, the author saw how “grace happens” when hanging out with teenagers. In this book he shares these encounters and empowers the reader to see God’s gracious activity in the teenagers who are a part of his or her life.

Family as Faith Community

Just as the Catholic high school is called to be a faith community and to actively pursue God’s gracious presence in the lives of students, faculty, and staff, so too the family is called to be a community of faith. In fact, the Christian family is the first and most significant arena of faith formation for children and teens.

Three Key Activities for Faith Maturity

What is the most critical factor that empowers young people to take faith with them as they launch into young adulthood? Quite simply, when parents practice their faith in a genuine manner, their children are much more likely to do so as they grow into adulthood.

More recent research takes this conclusion a step further, and pinpoints several specific activities done in a family setting that are key to the faith maturity of young people. (The three activities that follow are based on Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church*, pp. 173–177.)

Family Faith Conversations

Open-ended discussions on relevant and controversial issues create an atmosphere for dialogue and growth. Here are a few practical suggestions:

- Stay in touch with your own faith journey. You will find it easier to reflect on the day’s events and naturally bring them into conversation.
- Take time to listen and share. What is the “talkative” time of day for your teen? Take one-on-one time with each teen. Build personal memories together.
- Invite discussion on a provocative issue or controversial topic. Allow your teenagers to express doubts and different opinions, but know where you stand and be willing to be questioned about your own views and beliefs.

- Use media and current events as discussion starters. For example, ask your teen what he or she thinks about pornography online as it relates to censorship and free speech.
- Use the Scriptures as a source. What does the Bible say about a particular issue? Look for opportunities to pray together.
- Tell and read good stories together.

Family Ritual and Devotion

This activity moves from informal conversation to something a bit more structured and intentional. Families who take time to reflect on their daily, weekly, and seasonal habits will likely discover opportunities for family ritual.

These are a few suggestions:

- Adopt the attitude, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly!" Research tells us that even if we're not very good at doing ritual, it still has a powerful impact.
- Give simple blessings to each other at moments of daily transition: at morning leave-taking, at bedtime, and so on. Many young people deeply appreciate the offer of spiritual intimacy.
- Initiate at least one annual religious ritual in your family each year. You may want to rediscover the ethnic religious traditions that are your legacy. It is important to share responsibility for celebration and ritual among all family members. When given the challenge and opportunity, teens can be powerful and imaginative prayer leaders.
- Get a book or two on family prayer and ritual. Give your family rituals time, space, and planning. Set up a regular time for family prayer.

Family Outreach and Service

Faced with challenges of their own, many families find it difficult to make the time and effort to serve others. Yet acts of selfless mercy often can transform woes into healing and bring help to those in greater need.

Here are a few practical suggestions:

- Be invitational without inflicting guilt. Regularly invite your teen to join in works of mercy and works of justice.
- Diffuse teenagers' fear and ignorance by exposing them to the victims of injustice, to the victims' particular situation, and to those who are advocating for change. Don't be surprised when their reluctance to get involved turns to passion for the cause.
- Actions should be within teen and family capacities, such as delivering food once a month to needy families via Saint Vincent de Paul, helping to serve in a soup kitchen, committing to visiting an elderly person on a regular basis, or volunteering with Habitat for Humanity.

- Combine the action with a fun event whenever possible. Join with other families.
- Do “with” instead of do “for.” Respect and promote the dignity of others. Learn from those you hope to serve. Consider both works of justice and works of mercy.

When families engage in these practices—faith conversation, ritual and prayer, service—they greatly enhance the likelihood that their teenagers will take faith with them as they grow into adulthood.

Most of these activities can be initiated around the family dinner table. Of course it’s common for everyone in a teenage family to be very busy, relegating dinner together to rare occasions. I would challenge you and your family, though, to arrange for at least one night each week to have supper together, pray together, engage in faith conversation, and perhaps make some choices regarding service and outreach. The following questions may be helpful:

- What is one immediate step your family can take to incorporate some of these faith-building activities?
- What is one long-term goal your family can set in order to grow in faith?

Families are called to be communities of life and love. Although it may be more challenging during adolescence, there is no time when this call is more important. God’s love is revealed to all family members—children, teens, and parents alike—in the creases and folds of everyday family living. God is just as present at Saturday night’s negotiations over curfew as at Sunday Mass the next day. The good news is not that your family can become holy and sacred. The good news is . . . your family already is.

Suggested Reading

Tom McGrath. *Raising Faith-Filled Kids: Ordinary Opportunities to Nurture Spirituality at Home*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000; 800-621-1008, www.loyolapress.com. The author suggests how we can foster a healthy spirituality in our children while tending our own spirit as well. He shows how the hectic and the ordinary moments of family life offer endless opportunities to live more deeply.

Mary Jo Pedersen et al. *More Than Meets the Eye: Finding God in the Creases and Folds of Family Life*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2000; 800-533-8095, www.smp.org. This book will awaken a family’s awareness of God in all kinds of places and in common family experiences.

Chapter 3

School and Family in Partnership

While the faith community of the school is challenged to teach theology, nurture spirituality, and promote service, the faith community of the family is challenged to discuss faith, share ritual and pray together, and engage in service and outreach.

As we launch them into young adulthood, perhaps our greatest desire for our sons and daughters is that they take with them a personally owned and genuinely mature faith. When both the school and the family embrace their respective challenges, our deepest desires can become reality.

Although the home is not a school per se, much learning and growth occurs in the family setting. Much is taught (to both teens and parents) within the ordinary *and* extraordinary rhythms of daily family living. The family is a “school” of relationship and discipleship. The family teaches and evangelizes powerfully but informally.

Likewise the Catholic high school does not operate in the manner of a family. Prescribed structure, consistent scheduling, firm rules, administrative procedures, even a certain level of bureaucracy are all necessary components for the Catholic high school to fulfill its mission. Amid this structure young people are formed with education and values that will serve them their entire life.

Yet the overarching tasks, when it comes to the faith formation of our teens, are essentially the same for both home and school:

- Discuss and teach the Catholic faith in a personal and relational manner.
- Nurture heartfelt spirituality through prayer, ritual, liturgy, retreats, and the like.
- Engage in works of mercy to help those in need, and works of justice to help change systems of oppression in our society and around the world.

Getting Connected at School

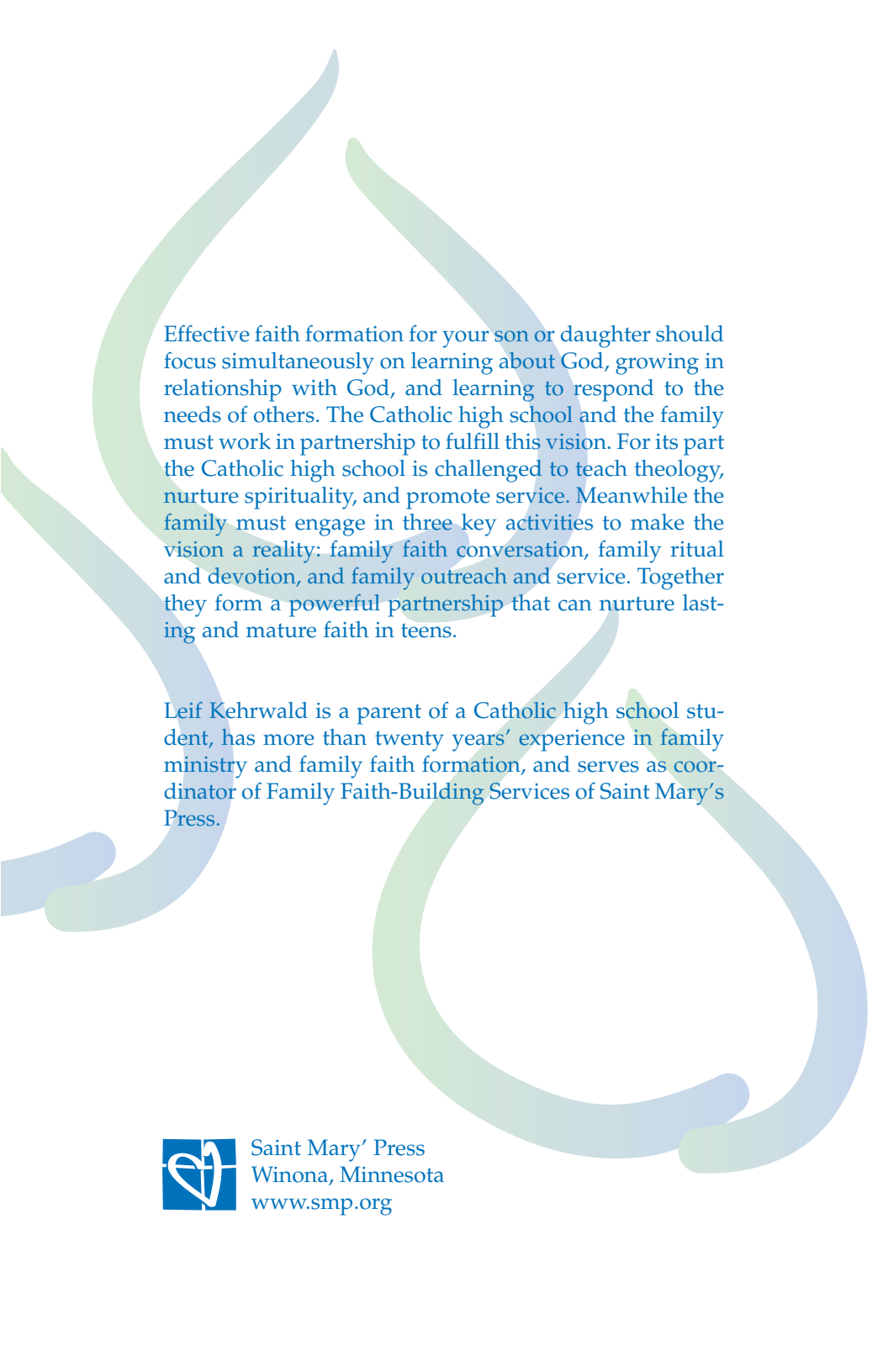
As parents we can be grateful to our Catholic high school and its efforts to be a faith community that provides holistic faith formation for our teens. Yet we also need to work in partnership with the school for the faith formation to “take.”

Following are a few practical suggestions to help facilitate that partnership:

- Make a point of introducing yourself to and getting to know your teenager’s religion teacher and the school’s campus ministry staff. Ask them what is covered in religion class and what opportunities students (and parents) have to participate in campus ministry activities. Ask if you can help out with service or retreat experiences. Find out when the school has major liturgies and if parents are allowed to come and participate. Of course you will want to be sensitive to your teen’s feelings and desires about your participation and involvement at school so that your efforts are not perceived as invading his or her world.
- Show genuine interest in the faith-based activities that your teenager is engaged in at school. Don’t just ask the who, what, where type of questions. Try to move beyond the facts and into feelings. Share your own beliefs, feelings, stories, and experiences in these conversations.
- Look for ways to draw connections between the school and the parish in which you worship. Encourage your son or daughter to be involved in your parish youth program as well as in the liturgical life of your parish. Though the Catholic high school may be their primary community of peers, the parish remains an important community of faith.
- Finally, remember the power of prayer. As you pray for your son or daughter, pray also for the faith community of the Catholic high school. Let us all pray that our teenage sons and daughters journey through their high school years with good friends, an openness to learning, and encounters of genuine spiritual growth.

Suggested Reading

Patt and Steve Saso. *10 Best Gifts for Your Teen: Raising Teens with Love and Understanding*. Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 1999; www.sorinbooks.com. The authors combine their expertise as a counselor and a high school teacher with hard-knocks wisdom from the parenting trenches to offer practical and engaging guidance.



Effective faith formation for your son or daughter should focus simultaneously on learning about God, growing in relationship with God, and learning to respond to the needs of others. The Catholic high school and the family must work in partnership to fulfill this vision. For its part the Catholic high school is challenged to teach theology, nurture spirituality, and promote service. Meanwhile the family must engage in three key activities to make the vision a reality: family faith conversation, family ritual and devotion, and family outreach and service. Together they form a powerful partnership that can nurture lasting and mature faith in teens.

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