

## Keeping Kids Catholic

HERE ARE FIVE WAYS PARENTS AND  
GRANDPARENTS CAN HELP THEIR  
CHILDREN KEEP THE FAITH

# How can I keep my kids Catholic?

by Woodeene Koenig-Bricker

**W**e stand on the sidelines of our sons' soccer match, a gaggle of parents stamping our feet against the creeping cold, huddling under umbrellas away from the drizzling rain that began with the game. As the game slip-slides away, we become not parents of opponents, but parents facing a single opponent — the weather. The desire to see our team win is gradually replaced by the desire to get the boys out of the rain, into dry clothes, and safely home.

I think of that image sometimes when I see families at church. Underneath our differences we have but a single desire: to see our family out of the rain of the troubled world, into the dry clothes of redemption, and safe in our heavenly home. But how do we bring our desire to fruition?



## When teens question their Church

Questions are inevitable. Teens especially are going to question certain teachings of the Church and expect you to be able to defend them. No matter how nervous it makes you, let them ask. The truth can stand up to the most rigorous examination. When older teens ask you about your own beliefs, be honest. Present the Church's teaching fairly and accurately, but if there are areas you have struggled with, be willing to talk about how you have resolved them. And, if there are things you still wrestle with, don't be afraid to say, "This is what the Church teaches. I'm still working on how to understand that in my own life."

• WOODREENE KOENIG-BRICKER FOR OUR SUNDAY VISITOR

Here are five suggestions we as Catholic parents can employ to help our children keep the faith. They are not "the answer." There is no such thing as the answer. But they are places to begin.

### 1. Accept imperfection

Sometimes we cling to the myth that because we don't have a "perfect" family, we can't effectively pass on the faith. We imagine if we could just get our family life in order, the rest would naturally fall into place. But it doesn't require a "Leave It to Beaver" family to raise good Catholic kids. Dozens and dozens of holy men and women had anything but perfect homes. Take, for instance, Blessed Margaret of Castello, whose parents were so embarrassed by her physical handicaps that they boarded her up in a cell hoping she would die quickly.

In their pastoral message "Follow the Way of Love," the United States bishops rejected the fallacy of perfect homes being required to transmit the faith. "Some of us," they wrote, "lived in single parent families; others were adopted children. Some of us grew up in alcoholic homes. We came from affluence and families where money was scarce."

This has been the reality of Catholic families since the begin-

ning of the Church. So once we accept the fact that our families, as imperfect as they may be, are the crucible Christ has selected to refine the faith, then we can truly begin to pass our faith on to our children. Which brings me to point No. 2.

## **2. Get into the spirit**

To raise a Catholic family, we must have a deep-rooted and active spiritual life of our own. As anthropologists will tell you, we do not transmit culturally what we do not value. But just as Catholic families vary, so too do the ways Catholics live out their convictions.

Research by the Search Institute, an organization that examines religious issues as they pertain to youth, indicates that of all the factors leading to a mature acceptance of religion, parents and family top the list, above religion classes, Mass, friends, homilies, and priests. The institute cites three key elements that make a definite difference in the

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transference of beliefs: talking about your faith; letting your kids see you practice your convictions by attending Mass, and praying and reading Scripture every day; and taking time to live your beliefs through service to others.

It comes down to a simple truth: If we want our children to have faith, we must practice our own.

### **3. Let your children have their own journey**

The third suggestion is perhaps the most difficult, especially for those who have returned after a period of "wandering in the desert." We have to let them find their own way to God, even if that means watching them try things we ourselves have tried and know lead to dead ends.

One way parents can make a family miserable is to assume

ing the change on her family didn't work. After all, when you are 6 and dreaming of Malibu Barbie, an hour on your knees before the Nativity scene won't build a deep love for religion. It won't work when you are 40 and dreaming of a new chain saw either.

One reason we sometimes are tempted to leapfrog our families over the struggles that come with developing a mature faith may stem from looking at the saints. We tend to forget that most of them had to engage the world before they were able to move beyond it. Consider St. Francis

they are in the same place on their spiritual journeys. In one family, the mom underwent a profound spiritual transformation and decided the family would not exchange gifts at Christmas. Instead, they would spend Christmas Day contemplating the mystery and miracle of Christ's birth. Though her desire to relinquish the grasp of materialism was admirable, spring-

of Assisi, who was a materialistic playboy before he gave up his wealth. When he finally transformed his life, he was giving up something he had experienced to the max. He was ready for the radical life change; it wasn't forced upon him. In fact, near the end of his life he is quoted as saying, "Don't make me into a saint yet. I am still perfectly capable of

## Never give up hope!

An elderly woman whose children hadn't turned out well was asked how she could be so serene about it all. She answered, "Children are like cookies, and God isn't through baking mine yet." Pray always for your children and never lose hope that with a little more time in the oven, they will turn out right in the end. Though you can't guarantee that your kids will stay Catholic, you can guarantee that you've done your part in passing on the faith. What they do with it after that is up to them — and God.

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fathering children."

There's a saying, "God doesn't have grandchildren," which reveals a profound truth: God has a personal and individual relationship with each of us. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first native-born saint of the United States, obviously had an intense relationship with God, yet her sons were, by her own admission, wanton and misdirected. It's clear from her letters that she gladly would have sacrificed anything if she could have given her sons faith. As Seton's life shows, we can provide a nurturing environment, but we cannot bestow faith on our children. That's something only God can give.

### 4. Don't foist religiosity on your kids

A priest friend of mine told me about a family that decided at the birth of one of their sons that he was destined for ordina-

tion. When he was 6, they began teaching him Latin. When he was 7, they began making sure he was reading theology. The priest didn't know whether or not the kid had a vocation, but he was sure that having to spend Saturdays conjugating Latin verbs while the rest of the kids in the neighborhood were shooting hoops had the potential to set him up for ridicule and ostracization, and probably killed any vocation he might have had.

As parents, we must not try to remove our children from the world — not just because this usually turns kids off to religion once they are older, but because one of the goals of raising strongly committed Catholic families is to bring others to the faith.

Those people who live in the world, who partake of its joys, but who are not of the world, are the ones who really bring Christ to the world. It comes

down to one simple fact: If you want people to want what you have, it's got to be *wantable*. We have a solemn duty to show our children that following the way of Christ is the most joyful, the most fulfilling, the most *wantable* way to live.

## 5. Turn your children over to God

Journalist Hodding Carter says, "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings." Living our faith, showing our children the importance of faith in our lives — these things will help develop deep roots. But along with the roots come wings, and sooner or later our children will try their wings. For some of us, that will mean that despite having done everything right, things will still turn out wrong. A daughter may get pregnant out of wedlock. A son may

choose to live with his girlfriend. A child may use drugs. Another may leave the Church in an angry huff quarreling over an issue like the ordination of women.

When our children's wings take them away from the safety of the nests we have built, that's when our own faith has its toughest test. It is then we must turn our children, our families, over to God. They are God's anyway. It is only when we love our kids enough to let God love them more than we can come in out of the rain, change into dry clothes, and rest safe at home. CD

Woodeene Koenig-Bricker's career writing and editing for the religious market includes 13 years as the editor of *Catholic Parent* magazine. She is the author of six books; her latest, *Asking God for the Gifts He Wants to Give You*, was published in June by Word Among Us press. She lives in Oregon and has one son. This article first appeared in U.S. *Catholic*.

I'll just have water

**Coffee isn't my cup of tea.** m SAMUEL GOLDWYN

The good ol' days

I can't understand why I flunked American history. When I was a kid there was so little of it. » GEORGE BURNS