



After the Plunge: Pastoral Leader Guide

by Ann Naffziger and Paul Canavese

Dear Parish Leader,

Thank you for willingness to become involved in this important ministry, to stay in touch with and support young parents as they begin to raise their child in the faith. Whether you are a parish staff member or volunteer, we know there are many demands on your time. We have designed this resource to make this process simple and easy to use, and we hope it serves you and your community well.

—The Pastoral Center team

Goals & Principles

This resource was designed with the following goals and principles:

- **Maintain a connection** between the parish and young parents during the first three to five years after baptism, a time when we often lose touch with families.
- Coach parents to **build households of faith** and incorporate faith practices into the family routine.
- Encourage parents to **foster their own faith** life and maintain healthy balances.
- Offer information in a **compact format** that busy parents are likely to actually read.
- Speak with **friendly, accessible language** that will not turn off outsiders.
- **Invite parents** to Mass and other events in the parish.
- Offer a tool that is **simple and easy** for you as a parish leader.

The Plunge

While most children are no longer physically plunged into the water, the Church teaches that by baptism we are plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ: dying with him, being buried with him, and rising with him (*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #6).

And becoming parents is a similar plunge: jumping feet-first into a new experience of dying to ourselves in self-giving love for another human being. This resource is a little tool to help with what comes next.

What Is Included

After the Plunge is made up of the following resources:

- A sign-up sheet, if you would like your parents to “opt in” to receiving these mailings. This gives them a heads-up, so they will expect the communications.
- An introductory letter and leaflet, to be sent sometime soon after initial signup.
- Four seasonal letters and associated leaflets to be sent throughout the year.
- All of the above, grouped into a single ZIP file, for downloading them all together (optional).

Postal Mail vs. Email

While you could certainly use this resource to help you send emails and attach the leaflet documents, we highly recommend using postal mail. Here's why:

- People's attention is often very divided when they receive emails. More and more people now check their email on their mobile phones while on the go.
- It is very difficult to get people to open email attachments.
- Emails can easily get stuck in spam or bulk mail boxes.
- Postal mail is more personal, and allows you to jot a little note on the letter. This can help us make a personal connection to these parents.

Using the Letters

We have intentionally kept the content of the letters quite short so they will not be ignored, and to give you an opportunity to customize them for your own parish. Here are tips for using them:

- Print them on your parish's letterhead paper or paste them into a letterhead file.
- If at all possible, address the letters by name. If your software can't do that easily, simply print the letters without the greeting and write in "Dear Mary & Joseph" yourself on each letter (well, please use their actual names!).
- Look for the highlighted sections of the letter, where we make suggestions on what you can customize. Feel free to extend the letters, but keep them brief or you will risk them not being read at all.
- We highly encourage you to add a little personal note at the bottom to the family. If you remember specific details from the baptism preparation process, by all means use them to connect (e.g. "We hope you've been able to settle into that new job," "We

still remember baby Stephanie's beautiful smile"). Express that you and the parish care about them, and that you'd love to see them again.

Using the Leaflets

The tri-fold color leaflets are designed to be inserted into the mailings and will fit in a standard size envelope. Use them like this:

- If at all possible, print these in color. That will help get parents' attention and communicate the value you place on them,
- If you have parish events (especially during the main liturgical seasons), you may wish to add another insert with details. At the least, you may want to provide Mass times for upcoming Christmas/Easter services.

Staying Organized

It will take some work to send these letters out on a regular basis. Here are some ideas to help:

- This is a great ministry for other parishioners to become involved. Explain how this is an outreach to make young parents feel welcome and help them raise their kids Catholic. You may even be able to identify someone with the skills to set up mail merge on their own computer and automate the printing/addressing process.
- Add recurring reminders on your calendar so you will remember to send these out.
- Send the Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter letters so they will arrive about a week before those seasons begin.
- The same letters/leaflets can be sent for three years or more. The parents and children will be in different places than they were the previous year and may be ready to act on suggestions the second or third time around.

We hope this resource serves you well and helps you stay connected with your young parents. Thank you for all the important ministry that you do in your parish!

Let's Stay in Touch

to help your child grow up Catholic

Congratulations on the baptism of your child! As you experienced the preparation process leading up to this event, you've gotten to know us here at [parish name] a little better. We hope you know how much we love and support you. This is your parish home and we welcome you and your whole family. We are the People of God and you are part of us.

Raising kids takes lots of energy and time. You're the primary teacher of your child and he or she will learn from you about values, virtues, and faith. We at [parish name] can help you do this. We'd like to stay in touch with you as your child grows and matures. Please consider joining with other young parents in our *Partnership with Parents Program*. It will cost you no money but the benefits will be out of this world!

Here's what we offer you:

- * A constant and warm welcome to celebrate Mass on weekends here. Please bring your whole family with you. Our weekend Mass schedule is:
 - o Saturday at [time]
 - o Sunday at [time]
- * Resources from us at [parish name] to help you raise your child with deep faith. We send these resources to you via postal mail about four times each year. In them we offer suggestions on how you can make your home a place where each season of the year includes prayer, reflection, and actions of faith!

To sign up for these resources, please use this form.

Your names

Your child's name

Your phone

Postal address

Email address:

Do you have any questions or concerns at the present time? If you do, please note them here or tell us about them in person.

Parish leader: Cut and paste this letter onto your letterhead or the template you use for email. Note also the highlighted portion of the letter, which you may personalize.

Dear [insert names],

Warm greetings from [Insert Parish Name]. We know that this is a time of incredible busyness, challenge, joy, and adjustment for you as your little one grows. It comes with a lot of work and self-sacrifice. Most of what you do for your child is seen by no one, and often not even appreciated by your child. On behalf of the faith community to which you belong—the Catholic Church—thank you! Because of you—and only because of you—your child will grow up Catholic.

Your child is already learning about God by how you love him or her and the example of your everyday actions. We at your parish want to support you so that you can help your child(ren) to grow up knowing a God who loves them unconditionally. In that spirit, the enclosed flyer offers a few suggestions for things you can do now, even with very young children.

At the parish, we offer many other opportunities to help you and your family grow in faith, including (insert opportunities here such as regularly scheduled masses, other prayer services scheduled throughout the special seasons of the year, opportunities for charity and service work, and social opportunities). Also, our staff would be happy to talk with you about your spiritual and faith questions, concerns, or interests. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you would like to learn more.

With our warmest blessings,

[Signature]

1 Set the Foundation

Have regular meals together as a family. This may not seem important when your child is just a baby, but it's never too early to make this commitment. Whether macaroni and cheese is on the menu again or not, the point is to all sit down together for the ritual of eating and sharing stories of the day. As children get older and start to go off in different directions, the regular meals together ensures time to regroup and connect.

Go to Mass and take everyone with you. Yes, it is challenging to make this weekly commitment (especially with little ones!) but once you get in the habit, it will become easier. Attending Mass is perhaps the single most important thing you do to help your children grow up Catholic. That hour can become cherished family time without outside distractions: simply resting, singing, praying and being together.

For more tips about building a household of faith, visit us at:



GrowingUpCatholic.com

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Building a Household of Faith

This is an important time for your family, as you start setting your priorities and routines. It is so easy to let the busyness of life—housework, jobs, shopping, information and communication overload—completely take over and make decisions for us. But what values does your family stand for, and how can you hold fast to them? Here are some principles and practices that you can build into your routine, even with very young children.

2 Care for Yourself

Refresh your own soul. As a parent you are likely incredibly busy and often stressed. Experiment with ways to steal some time for yourself to do something that refreshes your own soul:

- Take a few minutes to talk to God before getting out of bed or going to sleep at night.
- Journal.
- Read the Bible, a spiritual book, or a blog.
- Listen to inspiring music while you do the dishes or when driving.
- Find a special place in nature you can escape to occasionally.
- If your children grow up seeing you nurture your interior life, they will learn to as well.



3 Build Simple Rituals

Pray before meals. Memorized prayers or informal ones are just fine. Even children who are still too young to speak will begin to recognize a ritual of holding hands around the table and singing a short grace. Once kids are toddlers they can join in by sharing one thing they are thankful for or one thing they want to pray for that day. For ideas for simple mealtime prayers with young children, see: GrowingUpCatholic.com/mealtime

Bless your child each day. A natural time to do this is when you are rocking your child to sleep or tucking him or her in bed at night. It can be as simple as saying “Good night. I love you and God loves you” when you hug and kiss them. It might involve helping them remember all the people they encountered that day who love them (“Mommy loves you, Daddy loves you, Sissy loves you, and God and Mary and Jesus and Joseph love you.”) Find more ideas for bedtime prayer routines at: GrowingUpCatholic.com/bedtime

Parish leader: Cut and paste this letter onto your letterhead or the template you use for email. Note also the highlighted portion of the letter, which you may personalize.

Dear Parents,

The hectic holiday season is upon us as people chase sales and prepare for gift exchanges. But as Catholics, we get to celebrate *Advent* during the month leading up to Christmas. What is Advent? It is the antidote to the pressure-packed frenzy: a time to slow down, turn inward, and wait for Jesus to arrive.

The traditions that you choose for your household will always be remembered by your child.

Advent and Christmas offer a wonderful opportunity for your child to learn about and relate to Jesus, who comes to us as a baby. If you make this a time of family and faith, your child will remember that. If you let this be a time for over-indulgence and stressful activity, that is what your child will remember.

Here are some suggestions for enjoying a faith-filled Advent with your family:

1. **Use an Advent wreath.** See the enclosed leaflet to learn how to find and use a wreath. Young children are enthralled by the candle light, especially in a darkened room. You can read bedtime stories by the light of the candles, pray as a family, snuggle together and talk about the day, and/or simply sit in silence watching the flames for a few minutes.
2. **Set up a crèche.** Set up a Nativity scene during Advent to help your child understand the story. Hide the baby Jesus until Christmas arrives. Perhaps have Mary and Joseph slowly journey across the room toward the crèche during Advent, and the magi do the same leading up to the Feast of Epiphany.
3. **Attend one of our parish offerings during Advent.** Insert specific references here or refer them to an enclosed page with more details. It may seem like just one more thing to add to your calendar, but it can help you to slow down and put things in perspective.

We wish you a very holy Advent and Christmas season, and hope to celebrate Jesus' birthday with you this year. May this be an especially blessed time for your whole family!

Rich blessings to you and yours,

[Signature here]

1 About the Wreath

The Advent wreath was a tradition used in homes before we started using them at Mass. Your wreath can help you focus on preparing for Jesus' coming, amidst the hustle and bustle of the season.

The evergreen circle reminds us of God's love for us, which has no beginning or end. We light the candles in the dark of winter as we wait for the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World.

2 Getting Your Own Wreath

You will need a circular wreath of evergreens and four candles (three purple and one pink) to put on it. You can purchase all of this as a set at a religious goods store, buy a wreath and candles separately, or easily make your own. If you have easy access to evergreen branches, it can be a fun family activity to make the wreath together.



Lighting Prayers

Use one of these prayers as you light the candle(s) or one of your own.

1st Week of Advent: Almighty God, wake us up and remind us to be watchful and aware. As we light this candle, we ask that you help us live the way Jesus taught us to live, always doing what is right and loving. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who we know is coming soon. Amen.

2nd Week of Advent: God of mercy, justice and peace, help us get ready. As we light these candles, we ask that you clear a straight path to our hearts and help us see how we can live with more love. Help us move beyond everything that gets in between us and Jesus. Help us to stay watchful for his coming. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

3rd Week of Advent: God of joy and compassion, you send glad tidings to the lowly and break through the darkness with your great light. As we light these candles, help us remember that the Good News is on its way. May we announce it in what we do and what we say. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.

4th Week of Advent: God of new beginnings, you announced through an angel's message how you would enter the world as one of us so you could love us more deeply. As we light these candles, we reflect on Mary and how we can freely say "yes" to what you ask, just as she did. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.



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Getting Started with an Advent Wreath

This is a wonderful tradition to begin now. Your little one will be taken in by the smells and mesmerized by the candle flames. A wreath really makes this season of preparation special in your home!

3 Using Your Wreath

We suggest that you light your wreath and pray with it nightly during the Advent season, although you can use it at any time of day. Try turning down the lights so you can focus more on the candles and making this a special, prayerful time.

If you have young children, this can serve as a nice bedtime ritual, perhaps done along with bedtime stories. Make this a special family time, perhaps cuddling together on the couch, sharing how your day went, and/or discussing how to be more loving during this season.



4 Lighting the Candles

Be sure that the candles are in secure holders and won't fall over easily. You may wish to place some kind of cloth underneath them to catch any wax that might drip from them.

Light the candles at the beginning of your prayer time. Use one of the lighting prayers on the back of this leaflet.

You will light the candles in the same order each time:

- Starting on the 1st Sunday of Advent: Light the first purple candle.
- Starting on the 2nd Sunday of Advent: Light the first two purple candles.
- Starting on the 3rd Sunday of Advent: Light the first two purple candles and the rose/pink candle.
- Starting on the 4th Sunday of Advent: Light all of the candles.

Carefully extinguish the candles when you are done with your prayer/family time. Do not leave them unattended!

5 Praying with Your Wreath

There's no correct way to pray with your wreath, so decide for yourself what's best for your household. Here are some ideas:

- **Sing/play music:** Pick an Advent song such as "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Sing to a recording if you like. Just remember that Christmas carols have to wait for Christmas. During Advent we're still preparing!
- **Read from the Bible:** Choose any reading you would like. Mass readings for the day work well (<http://usccb.org/bible/readings/>).
- **Pray in your own words:** Ask God for what you really need this season, and pray for others in need.

Your prayer time might look like this:

- Light candle(s) and say lighting prayer.
- Sing an Advent song together.
- Read a Bible passage out loud
- Everyone can offer their own prayers out loud: who and what should we pray for together?
- End the prayer with an Our Father, Hail Mary, or other prayer.
- Have some family time together.

Parish leader: Cut and paste this letter onto your letterhead or the template you use for email. Note also the highlighted portions of the letter, which you may personalize.

Dear **Parents,**

Ash Wednesday is almost upon us. Lent may not be your favorite time of year, but it is a great opportunity for us as parents and individuals. It is a time for turning our focus back to God, cleaning up our lives, instilling better habits, and recognizing that not everyone in our world is as fortunate as we are.

Our lives are filled with so much noise. Lent is a chance to silence some of that noise, at least momentarily, in order to focus on the most important things in our lives. Just as Jesus found a way to escape regularly into the desert from the crush of people crowding around him, we are invited to change our routine.

How can you create a little space for yourself to re-focus your spiritual life this Lent? The Church suggests three practices that you can do individually and with your whole family. See the enclosed flyer to learn more and for some practical suggestions.

Our parish also offers extra services and programs to help you re-focus your faith life during Lent. Please join us for as many of our Lenten celebrations as you are able, and know that your whole family is welcome with us. **[Include here a note about special Lenten prayer, social, service, or faith formation gatherings.]**

Last, but certainly not least, we invite you to **consider how to celebrate Easter well** with your child when that time comes. We have enclosed a page to give you some ideas about this.

May you know the depths of God's love this Lent and always,

[Signature here]

1 Individual Prayer

There are as many ways and places to pray as there are people on this earth. Some do it in bed, while commuting, rocking a baby, or pushing a stroller.

Prayer is nothing more than conversation with God, so address God in whatever way feels comfortable. You might:

- ask God for what you need
- offer thanks for all the blessings in your life
- pray for the needs of others in your life or from across the world
- simply sit in silence, paying attention to any insights that come or letting yourself soak in some much-needed peacefulness
- listen to some Christian music and let the songs pray for you
- read the Bible (find the daily readings at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/>)
- write in a journal

However you can open yourself up to being more in touch with God—who is always, always, present to you—is prayer.

Your Family Lenten Commitments

Individual Prayer:
Family Prayer:
Fasting & Good Acts:
Almsgiving:

For more tips about building a household of faith, visit us at:



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Simple Ideas for Lent at Home

Every Lent, the Church invites us to the traditional practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Here are ideas for embracing these practices, along with your whole family.

2 Family Prayer

Praying with children doesn't have to be formal or use big words. Children love songs and using their bodies, so feel free to adopt a simple song for before meals. Find examples here: GrowingUpCatholic.com/mealprayers.

Or you could choose a short verse to repeat, such as:

*Thank you for the world so sweet.
Thank you for the food we eat.
Thank you for the birds that sing.
Thank you God, for everything.*

Once children are toddlers, they are big enough to hold hands around the dinner table and contribute when every person names something they are thankful for that day. However you choose to pray with your family, children will learn that it is normal to speak of God and to God.



3 Fasting

Fasting reminds us of those who don't have enough, help us live as better Christians, and keep us aware that we rely on God for everything that we have.

Adult Catholics are asked to fast—eat much less than usual—on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and abstain from eating meat on Fridays in Lent.

But fasting does not only apply to food. **Consider fasting or abstaining from something destructive.** Judgmental words? Holding grudges? Alcohol? An unhealthy relationship? Excessive screen time?

Alternately, you can **build something into your life that is life-giving instead.** Exercise? Eating healthier? More time in silence? Snuggling with your child before bedtime? Re-connecting with a close friend or family member?

Help your children brainstorm something negative they can refrain from (pulling Janie's hair) or something positive to build into their lives (helping clear the table). Then check in as a family occasionally to encourage each other along the way.

4 Almsgiving

This practice means giving to meet the needs of others. Designate a jar where family members can contribute coins or larger amounts to go to a preferred charity at the end of Lent—you can choose the charity as a family.

Discuss ideas for contributing. For example:

- The coins could symbolize sorrow for inappropriate actions, or symbolize acts of love and caring.
- A young child can put in coins found during Lent.
- An older child might pay a nickel every time he complains about doing a chore.
- Mom can contribute her latte money.
- Dad can donate his beer money.
- Perhaps skip going out for a family meal some night and put that money in the jar instead.

Lenten disciplines are much easier when done with others. If you lead your family in this, you will share with your children the discovery of the gifts and graces of a greater commitment to your faith life.

Celebrating Easter

Ideas for Busy Parents

“What is today about?” asked the Sunday school teacher to a group of preschoolers one Easter morning. “The Easter bunny brought eggs,” was the immediate and unequivocal reply. An unbiased observer, perhaps a visitor from another planet, might conclude that our Easter celebration is as much a festival of bunnies, eggs, candy, and new clothes as a celebration of Jesus’ resurrection.

We’re not suggesting that you should banish all of your Easter traditions, but read on for some suggestions on how to make Easter a more joyful and faith-filled experience for your whole family.

The Reason for the Season

The first step is to share the Easter story with your child. Even if your child knows the story, tell it again. We all pick up different insights over time.

There can be no resurrection without death, so the Easter story includes the Passion and death of Jesus. For younger children, be sensitive about discussing the violent details of Jesus’ death. You are the best judge of what your child is ready to understand. You can share more details when he or she is older.

Easter Sunday is our most joyful holiday and it starts a 50-day-long Easter season, when we hear what happened next each week in Mass. Read more about sharing the Easter story on the next page.

How to Celebrate

Easter is a time for joy because of what God has done. It is also a time for serious reflection about what it means for us to be followers of Jesus and to participate in his ministry. His resurrection was, after all, God’s answer to the forces that opposed Jesus’ ministry. It was a sign

that the ministry of healing, teaching and suffering on behalf of the poor and outcasts did not end on the cross. What does this say about how we might best celebrate Easter?

We don’t have to toss all the candy or ban the Easter Bunny—and we most definitely should still be celebrating—but we can be intentional about how we choose to do so. You might be concerned about how your child would react to making any changes to your tradition, but you might be surprised.

Try this: after telling your child what the Easter story is about, ask what *they* think would be good ways to celebrate that. Then have a family conversation to make some decisions together.

Easter Celebration Ideas

Here are suggestions we have gathered from other families for how you might do things a little differently this year.



✿ Brainstorm ways to adapt your existing traditions or start new ones to incorporate the real meaning of Easter. Add “Jesus Is Risen” alongside “Happy Easter.” Search online for “Christian Easter crafts.”

✿ Explain the connections between the Easter message traditions you will continue. For example, eggs and rabbits remind us of new life.

✿ Find ways to decorate that are less wasteful. Reuse decorations from year to year. Avoid plastic (who came up with the idea of plastic grass?!) as much as you can. Less can be more in decorating.

✿ Do your research and be very thoughtful before buying baby animals for Easter. The American Humane Society

reports that the vast majority of the baby bunnies, chicks, and ducks given for Easter die within a few weeks.

✚ Don't shop just for the sake of the sales or season. Shop for what you really need.

✚ Moderate the amount of candy you eat. Americans buy over 120 million pounds of Easter candy (\$2.1 billion worth) each year. Make it a treat, not a binge. Your bodies will thank you. Some families stuff at least some of their plastic eggs with alternates to candy (erasers, mini crackers, coins, etc.).

✚ We strongly recommend having a special Easter feast as a family. Use it as an opportunity to connect well with family and/or friends. The food does not have to be super fancy, but try to do something differently. Get everyone involved in the preparation so no one has to do too much. Light candles. Begin with prayer. Enjoy each others' company!

An Easter table blessing

O Lord,
you are our light and salvation.
You are the stronghold of our lives.
The brightness of the resurrection of Christ
has shattered the darkness of our world
and made our faces glow with new life
he has bestowed through the Holy Spirit.
As we share these Easter gifts of food and drink,
grant that we may dwell in your presence
all the days of our lives
and one day behold your beauty in heaven,
where you live and reign as one God,
forever and ever. Amen.

from *These Thy Gifts: A Collection of Simple Meal Prayers*
by Mark G. Boyer.

Telling the Easter Story

There are two sides to the Easter story: what physically happened, and what it means to us. Here are ideas for sharing both with your child.

Storytelling

The first side comes to us from the Gospels. If your child is old enough to understand the language, you can read it together. We recommend reading from chapter 20 of John and/or chapter 24 of Luke.

The adult language in the Bible can be difficult for younger children to understand, though. A good children's story Bible could help here. Or you can read the passages yourself—perhaps a couple times—and then tell your child the story

in your own words. It's easier than you might think. Be playful and have fun with it. Don't just relate the facts, but draw your child into the rich emotions (they were sad, scared, surprised, happy!).

What It Means

Your child is likely to start asking questions (perhaps many starting with the famous "why?"). Don't be intimidated. A good place to start is to ask your child what he or she thinks. You may be surprised at how much insight your child has!

Continue the conversation with them. If a question comes up that you don't know how to answer, tell them it's a great question and that you don't know (you might choose

to ask a parish staff member the next Sunday).

Key points to share with your child:

✚ Jesus rose to show us that even though people do bad things and sad things happen, God's love overcomes them.

✚ Jesus' resurrection means that we will also rise after we die someday, so we can be with Jesus and everyone who died before us.

✚ Jesus is still alive and we still encounter him today (even though it can be hard to recognize him). Jesus left the Holy Spirit to be with us in a special way.

For more tips about using the Bible at home, visit:
<http://GrowingUpCatholic.com/bible>.

Parish leader: Cut and paste this letter onto your letterhead or the template you use for email. Note also the highlighted portion of the letter, which you may personalize.

Dear Parents,

With young children in the household, the coming of summer may not change anything in your day-to-day life. But if you have school age children or someone's job runs on the academic calendar, summer brings significant changes to the family routine.

In the Church calendar, summertime is "Ordinary Time," not because the weeks are "ho-hum," but because we are in between the other major church seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. Ordinary Time can be a great time to experiment with new practices of faith in your family, especially if the longer hours of daylight, greater warmth, and change in routine allows for a little bit more leisure in your days.

What can you do to help your family go a little deeper with your faith at this time of year? Try one or more of the ideas suggested in this handout. They are great "spiritual exercises" to keep you and your family growing in faith. Give them a try!

In the name of Jesus, who loves all children,

[Pastor or Parish Leader signature here]

From Pope Francis

Pope Francis has had a lot to say to families. Here are some selections:

- Children need to see their parents expressing their love for each other. That is how they learn that it is beautiful to love other people!
- Parents should teach their children to pray to God as spontaneously as they call out “mommy” or “daddy.”
- It is very important for parents to be really available to their children *every day*: talking to them, praying with them, and playing with them. And not just moms, but dads, too!



Exercising Your Spirit this Summer

*Instead of taking a vacation from God as a family during the summer, consider instead how to vacation **with** God. The longer daylight hours offer new opportunities to take some time to try something new.*

With the turning of the season to summer, here are some fresh ideas for you.

For more tips about building a household of faith, visit us at:



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1 As an Individual

- Consider getting up a few minutes earlier to have some **time in solitude**. The perspective you'll gain can outweigh the few minutes of precious lost sleep.
- Fit in a **quiet walk** around the block after the kids have gone to sleep and use the time to tell God whatever your thoughts, learnings, or feelings from the day are.
- Go the bookstore and **look for a book** that has a simple, structured prayer program to follow, or get a book that has a spiritual appeal.
- Choose a small place in your house, yard, or neighborhood to be your **sacred place** where you can go occasionally for a few minutes of quiet time and prayer.
- Keep your eyes and ears open for **friends and family members** with whom you can share conversations about faith and beliefs, spirituality and religion.

2 With Your Spouse

- Ask your spouse or partner to pray with you and/or for you. Letting him/her know what you are struggling with and need help with is a beautiful way to build openness and intimacy in your relationship.
- Explore ways to schedule get some focused, intimate time with your partner. That may mean calling in the babysitting help of family, friends, or your child's godparents.
- Look for opportunities to attend educational or spiritual offerings at your parish together.
- Consider doing some service work or volunteering together as a couple.



3 With Your Children

- If you don't already have one, buy a **children's Bible or Bible story books** that you can read with your child. Good Bibles at the right age level make for great bedtime stories and conversation starters. See GrowingUpCatholic.com/bible for age-appropriate suggestions.
- Think of a **sweet ritual** to send your child off to sleep at night. Experiment until you hit on something you both enjoy and look forward to. It could be rocking to music, or snuggling for a minute in his bed before tucking him in, or rubbing his back while you remind him that you and God love him—no matter how challenging he was that day. It can be a relief to hear that God is even better than parents are at loving kids unconditionally.

Parish leader: Cut and paste this letter onto your letterhead or the template you use for email. Note also the highlighted portion of the letter, which you may personalize.

Dear Parents,

Greetings to you and all in your family!

Summer is ending as the daylight begins to shorten. Older children are off to school while younger children are adjusting to new skills and developments as their little bodies grow quickly. As a parent, you've probably noticed that any growth in your child requires new growth and skills from you, too.

This autumn, make a commitment that will foster your own spiritual growth as well as your child's. Try to attend Mass weekly if you don't already. The habit can be helpful to you and your little holy family in many ways.

As you probably know, attending Mass with young children is a challenge. Anyone who has been a parent will recognize what you face, and hopefully have compassion and appreciation for what you are trying to do. But as with any good habit, it takes time and practice for you and your child to become comfortable with the weekly ritual.

You'll find a flyer here with suggestions about how to make things smoother for you and your child at Mass. Remember, you and your child are *always* welcome in God's house.

[Parish leader: If your parish offers childcare during mass, or some form of kinderchurch or children's liturgy of the word, insert details about those offerings here.]

So give it a try these next few months. We promise you'll notice some changes and growth if you do.

In Christ's Love,

[Pastor or Parish Leader signature here]

1 The Noise & Wiggle Factor

Kids can be noisy, and bringing them to church can make them even more so. The echoes and acoustics are great, after all! They get hungry, they cry, they drop the kneelers with a bang, they don't keep their hands to themselves, and sometimes they try to run down the aisle.

It might make us self-conscious when our kids do these things, but **God doesn't mind any of that**. After all, Jesus did say, "Let the little children come to me and do not stop them" (Matthew 19:14). If others are giving you dirty looks, they probably have forgotten Jesus' words. Pope Francis doesn't mind either. He called the sound of children "the most beautiful choir of all," even when they are crying!

Jesus was the same age as your child once, and his parents had to teach him to behave properly in their synagogue services too. If you want your children to learn to behave in Mass, you'll need to help by giving them regular practice.

For more tips about building a household of faith, visit us at:



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Tips for Bringing Your Little One to Church

Attending Mass with young children can be challenging. Here are some ideas for how to navigate this part of parenthood.

2 Some Options

Babies and small children aren't expected to sit still for an hour at mass. It's perfectly fine to bring along items to **keep them occupied**:

- Set aside books specifically for bringing to church, such as a children's Bible, books about saints, etc.
- Quiet toys or a stuffed animal (nothing electronic or noisy, please) are fine for young children in the pews.

Just because your child is making normal child-like noises doesn't mean you to need whisk him or her out of the main sanctuary immediately. However, if it starts to be too distracting for too long, you have other options:

- Feel free to take your child to the back of the church or a "cry room" (if your church has one) to help her settle.
- Point out the statues, stained glass, holy water fonts, etc.
- Bless yourself and your child with the holy water can become a regular tradition and will help them to learn the sign of the cross.

3 Your Prayer Experience

To be honest, it may not be an especially prayerful experience for you as a parent to attend Mass with wiggly children. It will most certainly be different from what you were used to before parenthood. A key may be shifting your expectations.

- Even if you can't concentrate on the homily, maybe **one line of a song** will be what you needed to hear to give you comfort.
- Or perhaps you won't remember anything from the readings except **one verse** that stood out because it gave you strength to face an upcoming challenge.
- Maybe what you take away in a given week is a **blessed minute of silence** kneeling after communion.

If you attend mass regularly, you will come to relish the sweet family time of doing something all together, in close quarters, every week without anything else vying for your attention. Mass can become a time in which you don't have to do anything else in the world except hold, rock, soothe, sing, pray, and simply be together with your children in God's presence.



Pope Francis on Breastfeeding

During a baptism ceremony at the Sistine Chapel, Pope Francis surprised some by encouraging mothers to breastfeed their babies during the service if they were hungry.

"Some will cry because they are uncomfortable or because they are hungry," he said. "If they are hungry, mothers, let them eat, no worries, because here, they are the main focus."