

# PARENTING WITH JOY

## Leader Guide

*Thank you for your willingness to help lead your group(s) and make this a great experience!*

## Scheduling Your Sessions

You can use this resource to gather parents into small group discussion as their children go to their religious education classes. Or you can schedule "Parents' Nights" or other regular gatherings of parents (perhaps just after Mass). Providing child care will enable more parents to attend.

## Preparing the Materials

The participant materials are provided in both separate files for each session and in a single file. The handouts are four pages long for each session. We recommend that you distribute the handouts at each session, rather than giving them out all at once at the beginning. This will help your people remain focused on the current week and keep them from forgetting to bring their handouts each week.

## Facilitating the Sessions

The format of the sessions is very simple, and they can be led without the help of a staff person. However, it would be helpful to have one or more volunteer facilitators who welcome participants, track the time, and help ensure that everyone has a chance to share. If you have a large group, we recommend breaking up into smaller groups of 5-8 for discussion. Here are some tips for leading the group:

- 1 Ensure good hospitality. Members of your group may be new to a small group experience or the larger community. Facilitate introductions and be sure everyone feels welcome.
- 2 Go over the ground rules (see below) at the beginning of the series, and quickly review them at the start of each session. Parents have strong feelings about parenting. Make sure that the below ground rules are followed so everyone feels comfortable in the group.
- 3 Gauge the dynamic of your group. If necessary, you (or another designated facilitator) may need to gently facilitate to keep the group on schedule, remain on-topic, and/or allow all voices a chance to enter the circle. You may feel timid interrupting someone, but this can be a very important role that helps the whole group. Apologize in advance when reviewing the ground rules with the group. However, don't put people on the spot by compelling them to share.
- 4 Facilitate answering reflection questions. Sometimes sharing times can be a little awkward waiting for people to initiate. You can rotate around the circle, but we recommend that you try something called the "popcorn" method. One person starts, and when they are done sharing they choose the next person (who is always allowed to pass and pick another person). We have found that in practice this works very well, sometimes adding a little levity.
- 5 Listen to the feedback from the group along the way. Pace the time for the different sections based on the total time available and what works for your group.
- 6 We recommend that the content in the handouts be read aloud rather than silently. An excellent way to get everyone's voices heard early on is to simply go around the circle having each participant read one paragraph.

# Ground Rules

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Here are some guidelines for your gatherings. Your group leader will help facilitate.

- ① Our goal is to connect our faith with the way we parent and live our lives. Keeping this goal in mind will help us get there!
- ② Confidentiality. What's said in the group stays in group, unless you have the permission of the person who spoke it.
- ③ Start on time—and end on time. Your group leader will try to pace the sessions, but everyone can help by arriving promptly and being attentive to time.
- ④ Discussion involves everyone. Make it possible for everyone – even those who are naturally more quiet – to take part. Don't share a second time until everyone has had an opportunity to share the first time.
- ⑤ Remember your manners. Avoid dismissing the thoughts of others, don't laugh at others when they've shared (unless they've just told a joke), and no putdowns of any kind.
- ⑥ Share from your own experience and speak for yourself. Don't try to problem-solve for another person or tell them what to do, but you can share what you have found helpful in your own life.
- ⑦ It's OK to agree to disagree. It's just a fact of life that everyone has different opinions. If the group has differing thoughts on an issue, there's no requirement that everyone agree. Respect everyone's opinions and where they are at in their journey.
- ⑧ Turn off mobile phones before the group begins! Put your electronic lives on hold for this short time to be fully present to others.

## PARENTING WITH JOY

# ① IMPERFECT PARENTING & HEALTHY LIMITS

## Opening Prayer

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Gracious God, you know the challenges we face raising our children in this world today. We remember that Jesus was full of compassion for all the struggling parents he met, and that he enjoyed spending time with children.

Guide our conversation today so that we can see ourselves and our families with the compassion that Jesus does. May your Holy Spirit inspire us to see where we are being called to grow as we try to raise our children with hearts full of love and goodness. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

## Introduction

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*We recommend that you read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each person in the group read one paragraph aloud at a time, continuing around the circle.*

- Welcome to this small group process. We're glad you have made time in your busy schedules to gather in community with other parents and take some time to reflect.
- Pope Francis wrote a lengthy document titled *The Joy of Love* focused on relationships, marriage, and family life. He looks at these topics with a new spirit, emphasizing the need for the Church to be more merciful, compassionate, and understanding, rather than critical. One section focuses on the modern experience and challenge of raising children.
- The pope is clear that he doesn't presume to know what is best for all families or family situations. We each need to follow God's lead as best we can. His document is meant as a thought-provoking starting point, encouraging reflections that can help us raise mature, well-rounded, emotionally and spiritually grounded children.
- We who are writing this process are parents ourselves (our daughters are ages 7 and 10), so we bring with us our own perspective from parenting and talking to many other parents.
- This gathering isn't about us, the Church, or the people around the circle telling you how you should parent. You are the parents and you know your needs and your children's needs more than anyone else.
- But our faith and our spirituality have something valuable to contribute to the conversation. How we might be called to parent differently because we are followers of Jesus?

# It's OK to Be Imperfect Parents Here!

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- Pope Francis doesn't have a spouse or his own children, of course, but he has a good sense of the problems families face in raising children today. He mentions employment and financial fears, the exhaustion when coming home from work, how many families don't share daily meals anymore, and the many, many distractions of technology and outside commitments that keep families from coming together and bonding.
- This group is a chance to offer ourselves and other parents empathy and compassion for doing the best we can at this incredibly difficult job of parenting. We all have things we do well as parents, and we all have room to improve.
- This is not a place for competition or comparison—there's enough of that in our lives already. Instead, this is a space where it's ok that we have imperfect children, and it's ok if we are struggling. It is a place where we can look honestly at what is going well, and get support and encouragement for those things we want or need to change in raising our children.
- This is a place where the Gospel can challenge us to grow as parents, and where we can support one another in sometimes swimming upstream against cultural values that clash with our faith.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What are you most enjoying about your child(ren) at this point in their lives?
- ② What are you pleased about with your parenting at this point in your lives? What is going well or smoothly?
- ③ What is a challenge for you now in parenting?
- ④ What is a particular area of your parenting in which you would like to grow?

# Setting Healthy Limits

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- Our faith teaches us that it is important to live within healthy limits. Too much of even a good thing can be a problem. For example, we know it is not healthy to work constantly (skipping Sabbath breaks), consume too much (“gluttony”), or store up too much (Jesus’ parable of the man who built bigger barns). God wants us to live with a healthy balance in our lives.
- One of our jobs as parents is to help our children learn to live within healthy limits. Setting boundaries can be uncomfortable because of the pushback. Drawing the line at “One cookie is enough” is harder when we know whining and begging will follow. And of course the discomfort increases as the stakes increase.
- But as the adults in the relationship we know more than our children, so we have the responsibility (and authority) for setting and holding the boundaries. Here Pope Francis reminds us what psychologists and child developmental experts tell us: it is unhealthy when parents and children reverse roles. Letting the child call the shots isn’t good for them as children or us as parents.
- The challenges of setting limits come in many forms, including safety, use of electronic devices, time usage, and health. Our job as parents includes defining limits, but also helping our children learn how and why they should be set.
- Watching *Dora the Explorer* may be fairly benign for a four-year-old, but the parent is still responsible for deciding how much screen time Suzy has with Dora. Pediatricians are a good source of objective information about where to set limits, for everything from screen time and nutrition to exercise and minimum sleep.
- Pope Francis reminds us that we need to consider who and what we want our children to be exposed to and at what age. This means being aware of where their entertainment comes from, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time.
- A particular challenge in our own family has been determining the best way to set limits on extracurricular activities. We all want our kids to have fun, to excel, and be well-rounded. But sometimes we need to back up and consider if our children even *have* any unscheduled time left, and how external activities can take away from essential family time.
- Our job as parents includes monitoring our children and guarding them from risks that they aren’t even aware of yet. But Pope Francis reminds us that we can go overboard: “We cannot control every situation that a child may experience. Obsession is not education.” Helicopter parenting doesn’t prepare children to navigate real life on their own. Sometimes we need to let go and give our children space to fail (and learn).
- Perhaps, like parents of previous generations, we don’t really need to know where our children are physically each moment of the day. Alternatively, Pope Francis offers a provocative question: do we know where our children are “existentially”: their convictions, goals, desires, and dreams? (#261)
- Falling into bed each night, we may default to discussing how Madeleine did on her math test and how Rachel is doing in her new dance class, but what if we consider their souls? How are they developing emotionally? What touches their hearts? Are they asking spiritual questions? Are they growing in empathy and compassion for others? Then we can ask ourselves, how can we help them be attentive to this interior journey, not just the journey toward worldly success?
- As much as we need to help our kids set their own limits, the annoying truth is that the biggest influence we will have on them is our example. If we don’t have healthy schedules, diets, and usage of media and electronic devices, how can we expect our children to learn otherwise? And they’ll hold us to our own standards—we’ve already been humbled in our own family!

## Reflection Questions

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- ① How are your children spending most of their time outside of daycare/school now? Who and what is influencing them most? What is your comfort level with this?
- ② Share about a rule or boundary you have set that drew disappointment or a challenge from your child but was good for your family (e.g. you don't let William eat sweets anymore because it effects his behavior too much, you declined a sleepover because it was going to be your family's only evening at home together in a week, you said "no" to the after-school music class to preserve a little more free time for your child at home, etc.)
- ③ Where is your child's soul? What brings him peace? Where does he/she shine with compassion, spirit, liveliness, or goodwill?

## Closing Prayer

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Dear God,  
thank you for this chance to slow down  
and reflect on our family life.  
Grant us patience and compassion  
for ourselves, our partners, and our children  
on this journey of parenthood.  
Strengthen us to do what you would have us do  
for the good of our families.  
May we be aware of your presence with us in the week to come.  
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## Resources

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- The full text of Pope Francis' document *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)* is available for free on the Vatican website ([vatican.va](http://vatican.va), or do a web search for "Amoris Laetitia"). The numbers we site refer to the paragraph numbers in the document.
- To buy the document in book format or other resources to learn more about it, visit <http://pastoral.center/joy-of-love>.

## PARENTING WITH JOY

### ② TEACHING GOODNESS

#### Opening Prayer

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Gracious God,

be with us this day as we explore our role  
in shaping our children's values.

Help us to see where we can strengthen our own good habits  
so that we can help our children strengthen theirs.

Give us compassion for ourselves

and all other parents on this journey

so that we can be supportive and encouraging of each other.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

#### Cultivating Good Habits

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*We recommend that you read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each person in the group read one paragraph aloud at a time, continuing around the circle.*

- Parents rely on schools to provide basic instruction, and our children may spend as many or more waking hours at school than they do with us. But as the parents, we have the primary responsibility for our children's moral and spiritual formation.
- Yes—us—even if we don't have it all figured out in terms of our beliefs about spirituality, faith, and church. The parish may help if we take our kids to Mass and/or religious education classes. Pope Francis reminds us that the responsibility is ultimately ours to foster good habits and an inclination to goodness in our kids.
- If we are lucky, our children's school (whether public or private) is doing the same, but at times our moral and spiritual values may differ from what the school is teaching—explicitly or implicitly. Or the school may only give lip service to a particular value we consider more important. Such times are good reminders that the buck stops with us for the moral formation of our own kids. (#263)
- How do we foster goodness in our children? It begins with the hard work of cultivating good habits in ourselves. Our children watch us so closely that our words and actions carry more weight than anyone else—at least until they reach adolescence. A father we know shared that the biggest reason he tries to always do the right thing is because two little pairs of eyes are always on him ready to copy what he does.

- If we want our children to be sensitive and accepting of others, do we model that in our relationships? Are we sensitive and accepting of others (children *and* adults)? Do our kids hear us assume the goodwill of others and speak non-judgmentally, or do they overhear criticism? Do we sometimes resort to “Do as I say and not as I do?” If so, how might we be called to greater maturity? Considering the values we want to impart to our children is a good challenge for us practice such values ourselves.
- For example, if we want our children to learn to make “observations, not judgments” about others, we have to model it for them daily and repeatedly. We may not be able to do it perfectly all the time, but we can strive to do it more and more regularly.
- Say that our four-year-old bike rider notices a seven-year-old struggling to ride, and says something derisive about the other child. We can respond in a neutral tone, “Maybe she didn't get to practice when she was four like you. But I bet that there's something else she learned to do when she was four that was easy for her.”
- On the other hand, if our four-year-old is used to hearing us make neutral—or better yet—charitable comments about others, it may not even occur to her to be critical. She may have naturally accepted that “different kids learn things at different times.”
- Pope Francis recognizes that sometimes “we prove inconsistent in our own convictions, however firm they may be.” (#265) We may know what is good for us and morally right, but we don't always choose it. So how can we get to the point where the good takes root in us and becomes our natural way of responding and being in the world? It's all about developing good habits. (#266)
- Developing and practicing moral virtues is like exercise. If you're not in the habit to begin with, it can be very hard to get started even though you know intellectually that exercise is a good thing. Once you develop a routine of regular exercise, it becomes easier to continue. Then if you miss a day, it is easier to get back on track than if you don't have the routine to begin with.
- It's the same when it comes to developing our moral habits and values. The more we make the right choice, the more it becomes a habit and the stronger our moral muscles become. At some point, after we have practiced a particular habit enough it becomes our natural inclination and our children experience it as normal and natural.
- What are those values we want our children to grow up experiencing as natural? What do **we** need to do to better to live out those values ourselves? Are we asking things of them that we don't do ourselves?
- For example, we probably ask our children to be civil and put themselves in their sibling's shoes during a conflict. If so, can we honestly say that they see us regularly (even if not always or perfectly) doing the same with our partner? The more we model for them, the more they can incorporate the values into their personalities until they become instinctive, their natural inclination.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Share about a value that you feel responsible for teaching your children that is not emphasized as you would like in their school.
- ② Share about a value or conviction you want your child to embrace which is proving challenging for you to uphold.
- ③ What good habit can you commit to beginning or strengthening this coming week?

# The Value of Correction

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- We do what we can to instill good habits and virtues in our children, but—of course—they sometimes fall short. When this happens, it is our job to determine the best way to correct and/or discipline them. (#269)
- As parents, we may sometimes inflict punishments that are inappropriate or even cross the line into being harmful. When a two year old spills his drink (as two year olds are known to do), a harsh punishment isn't appropriate, no matter how stretched to the limit we may feel. And believe us, we've been there!
- On the other hand, some parents are inclined to overlook bad behavior that should be addressed. When a second grader is writing "I hate you" notes to a classmate, it's not responsible for the parent to shrug it off with a "She'll grow out of it" attitude.
- As parents, we can help our children realize that misbehavior has consequences, whether or not they may see them at the time. After the juice is spilled, the two year old can be firmly reminded, "This is why we have the rule that we don't take open cups into the living room." And the second grader needs a conversation about the effect of such notes on the classmate.
- Pope Francis reminds us that we have to encourage our children to put themselves in other people's shoes, acknowledge the hurt they have caused, ask for forgiveness, and repair the harm done.
- Obviously we're not going to use this complicated language with children, but we can teach it in age-appropriate terms. "What would you feel like if you got a note saying 'I hate you'?" We can teach the steps of admitting our wrongdoing, asking for forgiveness, and making amends. But again, it's not fair for us to ask this of our children if we don't do this ourselves.
- Although it may seem like our society expects us to be perfect parents and judges us when we're not, *God* does not expect us to be perfect parents. There are plenty of examples of imperfect parents in Jesus' family tree. One ancestor, Jacob, was known for his overt favoritism of one son (Joseph). Another, King David, was a murderer *and* an adulterer. Yet God was able to bring goodness even out of their failings and sinfulness.
- In many ways, it's better for kids to experience imperfect parents who have the humility to admit their mistakes and ask forgiveness than for the kids to feel the pressure of living up to the unrealistic standard of perfection.
- It's hard to be humble, admit a mistake, and apologize, and in some ways it may be even more humbling to have to do this with our children. Yet if we want our kids to learn this, then we need to be humble enough to do it ourselves.
- In our house, you might hear (more often than we might like): "I'm sorry I lost my temper with you, Madeleine. I was hungry and tired, and when I feel like that, I don't have as much patience for your complaints." Statements like that are a relief to our 10 year-old. It helps her to remember her parents are human (and get hungry and tired too!), helps her notice that her complaining has an effect on someone else, and demonstrates that parents "get it wrong sometimes," but are willing to apologize.
- Perhaps it seem like a big deal for parents to say things like this, but the more we can cultivate the habit, the less it will be a "big deal" for our children. We're back to cultivating good habits that reflect our values. The stronger the habits, the more they will become the norm for our children.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Do you tend toward over-disciplining and punishing, or not being firm enough when your child(ren) needs discipline?
- ② Share about a time when you had the opportunity to model asking for forgiveness (of your child or in front of your child). Did you manage the humility to do it, or not? How did it play out?

## Closing Prayer

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Mary and Joseph,

We know that even though Jesus was the Son of God  
he still needed human parents to teach him  
good manners,  
how to play fairly with other children,  
and to cultivate his true goodness.

Help us as parents

to know how to parent our own children  
so that we are neither too firm  
nor too lenient.

Teach us how to strengthen our own good habits  
so that we can model them more for our children.

We ask this in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.

## PARENTING WITH JOY

### ③ CHILDREN'S RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES

#### Opening Prayer

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Dear God,

we thank you for the gift of our children,  
with all of their beauty and complexities.

Send your Holy Spirit to be with us today

so that we may hear what you would have us hear.

Let our minds and hearts be open

to how you invite us to grow in our role as parents.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### The Problem of Entitlement

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*We recommend that you read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each person in the group read one paragraph aloud at a time, continuing around the circle.*

- In the First World today, many children and young people exhibit a strong sense of entitlement. They feel entitled to whatever it is they want when they want it, and they have learned they can expect to get it. Problems then arise when these children can't have something immediately or can't have it at all, despite feeling they "deserve" it.
- The balance between our children's rights and their responsibilities is a complicated but important topic. What are they "entitled to," what can or should we appropriately refuse them, and where should we be asking them to grow in responsibility?
- Pope Francis addresses this issue of entitlement in *The Joy of Love*. He poses some points for us as parents to consider as a check for whether we are indulging this movement toward our children's entitlement.
- As Pope Francis points out, "if we try to make everything revolve around the child's desires, such children will grow up with a sense of their rights but not their responsibilities." (#270) Are our children included in this grouping?
- What can be confusing for us as parents is that we *really love* our children and thus really want them to be safe, popular, and happy! It's a good impulse, but it's a powerful force that can sometimes lead us in the wrong direction.
- No one knows that better than advertisers. Convince a parent that a particular product will benefit their child in one of these ways, and... *cha-ching!*

- Pope Francis goes on to remind us that learning to wait for something or earning it instead of receiving it instantly is good for children—just as it is for adults. We know that the kind of food we want at a particular moment, or the car we would like to drive, or the house we want to live in aren't always easily attainable, if ever. There is value in learning to postpone our desires, and/or working for them, and it is a valuable lesson for us to teach our children.
- Scientific studies backs this up, as demonstrated in the famous “marshmallow experiment” first performed at Stanford University in the late 1960s and early 70s. Children who could decline a small reward long enough to receive a bigger reward were shown to have better test scores, educational outcomes, and health later in life. Mmmm... marshmallows!
- “Postponing desires does not mean denying them but simply deferring their fulfillment. When children or adolescents are not helped to realize that some things have to be waited for, they can become obsessed with satisfying their immediate needs and develop the vice of 'wanting it all now'.” (#275) We may very well struggle with this vice ourselves, so the practice of teaching detachment can also be good for us.
- Technology tends to drive us in the opposite direction, as we now can stream video on demand, shop online whenever we want, and message people instantly (and they better respond right away!). Neuroscientists are studying how electronic devices trigger releases of dopamine in our brains that make us obsessively seek more pleasure.
- If we want our children to know that they can still be happy even though they don't own X, Y, or Z, we need to practice detachment from material objects ourselves. We have to model the ability to be content with what we have now.
- St. Paul said it well in his Letter to the Philippians. “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4:11-13) Wouldn't we rather our children grow up with that kind of maturity than grow into a sense of entitlement with the assumption that they deserve to have whatever they want?

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Thinking back to your childhood, what was your experience of your parents providing or not providing what you wanted when you wanted it? How did that affect your sense of what you “deserve” to have or to do?
- ② At first blush, would you say that your children have a strong sense of entitlement? How regularly do you acquiesce and give them what they ask or allow them to do what they are requesting?
- ③ Share an example of something that your child wants but which you are questioning whether you can or should give them (e.g. they want a new bike but the used one on sale is perfectly functioning, or they want to play soccer *and* be in the choir *and* take guitar lessons simultaneously). Alternately, give an example of something that your child wanted that you didn't provide for any reason. What was the advantage to your child in *not* receiving this?

# Chores

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- Another topic Pope Francis wrote about is how children grow and mature when they are given appropriate responsibilities that balance their rights. We've touched on our culture's tendency to indulge our children. Now let's look at what is appropriate to ask and expect of our children. What responsibilities are we giving them? Should we give them more or less?
- The amount of work we have to do *for* our children changes naturally according to their age and development. Many of us may have felt like waiters and waitresses working slavishly to get food into our toddlers when they were two.
- If we are still preparing, serving, and cleaning up after all of our children's meals when they are school-aged, we are probably indulging their sense of entitlement. Pope Francis cautions against "underestimating their ability to grow in responsible freedom." So how, when, and how much do we ask our kids to help in order to foster that growth?
- How can our children contribute to the work of the family? What about the responsibility to help create the family meal experience? Kids as young as two or three can help carry items to the table and be taught to clear their own plate and cup afterwards. A kindergartener can tear lettuce for a salad. A grade school child can read and follow a simple recipe. School children can all be enlisted to help with the table and kitchen cleanup after meals.
- A couple of generations ago in America this was the norm, and children were expected to help out at a young age. Consider the *Little House on the Prairie* book series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Laura relates how she and her sister Mary were making their beds, sweeping, helping at mealtimes and doing the dishes at about ages six and four. As they grew, so did their responsibilities—until they were helping with gardening, farming, sewing, caring for their younger siblings, and a myriad of other household tasks. Plus, no Pokémon games!
- But by all accounts Laura paints a picture of a happy and well-adjusted childhood. She grew up without a sense of entitlement, and instead developed a mature understanding of how everyone in the family had to contribute to make day-to-day life run smoothly. Is there any good reason why we shouldn't help our children learn the same by asking them to contribute with household responsibilities?
- It's natural to feel a twinge of guilt when we tell our children it's time to quit playing when we need them to help get dinner on the table. They may be content and quiet (!) and if we interrupt them to enlist their help we may have to endure some complaining.
- But Pope Francis reminds us that we can and *should* ask children to do things that require effort proportionate to their developmental stage. (#271) We are asking them to pause their play to set the table, not to work in a sweatshop. When they are asked to be responsible for themselves, they learn more independence and develop more confidence. Their self-esteem is enriched when they contribute.
- To *not* ask a child to take on appropriate responsibilities is to do them a disservice. For example, if a child consistently leaves his jackets at school or the playground and they are lost, parents enable his pattern if they regularly buy replacements. They are "entitling" him to be forgetful and irresponsible with his possessions. But if the child knows he will have to pay to replace the next jacket he loses, he will likely become more mindful in caring for his things.
- As parents, we have more than enough work to keep the household running. There's no reason the children shouldn't have a part in the effort and be asked to contribute. Pope Francis isn't saying we should expect children to act like adults or have the responsibilities of adults, but he is encouraging us to not underestimate their ability to grow in responsibility. (#275)

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What responsibilities did you have in your family when you were growing up and/or how did your parents expect you to take responsibility for yourself? How did those expectations help to form you?
- ② What do you still do for your children that they could do for themselves with a little practice, guidance, and/or encouragement?
- ③ What responsibilities do your children currently have around the home? Do you have a sense that you can/should give them more responsibilities? What might some of those things be?

## Closing Prayer

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Gracious God,

you know we are still learning how to be good parents  
and that we don't have this role figured out yet.

Guide us in our parenting decisions,  
and give us a clear sense of discernment about  
what is best for our family.

We ask for your strength and courage  
as we strive to help our children grow in responsibility and maturity.  
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## PARENTING WITH JOY

### ④ SEXUALITY AND LOVING OUR BODIES

#### Opening Prayer

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Gracious God,  
may your Holy Spirit open our minds, hearts, and ears today  
as we explore the complex topic of  
how and what we are teaching our children about sexuality.  
Guide our discussion so that we may go out from here  
inspired and renewed in our commitment to teach them  
about the gift and beauty of human sexuality.  
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### Respecting our Bodies

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*We recommend that you read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each person in the group read one paragraph aloud at a time, continuing around the circle.*

- Sex education is a complex, controversial, and weighted topic. The Church has had many things to say over the centuries about sexual morality and we may not all agree with all of it. But today we aren't debating the Church's teachings about contraception, pre-marital sex, abortion, or homosexuality.
- Instead, we want to open up a conversation about how we can guide our children in their growth toward a mature sexuality that honors and values human sexuality. As Pope Francis wrote in *The Joy of Love*, "Who speaks of these things today? Who is capable of taking young people seriously? Who helps them to prepare seriously for a great and generous love?"
- While many assume that the Church has a negative view of sexuality, Pope Francis makes it clear that the Church views sexuality as an essential gift from God. Sexuality is an interpersonal language, a way of expressing love.
- As the primary educators of our children, we should not cede the responsibility of teaching out children about sex and sexuality to others (even if we find the topic uncomfortable or challenging). Our children will face many challenges around sexuality, from pressures around body image to attitudes that trivialize sexual activity.
- Depending on the ages of your children, it may or may not be time to initiate conversations with them about sexuality. But even at an early age we can begin teaching and modeling for children an acceptance of their own bodies as they were created.
- One way we do this is by affirming how beautiful, good, whole, and sacred their bodies are. Our culture—explicitly and implicitly—send messages that we should have "perfect" bodies, especially to girls and women. As Christians, our concern should be for *healthy* bodies.

- We can avoid criticizing of our children's bodies, which may have a much greater impact than we may realize. We should also avoid comparing their bodies with their siblings or peers, or critiquing other people's physical attributes. Pope Francis reminds us that sex education should include “respect and appreciation for differences” so that children learn to be open and accepting.
- We can instill appropriate modesty in our children by teaching boundaries around their bodies. For example, it may be fine if your three-year-old daughter enjoys running around the house reveling in her naked body after a bath. Playing naked in the front yard when she is ten is less appropriate.
- We can teach children how to set limits around their bodies when snuggling with them or in tickle fights when they are young. We may mention that it's okay for a parent they feel safe with to tickle them, but it's not okay for other acquaintances to do so. We teach them respect for their bodies by respecting their requests to give them physical space when they ask for it and teaching their siblings to do so also.
- Remembering that our children are watching and listening to us more closely than we sometimes think, we should model accepting our own bodies as they were created. Do they see us conveying a sense of dissatisfaction or even hatred of our own bodies? Or do they see us daily caring for and respecting our bodies?
- We live in a “hook-up culture” where sex is reduced to a fun activity that communicates very little and says nothing about the relationship between the people involved. Sex can be so much better—and more fun—than that! Be ready to talk to your children about how sex can be a powerful language of the heart that can express deep love in the context of a life-long relationship. Offer them a positive alternative to what they may learn from those around them.
- Pope Francis also discusses modeling gender roles by reminding us that “masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories.” He gives the example of how a husband's way of being masculine can include doing domestic chores and raising children, and a woman's femininity can encompass exercising leadership.
- He writes that “children have to be helped to accept as normal such healthy 'exchanges'” in the roles of the parents. Just as more and more single parents and homosexual couples are raising children today and their children are learning to challenge societal definitions of gender roles, so we can be thoughtful about what we teach our kids by the assumptions they see being made in our homes. (#285)

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What are you doing to teach your children acceptance of their bodies as beautiful and sacred? Is there anything you would like to do better/more of?
- ② How do you help your children to respect and appreciate differences in others in regards to gender and sexuality? What more can you do?
- ③ What gender roles are you modeling to your children, i.e. what do they assume is “normal” from what they experience in your household? If you could do something differently in this area, what would it be?

# Critiquing Cultural Messages

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- In *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis questions how well our educational institutions are providing a positive sex education. If our children don't hear positive values and teachings from us, they may not hear them at all.
- Worse yet, our children may be absorbing skewed and distorted understandings from friends, peers, and the media. It is extremely challenging to approach the issue of sex education in a time and culture when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished.
- So what can we as parents coming from a Christian perspective do to help put sex into a broader framework of love, respect, and mutual self-giving? How can we emphasize to our children that sexuality is rightly directed toward joy and loving relationships?
- Part of our task is to help our children identify skewed, disrespectful, or negative attitudes toward sex and sexuality. We can help them develop a critical sense of the onslaught of information and stimuli about sex, and the flood of pornographic material that deforms sexuality.
- We may think we have plenty of time before we have to begin such conversations, but one recent study found that some children begin stumbling upon or seeking out pornography as early as fourth grade.
- Pope Francis is reminding us that our culture is bombarding our children with messages about sex probably much more than we realize (e.g. in advertising). Consequently, our first task is to help them realize that many of these messages aren't beneficial. We can point out how messages can be unhealthy, irresponsible, selfish, or objectifying.
- At the same time, we can help our children by modeling and pointing out positive, loving relationships in their lives. Who are the people in our lives whom we respect for the integrity, honesty, and warmth of their relationships? Who do we--and they--know who have healthy and balanced (though not perfect) relationships, even if they live them out differently from our own?
- We can also introduce them to age-appropriate books that share factual information objectively. What about books or movies that offer positive examples of people in healthy, loving, sexual relationships? If you are partnered, you can look for ways to teach sensitivity, mutual concern and care, loving respect, and deeply meaningful communication as a way to model for them the sacredness and goodness of sex.
- As our children grow into adolescence, we need to hold in the forefront of our minds how fragile and bewildered young people can be when it comes to their changing bodies and awakening sexuality. On the surface they may appear self-confident and knowledgeable in this area (or they may clearly be anxious and at a loss). Either way, we should encourage them to integrate their physical experiences with the rest of their lives, respecting their growing bodily awareness. (#283)
- One danger is when children begin toying with their bodies as if they were mature adults. How might we invite them to learn about the language of their bodies and how to interpret and channel their desires in authentic, self-giving ways? We don't have the answers for you here. All parents need to figure this out as they go along, or risk letting other forces shape our children's views of sexuality.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Where are your children receiving messages about sex and sexuality outside of your home?
- ② Share about the attributes of one or more couples you know whose relationship is a good model for you and your children.
- ③ What resources have you heard of or already found helpful in broaching conversations to put bodily awareness, relationships, and sexuality in a positive, loving context?

## Closing Prayer

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Creator God,  
you created humankind in your own image;  
male and female you created us.  
We want to grow more in our ability  
to channel our sexuality in loving ways.  
We want to teach our children to do the same,  
but often we feel at loss for how to do this.  
Help us to know how to guide our children  
in this area so fraught with confusion  
so that they may come to see sexuality  
in a framework of love and generosity.  
We ask this in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

## PARENTING WITH JOY

### 5 PASSING ON FAITH

#### Opening Prayer

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Creator God,  
we come before you today  
to reflect on our relationship with you.  
You formed us in our mothers' wombs  
and tell us that we are fearfully and wonderfully  
made.

You have promised that you will  
always be with us,  
loving us every day of our lives.  
Guide our conversation as we reflect on  
how we can teach our children to know you  
and experience your immense love for them.  
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### Giving the Gift of Faith

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*We recommend that you read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each person in the group read one paragraph aloud at a time, continuing around the circle.*

- The fact that you are here today presumes that you have an interest in passing on a faith and spiritual life to your children. Regardless of where you stand in your own relationship to the Catholic Church, presumably you have experienced something valuable in your own faith life and you want your children to have that too.
- Your role in the faith formation of your child is central. Even if you don't think you are qualified to be an authority on matters of faith, spirituality, and the Church, as the parent *you* are your child's primary teacher.
- No one can replace you, not even a parish program. The parish programs are there to reinforce what you do at home—not to relieve you of this responsibility.
- The good news is that you don't need a theology degree, or to be an expert in Church history, or even feel settled and content with your own faith life in order to pass on faith. You just have to be willing to grapple with questions, doubts, hopes, and wonderings about God and Jesus.
- If your child experiences you as engaged with your faith and hears it discussed naturally in your home, chances are that your child will grow in opening to a relationship with God.
- In *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis writes that handing on faith “presumes that parents themselves genuinely trust God, seek him, and sense their need for him.” (#287)
- Notice that the Pope is *not* saying that parents should be able to explain the entire Creed or discuss the development of the seven sacraments over the first centuries of the Church. Passing on faith isn't about head knowledge, it's about the heart.
- The academic realm of theology is about the intellectual study of religion and its history. People who study this (both priests and lay ministers) can answer the academic questions.

- So if your child ever asks a faith-related question that you're not sure about, it's ok. You can tell your child honestly, "I don't know for sure," and then muse aloud with them how it might be. (Then you can ask someone who works at your parish to explain it to you/them!).
- What is more important for children than the explanations of tough theological questions is to witness and experience their parents engaged with their spiritual life: with the traditions, stories, and rituals of the faith.
- There are many things you can do that will make more of an impression on a child than what they will learn in a religious education class. Saying a prayer before dinner. Tucking them in at night, and reminding them that you love them and God loves them. Lighting an Advent wreath. Hanging an appealing, "child-friendly" sketch or painting of Jesus in their room. Regularly reading stories from a good children's story Bible and talking about them.
- Doing any of these things models for them your own openness to the spiritual realm and a relationship with God. It does *not* mean you have your faith all "figured out" or that you have to agree with everything the Catholic Church teaches.
- Since we shouldn't ask our children to do something which we aren't doing ourselves, let's take some time to reflect on where we are at on our own spiritual journeys and how we are expressing them now.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What is your current faith and spiritual life like? Do you have a regular spiritual discipline? Do you pray or sometimes just talk to God? Do you ever discuss your faith with your partner or any friends?
- ② Are you satisfied with where your spiritual life is at, or would you like something to be different?
- ③ Are there particular aspects of your faith that you want to be sure to pass on to your children? How might you take steps now to do so?

# Praying at Home

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- If you pray, do your children know that you do so? It's fantastic if you have a regular prayer life, but it won't get transferred to children by osmosis if they don't ever see you praying or hear you mention it.
- Pope Francis reminds us that kids need to see that prayer is important to their parents. He recognizes that handing on the faith is particularly difficult now because of current lifestyles and work schedules when many people keep up a frenetic pace just to survive. (#287)
- But handing on the faith—and cultivating your own and your family's prayer life—doesn't have to be one more thing to cram into our our insanely long to-do lists. Instead, it is possible to weave it into your daily life so that it becomes normalized, as something your family regularly does together.
- Try praying before meals—it can be as simple as everyone holding hands around the table and each person saying one thing they are thankful for and one person or circumstance they want to pray for. You'll be gratified to see how quickly their (and your!) gratitude will grow.
- You can pray with your children in times of crisis, at bedtime, in the car, with the Bible, when you hear an ambulance siren, or after something good happens. Let them see that praying can be natural and informal – they don't have to worry about doing it “the right way.”
- Besides, there is no “right way” to pray. The focus shouldn't always be on reciting prayers from memory, but also “talking with Jesus/God.” Let your child know that they can speak to Jesus as a friend. Let them know that they can tell him anything: silly things that happened that day, things they are scared of, what they hope for, people they are worried about, etc. Jesus is interested in everything about them and their lives, just as he is interested in anything you want to tell him.
- Invite your children to pray with you, but remind them they can also pray whenever they want when they are alone. You can suggest they pray quietly in their minds after you say goodnight, after they wake up in the morning, while they are walking to or from school alone, or riding to soccer practice, etc.
- When we tuck our children into bed at night, we ask them to voice their highlights and “lowlights” of the day—recognizing where they may have seen God showing up. This is a simplified version of a practice begun by St. Ignatius called the Daily Examen, which Pope Francis follows each day.
- You don't have to make a big show of it, but occasionally mentioning something for which you have prayed is a great way to witness to them. For example, when they have finished telling you about something good that happened to them at school you might be able to say, “That's great, Madeleine! I prayed last night that you would have a good school day today!”
- Or if you know they are worried or scared about something, you can offer to pray for them or with them about it. It can be immensely formative for them to hear a prayer as simple as “Jesus, help Rachel to be brave at the dentist tomorrow even though she is scared about having her x-rays taken. Please help the dentist to be gentle and patient with her.”
- Obviously, as parents you have a sense of your child's patterns of growth and are sensitive to what is appropriate to them developmentally in cultivating their faith life. Younger children will need symbols, actions, and stories more than discussions about the merits of prayer. Older kids may respond better to strong role models, Christian peer groups, and service projects. You are the expert on your own children.

- That said, there will still be times when our children confound us and we are at our wits end, not knowing how to help them or what they most need. At these times, Pope Francis says, “We need to ask God to act in their hearts, in places where we ourselves cannot reach.”
- If you've noticed that your child becomes a basket case every August before the new school year begins, take time to pray for him consistently then (maybe even resting your hand on him when he is sleeping), asking God for guidance to be a wise parent to him. When a younger child is consumed in a stage of tantrums, keep asking God for the wisdom to know how to help her and to work in her in ways that you can't. Such prayers will ultimately benefit your children, and yourself.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Do you ever pray as a family or with your children? If yes, share your experience of it. If not, what do you think is holding you back?
- ② What suggestions or ideas above are appealing to you that you might start incorporating into your family life?
- ③ Name a particular issue or concern which would be helpful to pray about for your child.

## Closing Prayer

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Lord, we thank you for this conversation  
which has sparked new thoughts, questions, and insights.  
Help us to be more intentional  
about cultivating our relationship to you.  
Show us how we can help our children cultivate a relationship with you.  
May we all grow together in our faith and our trust of you.  
We pray this in your name. Amen.

## Additional Resources

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- Find resources for passing on faith on the [GrowingUpCatholic.com](http://GrowingUpCatholic.com) website (click on the “Parents” tab). They include practical tips on prayer, children's Bibles, sharing meals, and more.

## PARENTING WITH JOY

### 6 AN EXPANDING LOVE

#### Opening Prayer

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Gracious God,  
Just as Jesus grew up in a human family  
with all the blessings and challenges  
of family life,  
we have blessings and challenges  
in our family.  
Help us to know and see how we can be  
more loving to those closest to us.

Be with us today as we also explore  
how we are called to love those  
outside of our immediate family.  
Strengthen us to be better models for our children  
of how to love all members  
of the human family.  
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### Modeling Values within our Family

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*We recommend that you read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each person in the group read one paragraph aloud at a time, continuing around the circle.*

- Pastor John Hagee once asked his assembly, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Besides going to Mass or perhaps sending your children to a Catholic school, is there other evidence to support your Christianity?
- The focus here is on how our faith concretely affects how we act in our day-to-day lives, Monday through Saturday. What are we teaching our children by how we live as Christians in today's world—in our relationships with our extended families, in our neighborhoods, at our children's schools, at the office, and in the wider world?
- Are we teaching them that it's alright to be polite to someone in person but then to disparage them in private? Do they see us making efforts to include the excluded? Are we modeling care for all of God's creation, or are they learning to thoughtlessly participate in a disposable, throw-away culture from us?
- Clearly Jesus' parents taught him the biblical values of inclusion, reaching out to strangers, showing compassion to the suffering and sick, and speaking out against injustice. How else would he have learned to be comfortable eating and drinking with sinners, conversing with a Samaritan woman, laying hands on those who were sick, and denouncing injustices?
- Although Jesus was God, he was also fully human and so he had to learn these things somewhere. Naturally, Mary and Joseph would have been his primary examples, teaching him by word and example how to live out the faith of their family.
- In *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis asks us to ponder all of our relationships, starting with the small circle of our immediate family and moving out to the wider family of the entire world. Whether or not we use religious language, are we teaching our children the Gospel by our everyday actions?

- Pope Francis encourages us to reflect on our relationships with our parents. As children, many of us learned the fourth commandment, “to honor your father and mother.” That one may have sounded a lot better once we had our own kids. But we're not off the hook, and continuing to honor our parents is easier and more pleasant for some of us than others. Unfortunately, the woundedness of humanity sometimes results in strained, painful, and even estranged relationships between parents and children.
- Consider what you are teaching your children by how you talk about, talk to, and relate to your own parents. Is there a way you might be invited to grow in relationship to your parents to set a Christian example for your children? Our children will pick up our habits, for better or worse. Luckily, as we do things to move toward more loving speech and actions, our kids will follow.
- As humans, we may not be able to avoid having personal reactions and judgments, but we can practice “editing” them charitably to form our children into more compassionate people. Our Savior did teach, after all, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” (Matthew 7:1-2).
- The same applies when talking about a parent who is deceased or from whom we are estranged. Regardless of how painful our history might be with them, can we teach our children respect rather than hatred?
- Sometimes Jesus asks very difficult things of us as followers. Fortunately, we don't have to do it on our own. We can pray for God's strength and courage and wisdom and healing.
- We probably also have challenges in our extended families: with in-laws, adult siblings, elderly relatives, etc. Even if we aren't close to our in-laws, are we gracious with them at holidays? Do we ever visit great-uncle Ray in his nursing home? Do our children ever hear us praying for our far-flung siblings?
- You're in good company if you have found it sometimes easier to love a stranger than someone who is close to you. Yet Jesus asked “If you love those that love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” The equivalent today might be “If you love those who are easy to love, what reward do you have? Even non-Christians do the same.”
- Perhaps setting a good example for our children is the challenge we need to revisit a tense relationship or to begin praying for a relative we have fallen out of touch with. It will be hard work, but parenting gives us the opportunity to grow in ways we may never have if we didn't have little eyes on us all the time and “big ears” taking in all that we say.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What is your immediate response to the question, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” How good of a defense attorney would you need?
- ② How are you honoring your father and mother at this stage in your life? How might you honor them more?
- ③ Give an example of an opportunity to make an observation to your child about another person instead of a judgment. How can you edit your criticism in order to be more charitable and compassionate?

# An Expanding Fruitfulness

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- St. Francis is credited with the saying “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” Pope Francis’ take on this is that families should speak to others about Jesus, by their actions as well as their words. (#184)
- How well do we do this outside of our homes? Are we witnessing to our beliefs in the wider world? Would other families at our children’s school say that we are living out Gospel values by how we relate to them? What about our neighbors? Our co-workers? Can our children see a continuity in what they hear at church and in the Bible with how they see their parents spending their time, energy, and money?
- A lawyer once tested Jesus by asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus gave a two part answer that included the Golden Rule: love God with your whole heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.
- When the smug lawyer pressed him to define “neighbor,” Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan. The answer not only kept the lawyer on the hook about whom he should love, but challenged him to go farther than he imagined. Yes, Jesus was saying, neighbors include both “near” and “far” neighbors; not just those close to us, but even the most despised, those who we would prefer to keep at a distance.
- Do we say or do things that show our children that we are trying to love our neighbors as ourselves? And do we show this love to both “near” and “far” neighbors? Maybe we give money to special collections for refugee families. But do our kids see us actually talking to people from other cultures or religions or sexual orientations?
- Maybe we have made a decision not to give money to homeless pan-handlers on the street, but we can still teach our children to look them in the eye and respond kindly. When there is an earthquake in a far-away country, we can initiate a family closet purge to donate the clothes we no longer need.
- Sometimes it’s easier to love someone far away and “in theory,” than to love someone close to us. Often it is easier to simply donate money to a good cause than to actually be in relationship with a poor person. That’s complicated! And often painful!
- It might be easier to serve a meal at a home for teen-age moms twice a year than to offer to babysit the rascally son of the single mom down the street.
- So we must ask ourselves, what is Jesus asking of us? How does God want us to use our time and money? There are so many pressures on us as parents, so many requests for help, and so much need in our communities and world, that we obviously can’t do it all.
- And we certainly can’t do it perfectly. But we can strive to live with intentionality and integrity so that our children see us striving to preach the gospel, with or without words.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① Who is a “near” neighbor in your life whom you are called to love, despite the complications of the situation? How might you demonstrate your love in practice?
- ② Who is a neighbor far from you—geographically, culturally, religiously, or politically - whom you find it challenging to love?
- ③ Name an area of your life in which you would like to grow in how you intentionally live and model for your children your Gospel values.

## Closing Prayer

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Lord Jesus,  
your words are so challenging at times.  
Some of what you ask of your followers is difficult,  
and some seems almost impossible.  
We are imperfect humans and imperfect parents.  
We want to follow you,  
but we are so limited in so many ways.  
Help us to know your compassion for us,  
even as you challenge us to grow in love.  
Let your Holy Spirit come upon us to know  
how to best use our limited time, energy, and money  
so that we can cooperate in building your Kingdom.  
We ask this in your name. Amen.