



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## **CATHOLIC FAMILY CHARACTER – NOURISHED BY SPIRITUALITY**

Psychologist Carl Jung once said, “Bidden or unbidden, God is present.” Amen! God is always present. God keeps us always in mind though we often fail to keep God in mind. Belief in the all-present existence of God (*omnipresence*) and God’s invitation to relationship with us leads to the development of personal spiritual character.

**Spirituality**, or *spirit-mentality*, is the quality, manner, or mode of responding to our experience of God in each concrete circumstance of personal life, that is, in relationships, duties, choices of leisure, books we read, movies we watch, etc. Spirituality embraces every facet of our living. Parent spirituality provides children with a spiritual heritage that is more valuable than financial inheritance. Some parents foster spiritual inheritance with the following practices:

- **Punctuate each day with formal prayer**, such as wake-up prayer, blessing of meals, a God-centered ritual for bedtime, and prayer at the sound of emergency police or fire sirens. For example, when a fire siren is heard some people stop and pray, “*O God, we beseech you to help your servants whom you have redeemed with your precious blood.*”

- **Celebrate the God-element of birthdays, name days, and holidays.**

- **Sprinkle conversation with spiritual advice**, for example, “*God will provide!*” “*This, too, will pass.*” “*Ask Jesus to teach you how to forgive Brian.*” “*What would Jesus do?*”

- **Create a spiritual environment**, i.e., crucifix in major rooms, liturgical table decoration (for Advent, Christmas, Lent,

Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time), religious statutes and symbols, a family slogan placed above the entry way door, for example, the words of Joshua 24:15: “*As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.*”

- **Name, define and model virtues that you hold sacred**, such as integrity, respect for differences, inclusion and hospitality/welcome. Practice one virtue a week and report progress or difficulties during a family meal or meeting.

- **Read to your child books and make remarks that promote virtuous living.** For example, “*I saw a woman in the checkout line today who deserves the patience award because. . .*”

- **Set a spiritual example in casual ways.** For instance, “*I have to pray about that before I can give you an answer.*”

### **Personal Prayer**

Prayer is merely conversation with the One who loves you most. It involves speaking, listening, and trusting. All good relationships require regularity in communication. Friends share interests and values that automatically determine the way you use time, what you add to

or eliminate from your life, and what sacrifices you make. Growing in relationship with God implies a similar pattern of choices. Some ways that parents lead children into mutual friendship with God include:

- **Morning Prayer**

Offer the day's prayer, works, joys and sorrows to God. Stir awareness within you of the Divine Providence of God. Trust that nothing will happen during this day that together you cannot handle.

- **Prayer before Meals**

Express gratitude for the gift of food and the person who provided and/or prepared it.

- **Gospel ABCs**

Read a Gospel story. Identify what **attitudes** are the focus, what **behaviors** the main characters chose, and what **consequences** followed. Weave these pieces into your daily life and turn them into prayer for the week.

- **Bedtime Examination of Conscience**

Recall the graces of the day and the disappointing choices of the day. Make an act of sincere contrition, plan how to improve, and ask the grace of God.

## **Sunday Mass and Eucharist**

Participation is key. Pre-read a child-friendly translation of the Gospel. Join in singing. Think about the lyrics. Recite responses. Listen to the Liturgy of the Word. Take a life-message from it.

Prepare for the Eucharistic Prayer. When the celebrant refers to people who have died, name loved ones. When he prays for the living, name people and concerns. When he offers the bread and wine, imagine placing the events of the past week on the Paten and fears of the week ahead in the Chalice. Offer your life with Jesus to the Father.

Make an intimate act of Thanksgiving after Holy Communion. Speak with Jesus. Share the matters of your heart, speak of your love for him, and ask him to shape your heart and actions. Witness to your love in the week that follows.

## **Frequent Spiritual Communion**

St. Alphonsus Liguori taught the practice of praying a spiritual communion throughout the day. Pray it often.

*My Jesus, I believe that You are really present in the Blessed Sacrament. I love You more than anything in the world and I hunger to be nourished by You. But since I cannot receive Communion at this moment, come into my soul at least spiritually. I unite myself to You now as I do when I actually receive You. Never let me drift away from you.*

Dr. Patricia McCormack, IHM, a former Catholic schoolteacher and catechist, is a formation education consultant, an author of several books as well as the **Parent Partnership Handbook** feature of *Today's Catholic Teacher*, and director of IHM Formative Support for Parents and Teachers, Arlington, VA. She speaks and writes frequently on topics of child formation.