PASSING IT ON

Raising Children to Thrive in the Faith

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As Catholic fathers and mothers, one of the most important adventures in life is passing on the faith to our children. In today’s world, this labor of love has never been more challenging. Fortunately, we are not alone. In this booklet, Curtis Martin and Kevin Cotter help equip you to share the fullness of the Christian faith with your family. Parenting is a journey; by applying the practical wisdom shared in this booklet, not only will you be able to better guide your children’s faith, but your own faith will come alive as well.

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If you have this booklet, you care about your child’s faith; if you are reading it, you realize that passing on the Faith isn’t an easy thing to do in our modern world. Pope John Paul II wrote, “Handing on the Gospel message in today’s world is particularly arduous…. One cannot escape the fact that, more than in any other historical period, there is a breakdown in the process of handing on moral and religious values between generations.”

Gone are the days when parents could presume a child would continue on in the Faith after they graduated high school and college. What used to be a given is now a question mark.

Recently, one of our FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) missionaries, Sarah Akers, sat down to reflect on the example set by her own parents. She recalled, among other things, their affection and love for each other as a couple, the family conversations around the dinner table, their sacrifices for her education, and their dedication to the Catholic Faith. Sarah noted, “Throughout my life, my parents’ example shaped who I am and who I want to be.” As parents, it is important to take the time to consider: Who will our children be in the future, and how are we allowing God to shape their lives each day? (For the rest of Sarah’s testimony about her family, please see the back of this booklet.)

As a national collegiate outreach, FOCUS introduces students to the Person of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church through large group events, small-group Bible studies, and one-on-one mentoring. Through the missionary work of FOCUS, we have

1 Pope John Paul II, Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture (16 March 2002), no. 2.
witnessed the faith lives of thousands of college students. In our experience working with college students, we have learned some common principles that can help them not only hold on to their faith but become more fully devoted followers during their college years—and, by God’s grace, for the rest of their lives. While passing on the Faith can be difficult, testimonies like Sarah’s help us to realize it is possible.

**Start with Yourself**

As parents, we can sometimes become so concerned about our children that we forget about ourselves. This is probably why, on commercial airline flights, the flight attendant always warns, “In the event that the aircraft cabin loses pressure, be sure to put on your own oxygen mask before placing one on a child.” That same principle holds true with our faith: We must put ourselves first, not only because we need the faith to survive, but also because it is such an important example for our children. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks to this: “The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called ‘the domestic church,’ a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity” (CCC 1666).

If our home is a “domestic church,” we need to look at how we live out the Faith. Society often sends the message that religion is a practical way to keep our kids well-formed and grounded. And yet, our faith is not simply another task on our checklist; it is a relationship with Jesus Christ that changes the way we do everything. Right now, we invite you to consider in your own heart, “Is Jesus Christ at the center of my life?” It is not enough to just know about Jesus; we must give our entire lives over to Him. He must be Lord of all, or He isn’t Lord at all.
We also encourage you to consider your relationship with the Catholic Church. Do you know what the Catholic Church teaches? Do you believe what She teaches? Do you try to live out the Church’s teaching in your everyday life?

It is imperative to begin with these questions. Successful parents give an authentic example of the Faith to their children—no matter how scary this may be or how unqualified you believe you are. The old adage is true: We can’t give what we don’t have. Your children may never come to know and love Jesus Christ and His Church if you don’t. At the same time, our Church is not a place just for flawless saints; it is a place full of imperfect people who desire to know God more deeply and who want to be more like Him. This is the kind of example we want to pass on to our children.

For more information on the Catholic Faith, see the suggested reading list at the back of this booklet.

How to Live Out Your Faith

How can we live out the Faith as an example to our children? A great aspiration for a parent is to become a lifelong learner: Always continue to discover, improve, and grow as a person and as a parent. On the campuses we serve, we teach our students how to continually improve their lives by learning the four components of Christian living practiced by the early Christians: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Below are some suggestions on how to continue learning about these four components and how they can help you pass the Faith on to your children.
The early Christians studied the *apostles’ teaching*. Today, we have the apostles’ teaching through Scripture and the teachings of the Church. The Book of Hebrews tells us, “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:16). When God’s word speaks in our lives, we allow the living God to change our lives. Reading a passage from the Gospels each day is a great way to allow God to move in your life. To learn more about the teachings of the Church, read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; it is a clear and concise presentation of what we believe. Knowing the Faith will give you a solid foundation for living it out and passing it on to your children.

The early Christians also devoted themselves to *fellowship*, or community. The parish is a great place to start building community. Successful parents also have a network of friends and relatives who are faith-filled examples to their own children. Find committed Catholics to challenge you and to walk with you on this journey. Join a Bible study. Start a discussion group on parenting. Bring families together to share a meal and pray the Rosary.

The *breaking of bread* mentioned in Acts is the sharing in the Eucharistic meal and the liturgy of the Church. It is easy to get lost in the ritual of the Mass and the true meaning of it all. At its heart, the Mass gives us a concrete way to have a closer, more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. It is a clear reminder that God is truly with us in a real way. Our unwavering dedication to the Mass and the Sacraments convey to our family that our faith is more important than sporting events, social engagements, or anything else on our to-do lists.
Another great opportunity to integrate the Faith with our everyday lives is to follow the Church’s liturgical calendar. Celebrate days that are important to your family, such as feasts of patron saints and the anniversaries of each family member’s Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation. So often our faith can seem like a bunch of “do not’s”; use these times to show your children the *positives* of our faith. Take time to celebrate by having special meals, drinks, and desserts. We celebrate the things that are significant to us; by celebrating the hallmarks of our faith, we show our children that our relationship with Jesus is the most important thing in life.

*Prayer* is the final characteristic of the early Christians in Acts 2:42. For busy parents, prayer can seem unrealistic or even selfish in light of the many tasks and duties the day holds. Nevertheless, successful parents realize they cannot parent alone; they need supernatural grace to grow in their own faith and to make crucial decisions for their children throughout their development. Wherever you are in your relationship with God or in your prayer life, God wants to meet you there—but He doesn’t want to leave you there. He wants you to take the next step and go further in your prayer life, whether that is praying a single Our Father each day or praying for twenty to thirty minutes a day. If you need help in growing your prayer life, seek out a priest who can advise you and check out the recommended books on prayer in the back of this booklet.

**Parenthood: Raising Adults**

Successful parenting doesn’t happen by accident. As you know, it takes a lot of hard work, sacrifice, patience, diligence, and a lifetime of learning. Maybe most importantly, successful parents have the right *mindset* for how to parent their children.
St. Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). In the midst of a culture that often discourages our faith, we must “renew our minds.” By doing this, we will know how to show our children “the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Our mindset should be different from the world’s, but what is this mindset? James Stenson, writer and speaker on family life, says this: “[Parents should] see themselves raising adults, not children. They have been called by God to carry out a job, and that holy task is this: to lead their children—with daily sacrificial effort—to grow into confident, responsible, considerate, generous men and women who are committed to live by Christian principles all their lives, no matter what the cost.”

When we seek to raise adults instead of children, we parent with the mindset of the future, not just the here and now. Successful parents know this truth and seek to live it out each day as they model and teach their children habits and virtues that will help them for a lifetime.

How to Share the Faith with Your Children

Vision for Sharing the Faith
It is easy to think our faith is just about regulations and theological propositions, but it is so much more than rules; it is a dynamic drama being played out over the course of history. From the beginning, God had a plan for His people that He fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, and which He is still carrying out.

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today. This plan of salvation throughout history is the larger story that you and your children enter into as Christians. His amazing plan for our lives isn’t meant to restrict us but to make us become fully alive. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10). God passionately loves us and desires a relationship with us. All of God’s teachings should be delivered in the context of this relationship. Rules without relationship lead to rebellion.

The Practical Application
We want to share with you some practical ways to pass on the Faith to your children. Please note that these are suggestions—you don’t have to implement all of these ideas at once! Parenting is a journey; we hope some of these suggestions will help you along the way.

• Begin by praying for and with your children every day. To start, try praying before meals, at bedtime, and before you leave the house each day.

• Create environments that encourage conversation. Conversations allow you to connect with your children while also creating the opportunity to speak into their lives. Make family meals a priority. Do housework together. Take the time to spend a day or a weekend with a child individually. Minimize obstacles to conversation such as TV, cell phones, texting, and the internet. Be bold in setting boundaries early on with regard to family time and the use of technology.

• Make the Faith an everyday part of your lives together. We often confine religious matters to Sundays or formal times
when we pray together or learn about the Faith—but the faith is who we are, and it should affect our whole lives; it should help us navigate everything from our social lives to our finances. Use every-day events to speak to your children about God and how He is involved in all we do.

- Protect your children from things that will harm their faith. In our culture, pornography runs rampant, anti-Christian themes are prevalent in our media, and children are engaging in acts of sexual immorality at younger and younger ages, to name just a few dangers. Your job as a parent is to protect your children by making sure the teachings of the Faith are supported by the friends your children have and the entertainment they consume.

- Give them opportunities to make the Faith their own. Prudently allow times for them to take the lead in their faith lives and make their own choices. Be sure to encourage them when they do take an initiative in their faith.

- Have fun with your children, whether in everyday life or when sharing the Faith. A characteristic of all Christians should be joy. Not everything in life has to be so serious; be sure to have a good time along the way.

- Practice religious customs that teach your family about the Faith:
  - Develop holiday traditions. For instance, use an Advent wreath at Christmastime or fast during Lent and give the money you would have spent on food to the less fortunate.
Go to confession together. Forgiveness is essential to right relationship with God and our family members.

Honor Sunday as the Lord’s Day. Truly set Sunday aside as a day for rest, worship, and family time, not just another day to catch up on yard work, errands, and homework.

Pray the Rosary together on a consistent basis, even if it is just one or two decades.

Those are just a few ways to share the Faith with your children. Above all, you will need the desire and creativity to consistently teach your children in new and engaging ways.

Adolescents
In the teen years, it can often be more difficult to connect with your children. As they make the Faith their own, they need a balance of freedom and boundaries provided by mom and dad. Be very clear about your expectations (e.g., Sunday Mass as a family, time for Confession, family time on Sunday) while allowing for your child’s freedom of individual expression in other areas of his or her life.

Side-by-Side
As our teens make the Faith their own, their parents’ example takes on an even more significant role. We should take our teens by our side and show them how to live out the Faith. Here are some suggestions for how to do this together:

• Have a family faith formation activity scheduled on Sunday, such as the Bible Timeline for Teens or Theology of
the Body for Teens.

- Ask them if they have questions about the Faith and then find out the answers together. In doing so, you can teach the reasoning, logic, and decision-making that are crucial to their development.

- Attend a men’s or women’s conference or retreat together with your child.

- Develop a family ministry that asks your children to give of themselves, such as serving a meal at a homeless shelter or visiting a nursing home on a regular basis.

- Get to know your teen’s friends in a fun way. Make your home an inviting place for your children and their friends to hang out. When you know your teen’s friends, you have a better understanding of the challenges he or she may face.

Going to College

As teens transition to college, be intentional about helping them continue their faith. Just as you would develop a game plan for their academic goals and financial needs, make a spiritual game plan for their life in college. What are their spiritual goals? How will they accomplish these goals? When looking at a college or university, see what type of spiritual development it will offer your child. If you are looking for a faithful Catholic college, consider reading the *Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College* ([www.thenewmanguide.com](http://www.thenewmanguide.com)). FOCUS missionaries serve on public and private schools across the country; for a list of all of the colleges and universities we serve, go to [www.focus.org](http://www.focus.org).
The Role of Mom and Dad
Dads and moms share the responsibility of helping their children come to know and love Jesus Christ and His Church. They also pass on the Faith in distinct ways. Below are some examples of the specific roles dads and moms can play to share the Faith.

Dad’s Role
Dads have a unique role as the heads of their families. St. Paul tells us in his Letter to the Ephesians, “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church…. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (5:22-23, 25). This passage can easily be misunderstood, but what St. Paul tells us is that the husband must lay down his life for his wife, as Jesus did for His Church by dying on the cross. The role of a husband and father is to be a servant leader. Different men will do this in different ways; there is no one way to be a faithful Catholic dad (or mom, for that matter). The question you must continually ask yourself is: How can I lead and serve my family with the gifts and talents God has given me? Some things to bear in mind:

- It is impossible to serve your family without first loving your wife. Make her the first priority in your family. This gives her the support she needs—and the marriage your children need—in order to thrive. Women have a much easier time seeing you as the head of the family when they are engaged in the mission of the family. Have a family mission statement, and discuss your goals and dreams for your family together. When husbands and wives are united as one and work as a team, children receive clear
and consistent messages on how they are supposed to live their lives. (For more on marriage and parenting, see the recommended reading list at the end of this booklet.)

- Successful fathers are willing to discipline their children in order to help build their character. Men often view the world objectively, which is imperative when it comes to rules: Your child’s character is strengthened when rules don’t bend and principles remain constant. You may be temporarily unpopular around your house, but this is the sort of sacrifice loving fathers make. At the same time, dads aren’t only disciplinarians, so be sure to love, hug, and praise your children whenever possible. This way the children don’t think of dad as only a disciplinarian!

- Your children, especially your boys, might wonder, “Is religion just a girly thing to do?” Show your children that real men take their faith seriously. They lead their family in prayer. They know Church doctrine. They engage with other men at their Church in Bible studies, service projects, and fellowship. If you don’t know how to lead your family in the Faith, look to other men who do for inspiration and advice.

- Lastly, successful fathers always put their families before their jobs. Work is temporal; your children’s souls are eternal. We only get one chance to raise our children correctly. While work is an important aspect of our lives, it is easy to get wrapped up in the praise, achievements, and joys that come with it. We work to provide for our families, and our most important job is our time at home with them.
Mom’s Role
Pope Pius XI wrote: “For if the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and...so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love.” As the heart of the family, women have an innate ability to connect with their family members and to give of themselves in a loving way. Pope John Paul II called this ability a part of the “genius of women.” Later, he would commend the daily heroism of brave mothers who “devote themselves to their own family without reserve, who suffer in giving birth to their children and who are ready to make any effort, to face any sacrifice, in order to pass on to them the best of themselves.” At the same time, our culture and media continue to discourage motherhood and present it as merely a burden. In times like these, mothers are more important than ever. Here are some practical suggestions for how to pass on the Faith as a wife and mother:

• See your role as a wife and a mother as irreplaceable, sacred, and a means for bringing you closer to God. No one can take your place! Blessed Mother Teresa once said, “We can do no great things; only small things with great love.” Having a cheerful attitude and living a life filled with joy, even in the little things, is contagious for your children and those you come in contact with each day.

• Put your marriage before your children. This is easy to forget, but in Ephesians 5:33, we are told, “Let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” Men are instructed to love

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3 Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (31 December 1930), no. 27.
their wives, because love is not as natural a response for them as it is for women. Women, on the other hand, are instructed to respect their husbands, because respecting does not come quite as naturally for them as loving does. Find the respectable things your husband does and get in the habit of sincerely thanking and praising him; it will build and strengthen your marriage and family more than words can express in this short booklet. Your connection with your husband is vital for both of you, but also for your children, so find time to have fun together and reconnect: Plan date nights, have great conversations, and remember why you got married in the first place. Set aside other times to discuss the budget, children, and family burdens so that these heavier topics don’t take over your fun dates.

• Scientists tell us that women talk twice as much as men. As a mother, this can be a tremendous advantage: Your ability to talk with your children allows you the special opportunity to speak to them about what is on their hearts. Ask the Holy Spirit to be your guide as you talk with your children; you will need His help when your teens bring up an uncomfortable topic, or when you need to start a conversation about a particularly difficult subject.

• All women are called to share their gifts with the world. It is good for children to see their mothers involved in giving time to the Church, a school, or the needy. Children at their mother’s side learn compassion and begin to understand that the world does not revolve around them.

Single Parents
Single parents may feel they have been given a daunting task in
handing on the Faith to their children. This is an opportunity to place your trust and hope in the grace of God and in the help of others. Find mentors for yourself who have walked a similar path; you are not alone. Also, seek out mentors of both sexes for your children to help their development. Please know our Lord will bless you in your commitment to sharing the Faith with your children.

Conclusion
Passing on the Faith to our children is an adventure with many twists, turns, joys, and sorrows—but nothing is more important. The family provides a vital foundation for the Faith. The unconditional love children experience from their parents and their human family is a taste of the much greater love of their heavenly Father and an assurance of their belonging to God’s family, the Church. The work you do today will not only affect your children but will echo for generations to come—both inside and outside your family.

To see just how parents can make a difference in their child’s faith life, please read the testimonies below of FOCUS missionaries about their own parents. Through the example and dedication of their families, they are able to reach college students today for Jesus Christ and His Church.

Sarah Akers, FOCUS Missionary
One of the greatest gifts my parents gave me is my Catholic faith. It was truly a blessing to grow up in a Catholic family. From an early age, I remember family life centered on the liturgical feasts in the Church. It was a normal occurrence in the
Akers family to have a cake on our baptismal feast day, to dress up as a saint on All Saints Day, to say Advent prayers around the dinner table, or to help at our local parish as a family. We spent a lot of time participating in our parish life, from my brothers’ serving as altar servers, to singing in the choir, or my parents’ teaching religious education.

Family dinner together was the most important part of the day, even if it often fluctuated around the busy schedules of all our activities. It was at the dinner table that we were taught the art of conversation and the importance of sharing about our day and the things going on in our lives.

My parents constantly taught my brothers and sister and me about the beauty of the Catholic Church both by their words and through their daily lives. One of the many qualities I admire about my mom and dad is how they lived the Catholic Faith in an attractive manner. It wasn’t anything showy or imposing, but they lived it out in a way that demonstrated how essential the Faith was in their ordinary lives. Daily Mass and praying as a couple were everyday things for them. One fond memory I often call to mind is seeing my parents praying night prayer by their bedside at the end of each day.

My parents were always visible with their affection and love for each other as a couple. It wasn’t uncommon to see them laughing together, singing and dancing in the kitchen, or walking hand in hand. They laid a solid foundation for us by demonstrating what a faithful marriage should look like.

My parents made sacrifices to send their six children through Catholic grade school, Catholic high school, and even Catholic colleges. They often stressed the importance of a good education
and what a blessing it was to have our faith. In college, my parents made a point to stay involved in our lives by making trips to campus to visit, by inviting my friends over to their house, and by sending a weekly update with a family newsletter.

Throughout my life, my parents’ example shaped who I am and who I want to be.

**Siblings Matt and Meghan McCartney, FOCUS Missionaries**

Why do we have our faith when so many of our peers do not? Two reasons: grace and our parents. God’s free gift of mercy certainly showered upon us, enabling us to receive many blessings which we do not deserve—most specifically, our parents. As a family, we went to Mass together, and parish life was also our family life. Our father gave his time generously to our parish, volunteering his gifts for construction. Our mother converted from her family’s faith in the Lutheran church to Catholicism shortly after marrying our father. She made an incredible sacrifice when she left the church in which she was raised, but it was important to her that her children grow up in a single-faith home, and she chose to become Catholic.

Our parents made great financial sacrifices because they put faith first. They chose Catholic education for us, and we attended Catholic schools through high school. We never had new cars or elaborate vacations, but we had fun. Faith was first, and tied to it was family. We almost always ate meals together growing up, and we prayed before meals. We worked together inside and outside, and then we played together. Not only were our parents faithful, but so were our grandparents, brothers, sisters, and those they married; our entire family life is one of
faith. We were with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who practiced and lived their faith on a weekly basis. Often when we gathered, there were stories told around the fireplace, poems and songs made for an occasion, company enjoyed, games played, and impromptu speeches given.

Why did we decide to take on the faith of our parents? They trusted and loved Our Lord, and they shared this great gift with us. However, it was when illness hit that our faith was strengthened. When our dad was diagnosed with peripheral neuropathy in 1999, a chronic disease with no known treatment, our family hit their knees in prayer. Prior to this time we had been practicing our faith, but it wasn’t something we discussed much together. Our dad’s suffering brought us to pray together more frequently. We started really discussing the gospel, and we became aware that our parents modeled for us an hour of prayer every morning. We started offering up our dad’s illness and future, and our extended family responded with initiating a family Rosary every Thursday evening to entrust our dad into Our Lady’s hands.

Our dad was forced into an early retirement. This allowed him to help reconstruct the parish garage into an adoration chapel where our parents now spend time in front of the Eucharist. It is not only revitalizing the parish but our family as well. It is clear to see now, after 11 years, that our dad’s suffering has helped us trust in God more deeply and develop a closer relationship with Christ and His Church.
Suggested Resources for Families

On the Catholic Faith:
*Catechism of the Catholic Church*
Made for More by Curtis Martin

On Marriage:
*Life-Giving Love: Embracing God’s Beautiful Design for Marriage* by Kimberly Hahn
*Dream Manager* by Matthew Kelly
*Building Better Families* by Matthew Kelly
*Love and Respect* by Emerson Eggerichs

On Catholic Parenting:
*Family Matters* by Michaelann and Curtis Martin
*The Catholic Parent Book of Feasts: Celebrating the Church Year with Your Family* by Michaelann Martin
*The Catholic Family Handbook* by Lawrence G. Lovasik
*Compass: A Handbook on Parent Leadership* by James B. Stenson
  James Stenson’s website: www.parentleadership.com

On Prayer:
*Time for God* by Jacques Philippe
*In the School of the Holy Spirit* by Jacques Philippe
*Meditation and Contemplation* by Fr. Timothy Gallagher
*An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* by Fr. Timothy Gallagher
*Praying Scripture for a Change* by Dr. Tim Gray
On Fatherhood:

*Successful Fathers* by James B. Stenson

*Christian Fatherhood: The Eight Commitments of St. Joseph’s Covenant Keepers* by Steve Wood

*Legacy* by Steve Wood

On Motherhood:

*Woman of Grace: A Bible Study for Married Women* by Michaelann Martin

*Holiness for Housewives and Other Working Women* by Hubert van Zeller

*A Mother’s Rule of Life: How to Bring Order to Your Home and Peace to Your Soul* by Holly Pierlot

*Don’t Drink the Holy Water* by Susie Lloyd

*My Cup of Tea: Musings of a Catholic Mom* by Danielle Bean

On Resources for Teens:

*The Great Adventure Bible Timeline for Teens*: www.greatadventureonline.com

*Theology of the Body for Teens*: www.tobforteens.com
Notes: