



# The Rule of Family Faith: Practicing the Presence of God in Our Outward Lives

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**F**amily spirituality does not always look like “spirituality” as many people understand it. When we think of spirituality, we often picture inner peace and tranquility. But families are anything but tranquil. In fact, if you want to turn your life upside down, entertain a serious love relationship, consider marriage, or better yet, have a child. To obtain the serenity we often associate with spirituality, one would have to flee all this for the desert or monastery, as some early church fathers did.

We also envision spirituality in terms of revelatory mountaintop experiences, the kind religious mystics claim. But again, such an occurrence seems more likely to happen on retreat from, not in the middle of, domestic life. In search of epiphany, people have often left home and family and embarked on a journey. Taking care of a home is actually one of the most ordinary of activities. In fact, preparing food, cleaning toilets, and folding laundry can be downright humdrum, drab, and dreary. It is the kind of work that is never finished and that endlessly recycles, rising up again almost as soon as one has finished the last load of wash or cleaned the most recent mess.

Those who cannot pursue either monasticism or mystical visions often turn to the church and congregational worship as the heart of faith. But once again those with kids, especially families with young children, can sometimes find it difficult to get everyone out the door, into the car, and to church on Sunday morning without a minor family feud over who wears what or sits where, arriving frazzled and distraught from the effort. Once there, children’s noise and constant movement are often unwelcome. So families disperse to age-appropriate settings, such as a cry room, and then leave, wondering whether the faith of the family as a whole has been deepened or further fragmented. Neither child nor adult knows what the other encountered for

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This article draws on her book, *In the Midst of Chaos: Care of Children as Spiritual Practice*.

the past hour or two. Nor does the Sunday school flyer or church bulletin usually make it out of the van and into the home.

If we cannot flee family relationships, travel to the mountains, or join together to worship in the right spirit on a regular basis, then we might at least consider a quiet half-hour set aside daily for individual prayer and Bible reading as the bedrock of faith. Yet again there is nothing like having children to disrupt this. Such practices are often further complicated by the demands of paid employment.

Given these powerful preconceptions of what it takes to be a spiritual person and daunting obstacles to church participation, what becomes of faith in families? Are those people who are immersed in what one psychologist calls the “parental emergency”—the heavy lifting of parenting that easily consumes at least eighteen years of adulthood—just “on idle” with their faith, taking time off while others seek God on their behalf?<sup>1</sup> If not, just how does one understand the development of faith amid the demands and chaos of families? What about the children themselves? Is their way of faith included in these common views of spirituality as somber reflection, mystic awakening, corporate enactment, or personal prayer?

So persuaded are we by these definitions that we do not recognize family spirituality when we see it. The problem, in other words, is as much the common perception of spirituality as any failure to practice our faith. My hope in this article is actually quite simple, therefore: I want to explore ways to envision the rule of faith in families so church leaders and those in families can nurture and uphold it. In other words, I will not suggest one more spiritual chore to do, one more

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program to create in congregations, or one more family faith activity to work into an already overloaded schedule. Rather I want to help enrich the active practice of faith already percolating in families and congregations by exploring the peculiar character of the rule of family faith.

### Christianity's Ambivalence about Family Faith

It might help to understand the broader nature of the challenge first. Few religious traditions have escaped the tension between spiritual practice and family life, although most have explored ingenious ways to deal with it that do not, in the end, adequately resolve it. Catholics, for example, have attempted to mediate the hierarchy of celibate spirituality over spirituality of the home by identifying the family as a “domestic church,” a small-scale model of the Church itself, an idea that goes back to the fourth century and that has enjoyed resurgence in the past two decades.<sup>2</sup> Jews in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe and other periods separated spiritual practice along gender lines, with religious study reserved for men and care of family the obligation of women. Hinduism regulates the problem chronologically, dividing the life cycle into four periods with a special stage of “householding” for rearing children.<sup>3</sup> Seventeenth-century

Puritans sanctioned the home as a “little church” but then elevated the father to the role of pastor, nearer to God than others—with all the potentially harmful consequences of this equation.<sup>4</sup> None of these patterns is ideal. Almost all have biases against women and children and their full participation.

Christianity has its own ambivalent history on the family that goes right back to Jesus himself. A curious passage appears in the Gospel of Mark, right at the beginning of the gospel, defining his ministry, in which he rejects his own family (Mark 3:31–35).<sup>5</sup> Jesus has just been baptized and tempted, he has eaten with tax collectors, refused to follow religious rules about Sabbath keeping, and gathered a group of men around him for intimate fellowship. His family is rightfully worried about him. All they want to do is protect him. But they can barely get through the throngs of those who will not leave him alone. When they do, what does Jesus say? “Who are my mother and my brothers?... Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

It is not that Jesus does not love his mother or cherish families; other Scripture passages suggest otherwise. He blessed wedding wine, welcomed children, valued marriage, and rejected divorce. But Jesus had a larger vision in mind. He disclaims his own family to proclaim a new family of believers defined not by

birth but by commitment to doing God's will.

Jesus himself was, of course, single and without children, and he asked those who followed him to leave their families. The apostle Paul never married or had children. He thought the coming of God's kingdom advised against changing the situation in which one found oneself. He and his followers described the early Christian community as the new "household of God" (Eph. 2:19), a portrait that subtly shifted the locus of faith from the hearth of the biological family to house churches and new extra-familial relationships.

It is no surprise, then, that the early church did precisely what Jesus predicted: set brother against brother, father against child, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Matthew 10:21, 35–36; Luke 12:52–53). It is also no wonder that letters written to the Ephesians and Colossians—not by Paul himself, most Bible scholars say, but by Paul's disciples in his name—try to re-impose order on the family. These letters contain what early Greeks and Jews called *household codes*, or codes that sanction the authority of the *pater*, the father and husband, over his children and wife (wives be subject to husbands, husbands love wives, children obey parents, and slaves be obedient to masters). Why this attempt to re-impose order? Jesus and Paul and their disciples had disrupted ordinary family life. They had turned the world upside down. They had made all free and one in the love of Christ—Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free—all children of God (Gal. 3: 20).

## The Rule of Religious Life

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Early church theologians attempted to resolve this ambiguous legacy by setting up a two-tier spiritual path. Those who were "religious" left families to pursue a higher calling. This calling involved living by a fresh "rule" or pattern of life carefully crafted around disciplines of charity, celibacy, poverty, shared possessions, and steadfast commitment that helped preserve bounded religious communities.

In some cases, the established hierarchy of celibate religious life as superior to the faith of the laity left the latter without spiritual guidance.<sup>6</sup> But this was not always the case. Although some leaders, such as fourth-century monastic St. Jerome, viewed family life as a major impediment to religious enlightenment, others, such as Augustine of Hippo and John Chrysostom, saw the family as part of God's good creation and, in Chrysostom's case, believed families were as important as monastic communities in putting key virtues into practice. Rich reciprocal relationships often developed between religious communities and families. Those in the former sought the good of the latter through prayerful intercession and daily practice of the rites of the church. Families were blessed when a child would enter a religious order. Monastic communities served as sanctuaries for orphans and the poor and as outlets for women who sought education and relief from domestic work.

Families have always benefited from the spiritual knowledge of those in religious orders such as the Jesuits and the Benedictines, both of which encouraged integration of faith into daily life.<sup>7</sup> In the fifth-

century, Benedict of Nursia, created an order that balanced prayer and daily work, while Ignatius of Loyola founded the Jesuits in the sixteenth century as a religious society that combined contemplation with action designed to change the world. Today thousands still belong to these orders, and their practices are receiving renewed attention not only among Catholic laity but also by all those who seek richer ways to incorporate a religious "rule" of faith into daily living.

The term *rule* does not refer to a set of directives, instructions, or step-by-step exercises. Its meaning is better captured by the Latin word *Regula*, suggesting a pattern or model that guides a way of living. From this angle, "every thoughtful person," observes Thomas Moore in his Preface to *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, "no matter what his or her lifestyle may be, has a rule." Even though we may associate *rule* with ideas like regulation and authority that go against freedom, living an examined life actually has the potential to liberate followers from being pushed and pulled around by internal desires and outside forces. A rule for religious life is "an instrument for shaping a particular kind of life for which a person has deep and genuine desire." Such a rule remains open to further interpretation and reflection.<sup>8</sup>

The Rule of Benedict points to practices and patterns that sustain a way of life centered in the love of Christ. As such, for fifteen hundred years, the Rule has shaped those under vows in Benedictine communities; but it also has the capacity, according to Anglican historian and mother Esther de Waal, to aid those "struggling to follow our baptismal promises in the world."<sup>9</sup> De Waal is convinced that the Rule's monastic wisdom

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can speak directly to “those who like myself are seeking God in the midst of a busy, often confusing and exhausting daily life.” Her reflections on the Rule emerge, as she confesses, not from any kind of spiritual retreat or direct participation in monastic community but out of the lived “experience of a wife and mother with many commitments.” Joan Chittister, a member of the Benedictine Sisters, also seeks to “distill” the wisdom of the Rule but does so after thirty years of living by it. The Rule is written “by a layman for laymen,” she argues. It offers “sensible, humane, whole, and accessible” guidance for the “overworked, overstimulated, and over-scheduled;” that is, for the average person who does not seek to escape their world but live more thoughtfully, caringly, and fully within it.<sup>10</sup>

The Rule invites us to wake up and listen for God through Scripture, our lives, the wisdom of others, and the Rule itself. It values stability gained through perseverance and endurance, just the sort needed to sustain faith through the constraints of families. It anchors all relationships in a humility that sees God as God (and not us) and refrains from seeking to control others or push oneself and children ahead. The Rule establishes a balanced rhythm of daily prayer, study, and work, all in a kind of moderation that counters the drive to overload our

days. It regards each person as God’s created, deserving of respect, never to be used as an instrument for our own gratification. It encourages us to hold material possessions lightly while also seeking God in our most ordinary surroundings and daily labor. Paradoxically, the ordinary is sometimes the most extraordinary. In all this and its other rich counsel, the Rule ultimately hopes to point beyond itself to the rule or way of Christ.

In the last several years, many lay people have also turned to the rule of seventeenth-century Carmelite Brother Lawrence. Three centuries ago, he attracted attention because of the spiritual centeredness he embodied despite his menial surroundings. As a lay brother, his primary responsibility among the Carmelites, was serving others. Yet despite monotonous labor—cooking, washing dishes, cleaning hallways, and repairing shoes—he reached a point where work was no different from prayer. “In the noise and clatter of my kitchen,” he says, “I possess God as tranquilly as if I were upon my knees before the Blessed Sacrament.”<sup>11</sup> This was his “best rule” of “holy life.” “My most usual method is this simple attention, an affectionate regard for God to whom I find myself often attached with greater sweetness and delight than that of an infant at the mother’s breast.”<sup>12</sup> This is how Brother Lawrence describes his steady

practice of speaking with and reflecting upon God amid the mundane tasks of life or “practicing the presence of God” throughout the day regardless of external circumstances.

## Extending the Rule of Religious Life to Family Faith

All of this is helpful as far as it goes. But does it go far enough? Can rules written for monastic communities account for the unique demands of families, such as solving conflicts deeply embedded in the biological legacy of family intimacy, caring for close relatives in sickness and health, or bearing and raising children? Does the rule of religious life need further development to correspond to spirituality in families?

Various aids to prayer, such as Brother Lawrence’s practicing the presence, are helpful. But they still require an interior focus of mind, will, and heart that one can rarely find time for in family life. They call for a kind of stepping outside of one’s routine, or for bringing something that is outside one’s routine—God, spirituality, tranquility—into it. One participates in these disciplines “despite” or “regardless” of the chaos. They still assume one meets God in a quiet inner space.

Despite popular publications affirming everyday spirituality and longstanding movements in Christian history encouraging integration of faith into daily life, Christian perception of faith as something that happens outside ordinary time and within formal religious institutions, or within the private confines of one’s individual soul, still pervades Western society. Bias against “outward” forms of spirituality, as enacted by the body in the

midst of family and community, still persists.<sup>13</sup> Limiting spirituality to the “inner” life and restricting theology to the life of the mind ends up marginalizing many Christians, and excludes a huge portion of life from both faith and theology. The closer one is to the outward life of the family, it seems, the farther from God.

Monasticism rests on a wholly distinct pattern for Christian faith—whom and how to love, how to work, where to live, how to care for the body, how to spend one’s money. This pattern includes celibacy, silence, solitude, a dispassionate extension of love to all, transcendence of sexual desire and the body, voluntary poverty, and pilgrimage beyond the bond and boundary of home.<sup>14</sup> Has anyone ever outlined so clearly and carefully a rule for family faith that has comparable weight, integrity, and cohesiveness?

to the world.”<sup>15</sup> Do those most proximate to children have anything comparable to offer? What can we learn about faith in families that provides its own “privileged” perspective on spirituality?

## Practicing God’s Presence in Our Outward Lives

What might be included in a fresh rule for families? A kind of wisdom can arise in families and parenting, as is evident in memoirs of mothers, empirical studies by social scientists, and theological reflections of parents. Some of this wisdom, documented and elaborated in my books, can be stated in pithy maxims: Utterly physical acts of birth and care can be powerful spiritual catalysts. Walking “according to the pace of children” can deepen

human and essential to creativity, they can sometimes contribute to faith. Work, activity, and service within the home and in relationship to children can bring us as close to God as sublime contemplation. God loves and transforms us in the midst of messy details and troubles. The family can function as a workshop or laboratory for honing practices of faith that nurture forgiveness, generosity, hospitality, and justice.

These kinds of maxims shaping the rule of family faith are not meant to eliminate qualities often associated with the rule of religious life, such as silence, solitude, rest, humility, and non-anxious peace. These are all needed dimensions of a full faith. Nor do I want to sanction busyness as somehow sacred: there is nothing spiritual about over-extension and burnout. We should be cautious when we find ourselves boasting about our many activities or those of our children.

I simply want to widen the circle of faith for the sake of children and parents. Millions of parents face the question of how to live a life of faith when silence and solitude, rest and tranquility, contemplation and centeredness are rare. Widening the circle of faith means balancing profound silence and fruitful words, potent solitude and invigorating company. More important, widening the circle of faith means redeeming chaos and redefining spiritual peace to include disruption, interruption, and disturbance as equally essential to a Christ-like life.<sup>17</sup> Grace is active not only when we are passive and quiescent or tranquil and mindful but also when we are deeply involved in the activities of childhood and parenthood themselves. People respond powerfully to Brother Lawrence precisely because he seems to

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A gap exists between the monastic rule or pattern and daily life for most of us: marriage, children, and passionate attachment to specific people; immersion in bodily, sexual activity; commitment to one location; ownership of material possessions; and the daily grind of making a living and maintaining a home. The monastery, Chittister argues, offers a “privileged perspective from which to speak

faith.<sup>16</sup> Children form adults as much as the reverse, and they have much to teach adults about the life of faith. Words rather than silence, especially in the lives of young children, have the potential to open up worlds, build a home, breathe life into our lives, and invoke the Word “with God” (John 1:1). Anxiety and chaos are not in themselves antithetical to the Christian life, but when understood as part of being

suggest that our outward actions themselves might become prayer.

## Sample Practices of Faith in Families

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Practicing the presence of God in families involves recognizing practices that invoke, evoke, and form faith in our outward family lives. We already participate in such practices in the varied contexts where children and adults live together: cleaning, playing, working, eating, talking, learning, fighting, making up, arriving, departing, and otherwise making a home.

### Doing Laundry as Spiritual Practice

My own Protestant background shapes my desire to reclaim a rule of family faith. The Protestant tradition has long seen the ordinary as significant. Protestant Reformer Martin Luther challenged the sequestering of Christian vocation to a select few, capable of practicing celibacy and living in cloistered community, and reclaimed mundane life as a potential site for sacred activity. To put his own sixteenth-century principles of religious reformation into action, he renounced his vow of celibacy and wed Katherine von Bora, a former nun. Together—and she was a wonderful, straightforward, hard-working partner who knew how to hold her own—they raised a large and boisterous family that included six of their own children and four orphans. His comments on faith and family are among the most remarkable of any classic Western theologian. Christians should look on the “insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties” of household work and child care—rocking the baby, washing its diapers, changing its bed, staying up at night—as “adorned

with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels.”<sup>18</sup> When done in faith, raising children pleases God.

So, several years ago when I saw God in the most unlikely of places—in changing my sons’ cloth diapers—I was in good company. Somehow the mundane routine of rinsing, washing, drying, folding, and piling up a fresh stack of clean diapers became a source of graced solace through which Christ entered my life. I still like folding clothes. There are others who know what I am talking about. When Kathleen Norris published an essay about laundry in the *New York Times Magazine*—specifically, about the “joys of hanging clothes on the line to dry”—she received at least a hundred letters in response.<sup>19</sup>

Although Norris doesn’t explicitly connect her attempt to reclaim the mystery of the “quotidian”—the daily, the ordinary, the commonplace—with her own Protestant heritage, I speculate that there is a close link. It takes discipline to notice the distinctive grace of Christ in the ordinary. Many Protestants have fallen out of the habit. We have developed a kind of amnesia about the call in our own tradition to sanctify the ordinary.<sup>20</sup> This call is worthy of retrieval.

### Playing as Spiritual Practice

Few Thanksgivings go by when I do not think fleetingly that I am late for the “turkey bowl” and then realize, a bit deflated, that our family does not play turkey bowl any more. Like the stimulus-response of Pavlov’s dog, when my family got together with close friends, we played. We—adults and children together—played Hearts and Oh Hell, we played Wiffle ball in the side yard, we took trips to major league baseball games, theme parks, and

zoos. And we played turkey bowl. Even though I don’t like football, I’d show up in sweats and mittens every November, rain or shine, to divide into lopsided teams.

All this playing filled many good purposes. We never dwelled on them or even spelled them out. But we knew deeply and thoroughly, without having to define them, the lessons of fun, vigor, joy, happiness, defeat, recovery, conflict, arbitration, reconciliation, camaraderie, sensual energy, touch, tackle, and roll.

Especially for families with boys, as in my case, playing in today’s society is frequently driven by technology (with video games a primary illustration) and organized activities (with travel sports the epitome). How does one reclaim play as a potentially rich faith-formative practice? Has play moved so far out of the orbit of spirituality—not only in our technological, economically stratified world but also over the long history of Christianity’s subtle disdain for embodied fun—that making this connection is ludicrous?

To answer, we must first consider a larger question about how to regard popular culture and its relationship with family faith. Do these two stand in adversarial relationship with technology or sports or marketing, tainting and threatening faith? If not, just how does one withstand the powerful influence of wider society? Society does not always support our efforts to raise faithful children. This may come as a surprise most particularly to mainstream Protestants like myself who have otherwise escaped religious and social marginalization and presume cultural affirmation.

The solution is not to get rid of TV, spurn competitive sports, and otherwise reject the ways culture defines play, however. Instead we are challenged to

transform play from within, in the same way that theologian H. Richard Niebuhr talked about “Christ transforming culture.”<sup>21</sup> We must discern its negative impact so we can resist and transform it “even as we make appropriate use” of it, as Richard Gaillardetz says about technology.<sup>22</sup> This means talking more self-consciously with each other and in our families about how play subtly forms us and shapes our view of the world. It also means recognizing criteria by which to distinguish faith-filled play from less faithful play.

Faith-filled play involves pleasure of a holistic sort. Mind, body, spirit—all are engaged together. Play has rich interpersonal and intergenerational potential, connecting us to others, and is wonderful when done together in a communal or cooperative context. But play also involves activity done by oneself. One must be able to play well alone in order to play well with others. Play sparks and fuels imagination and creativity. It suspends and transforms reality but does not supersede it. It creates legitimate spheres of irresponsibility and liminal space where failure and risk can occur without dire consequence, and transformation can happen. It involves an attitude of delight and enjoyment—an embodiment of joy—as much as any specific activity. In fact, any playful act can become work if the pleasure dissipates. Everyone should have equal access to play, regardless of talent, wealth, or the right outfit. Genuine play does not harm those playing or others around them. Through its unique power to create, re-create, and resurrect, faith-filled play embodies essential facets of God’s relationship to the world and of our relationships with God and each other.

Such criteria may or may not rule out certain video games. They simply give us a solid rule on which to stand as we measure the play that dominates our lives. They give us guidelines by which we can revitalize forms of play that sustain relationship, connect us to the environment, and foster genuine joy. Adulthood by definition involves growing up, out, and weary of play. Adults outgrow some of the best kinds of play, in much the same way that our capacity for wonder fades. Living with children keeps play alive, and we adults are fortunate when kids invite us to run in this direction.

out of the sun and the rest of the world. In hushed voice, we browsed. We sat on the floor, leafed through books, picked this one, put back that one, and then read a few together before final decisions on what to check out and load into the wagon for the trip home.

The books felt like gifts, much more precious than if we had gone to the store to buy them. I even liked explaining to our kids how a public library works—a community agreeing to pool resources and share the wealth so all, the haves and have-nots, can benefit. This only works as long as borrowers abide by the covenant

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### Reading as Spiritual Practice

Reading aloud together is one of the most satisfying and mutually transformative experiences adults and children can share. Like play, reading can subvert and transform the world. Kids also know and remind us how to read slowly, meditatively, savoring the words, asking us to read the same book over and over again.

Pilgrimage to our favorite local library was an integral part of our larger practice of family reading when my children were younger. We traversed the walking distance between home and library with an incredible tricycle that had a little wagon behind the seat where we put the fifteen or twenty picture books we were returning. The library had the feel of sanctuary: a cool, quiet, welcome respite on our way in and

of care for the books, returning them as they received them. So people “hand on” what they “received,” much like Paul passing on the tradition of the breaking of the bread (I Corinthians 11:23) or people handing on stories they have known and loved from one generation to the next.

We discovered a lot of books on these treks, some wonderful authors never heard of before, and others that evoked deep-seated memories from our own childhood. I cannot easily describe our criteria for selection. Our choices had something to do with sensual, aesthetic appeal: size, color, quality of picture, word spacing, feel of the book in our hands. But it also had to do with other elusive, faith-related goals. We looked for and stumbled across books that not only gave pleasure. We sought books that

would embody values and ideals in which we believed, “a moral vision,” as Herbert Anderson says about Dr. Seuss, “without moralism.”<sup>23</sup> We read to move “into the shoes of another, and thus ultimately to learn compassion” in Anne Thurston’s words.<sup>24</sup> We also looked for books that raised tough religious and philosophical questions about loss, death, human meanness and evil, ambiguity and daily struggles so familiar to all of us who, like Judith Viorst’s *Alexander*, know what it is like to have a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” In all these ways, reading is a rich practice in an active life of faith.

## Doing Justice as Spiritual Practice

This is perhaps the most challenging rule of faith in families and the most overlooked practice in books on family faith. Lots of popular literature feeds off specific religious traditions while overlooking the mandate that often stands at their heart: family love must not stop at the doorstep. Genuine Christian family values are not simply about commitment or fidelity. They compel love of one’s neighbor.

Families are actually crucibles for learning ethics and for practicing justice internal to the family and in relationship to the wider public good. When our family moved ten years ago, we had to decide where to live. We soon discovered that choosing a house was not just a decision about location, size, and school district. Instead, it plunged us into much bigger questions. Deciding where to live, which itself is a privilege not extended justly to all, marks one’s fundamental convictions and forces one to put one’s values into action. Our decision ultimately

came down to a complicated compromise between a variety of commitments.

Doing justice in families often involves negotiation and compromise—something that seems to go against the grain of genuine prophetic justice. “How to be peacemakers both at home and in the larger world is quite a challenge.” So James and Kathleen McGinnis, Catholic parents and peace activists well known for more than two decades of work on “parenting for peace and justice,” admit on the first page of the tenth-anniversary-edition of their widely read book *Parenting for Peace and Justice*. They have refused to see parenting and doing justice as divorced from one another. But they have struggled. “For almost twenty years,” they say, “we have wrestled with the challenge of integrating our family life and social ministry... We have wanted...to be able to act for justice without sacrificing our children and to build family community without isolating ourselves from the world.”<sup>25</sup> The effort to raise children faithfully pushed both of them to a whole new level of what it means to do justice.

Fortunately, love of one’s own children need not exclude love of other children, and under the best of circumstances the love evoked by one’s own children helps us “see each person as someone else’s child, someone else’s pain and joy,” as it did for one mother. It left her less able to bear some of the “misery we inflict on each other.”<sup>26</sup>

Parents are also a bridge or a hinge standing between children and the wider world, helping children move from love of self to love of others in the wider community.<sup>27</sup> Precisely at the point where one’s heart might turn away, might curve in on itself—on the doorstep, at the

gate, from the center of one’s most primal, passionate, intimate love of our children—we are called to realign our passions and help our children do likewise.

Finally and not least important, how families model justice internal to the home powerfully shapes children’s understanding of justice in the wider world. When the “first and formative example of adult interaction” is “one of domination and manipulation or of unequal altruism and one-sided self-sacrifice,” rather than “one of justice and reciprocity,” children are considerably hindered in learning justice. “It is within the family,” political scientist Susan Moller Okin argues, “that we first come to have that sense of ourselves and our relations with others that is at the root of moral development.”<sup>28</sup> The family must be just, she asserts, if we are to have a just society.

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## Conclusion

Out the great hubbub of daily life, it helps to look at a few sample practices like cleaning, playing, reading, and doing justice as full of rich spiritual potential. I name these practices as illustrative, not exemplary. The last thing those caught in the demands of families need is one more exercise to implement, one more ideal to live up to, one more task to execute. No one can excel in all the practices of faith. Instead one cultivates favorites, those toward which one naturally gravitates, by which to live and raise children. I simply hope to extend an invitation to people to consider areas in their own family lives where they already find themselves pursuing the love of God.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> David Gutman, *Reclaimed Powers: Toward a New Psychology of Men and Women in Later Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p. 190 and Janet Martine Soskice, "Love and Attention" in *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, Michael McGhee, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 62.
- <sup>2</sup> See Florence Caffrey Bourg, *Where Two or Three are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2004). See also Vigen Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children," in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Children in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001).
- <sup>3</sup> Ernest Boyer, *A Way in the World: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1984), pp. 32-33.
- <sup>4</sup> See John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- <sup>5</sup> The story also appears in the other Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:55; Luke 8:19-21).
- <sup>6</sup> See Carol Harrison, "The Silent Majority: the Family in Patristic Thought," in Stephen C. Barton, ed., *The Family in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 87-105.
- <sup>7</sup> See Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, Louis J. Puhl, S. J., trans. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951); Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of Saint Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982); Marilyn Schauble and Barbara Wojciak, eds., *A Reader's Version of the Rule of Saint Benedict in Inclusive Language* (Erie, PA: Benet Press, 1989).
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Moore, Preface, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), pp. xvi-xvii.
- <sup>9</sup> Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), pp. 12-13. See also de Waal, *Living with Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1989).
- <sup>10</sup> Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), pp. 3-4.
- <sup>11</sup> Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a critical edition by Conrad De Meester, Salvatore Scriurba, trans. (Washington, DC: ICS, Institutes of Carmelite Studies, 1994). The quote is cited by Marjorie J. Thompson (*Family: The Forming Center*, Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1996), pp. 81-82 comes from an earlier 1985 edition, p. 93.
- <sup>12</sup> Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, The Second Letter.
- <sup>13</sup> See Owen C. Thomas, "Interiority and Christian Spirituality," *Journal of Religion*, Jan. 2000, 80(1): 41-60.
- <sup>14</sup> Wendy M. Wright, "Living the Already But Not Yet: The Spiritual Life of the American Catholic Family," *Warren Lecture Series in Catholic Studies*, no. 25, University of Tulsa, Mar. 21, 1993, pp. 2-3. See also Wendy M. Wright, *Sacred Dwelling: A Spirituality of Family Life* (Leavenworth, KS: Forest of Peace Publishing, 1994) and *Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating Contemplative Spirit at Home* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
- <sup>15</sup> Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, p. 9.
- <sup>16</sup> See Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, pp. 152-153 and Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 27. The phrase comes from Genesis 33: 14.
- <sup>17</sup> For other treatments of faith within the ordinary practices of family life, see Bradley J. Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Tom Montgomery-Fate, *Steady and Trembling: Art, Faith, and Family in an Uncertain World* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005); Elizabeth Ann Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven: A Spirituality of Everyday* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994); and Delores R. Leckey, *The Ordinary Way: A Family Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).
- <sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," in *Luther's Works*, Walther I. Brandt, ed., and Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), pp. 39-41.
- <sup>19</sup> Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and "Women's Work"* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), p. 15.
- <sup>20</sup> See Douglas F. Ottati's chapter, "The Sanctification of the Ordinary" in *Reforming Protestantism: Christian Commitment in Today's World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).
- <sup>21</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951).
- <sup>22</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), p. 138.
- <sup>23</sup> Herbert Anderson, "Sense and Nonsense in the Wisdom of Dr. Seuss," *New Theology Review* (Aug. 2001): 45.
- <sup>24</sup> Anne Thurston, *Because of Her Testimony: The Word in Female Experience* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 47.
- <sup>25</sup> Kathleen and James McGinnis, *Parenting for Peace and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981, 1995), pp. 1-2.
- <sup>26</sup> Camille S. Williams, "Sparrows and Lilies," *First Things*, Aug.-Sept. 1993, p. 12.
- <sup>27</sup> See Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1993) and Cheryl J. Sanders, *Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth, and the Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997).
- <sup>28</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), pp. 14, 22.