



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

CREATE A CULTURE OF SPIRITUALITY throughout the Liturgical Year

Socrates mused that the unexamined life is not worth living. I agree! An unexamined life is one that lacks reflection, and therefore it is a life that fails to deepen. Reflection requires silence and solitude in order to hear the whisper of God's presence, to develop and recognize the voice of conscience, to discover the deep aspirations and hungers of our souls, and to discern the providential movement of God within our daily lives. It is within a culture of reflection and respect for soulful formation that we hone those skills, become shaped by them, and live out of them.

Self-reflection, or lack of it, defines how we interact with others and it shapes our spirituality. Sometimes, left to our own resources our edges get rough, our tongues get sharp, our imaginations run wild, our tempers erupt, our psyches become super-sensitive and fragile, and our egos easily take offense. Reflection or recollection brings perspective. All folks, of all ages, are spiritual beings, creatures of body and soul with whom God communicates. In the absence of reflection, we miss the cues. Reflection readies us to recognize the ways that God is revealed within the events of our daily living and as a pattern in our life histories. From such recognition flows **personal spirituality**: *the quality, manner, mode, or way of responding to experiences of God and others in the concrete circumstances of daily living.*

Spiritual Practices

Rather than providing an environment that supports the development of an interior, spiritual life, the common culture is marked by noise, materialism, and frenetic activity. Distractions are plentiful; diverse interests and multitasking grab the lion's share of time and attention; and a sense of the sacred is often relegated to participation in the Sunday liturgy—if that! In order for children to develop an interior life, parents and catechists must be countercultural and creative. Spirituality is supported by various practices, which include, but are not limited to, the following elements:

1. Religious **customs** that season family or classroom time, e.g., blessing at mealtimes, reverencing each wall crucifix on the feast of the Holy Cross, or picking by random a card that names and defines a gift or fruit of the Holy Spirit that the child will practice during the season of Pentecost.
2. **Rituals** or **routines** that insinuate an awareness of God into daily living, e.g., a morning or bedtime blessing, a New Year blessing of the home or meeting space, Advent wreath, Lenten rice bowl.
3. Annual **Mass participation** followed by a social celebration, e.g., New Year's Day, the solemnity of Christ the King, Mary's birthday.
4. **Personal example** of adult spirituality, e.g., being observed at prayer; frequent and easy reference to God, Mary and saints.
5. **Sacred space with physical reminders of the holy** challenge to parents and teachers to become interior designers for the interior life.

Sacred Spaces

Designing sacred space is not difficult. The meal table, a prominent coffee table, the top of the television, a tiered corner table, a shelf in a bookcase, or even a placemat on a bedroom bureau will serve to provide a visual, tangible reminder of the presence of God and the need for reflection. In addition to establishing family sacred space, set an example for individual bedroom prayer centers. What a wonderful custom it would be to provide a personal prayer space in a child's bedroom as a first Holy Communion gift, allowing the child to decide the particulars of maintaining it. Items included at a prayer center depend on the planner.

The ideas that follow are merely suggestions to engage the reader's creativity.

- The use of a colored cloth or napkin can indicate the liturgical season: green in Ordinary Time, violet in Advent and Lent; white at Christmas and Easter; red during the Triduum, and though Marian feasts do not constitute a liturgical season, a cloth of blue or special pattern and color would do just fine.
- A prayer dish is a container with a lid. It serves as a type of tabernacle: into the dish you place the names of persons, events, concerns, and intentions that weigh heavy on your heart and you ask Jesus to take care of them. Then you put the lid on the dish and go about your daily life with a sense of holy abandon and detachment.
- Symbols of the liturgical season, for example, advent wreath, empty Christmas manger, crown of thorns, nails, statue/figurine, picture card of the liturgical scene, miniature easel or business card holder to display Holy Spirit cards with practices for Pentecost, or virtues of Mary, etc., a rosary.
- Spiritual reading, such as a Bible, rosary pamphlets, seasonal litany cards, books of saints, inspirational books, etc.

Two particular resources recommended for the family prayer center are *Magnificat* for adults and *MagnifiKid* for children 7–12 years of age. Both books are available in English and Spanish at www.magnificat.net. Through fourteen issues, *Magnificat* provides adults with an abbreviated version of the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office) for morning, evening and night prayer; a complete missal that includes the daily Mass readings, a daily meditation, and the lives of the saints; and alternating features like theme blessings and creative litany prayer. *MagnifiKid* is a 16-page colorful weekly booklet that provides a complete missal and personal guide to help children apply the Sunday liturgy throughout their week.

- Inspirational Sayings: Keep a business card display container on the meal table. Invite each family member to write a favorite Scripture quote(s) on cards. At each meal pick one card and announce it before praying grace before meals. Or create a card after each Sunday liturgy.

By personal example and the interior design of our homes and classrooms, we teach our children and their friends that we share the sentiment of Joshua: "As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). Carving out sacred space is no guarantee of a developing interior life, but it makes a visible statement that calls us to pause, to remember who we are, to prioritize our lives according to God's design, and to take personal responsibility for our relationship with God. Without a doubt, this is a formula for a life worth living!

This article was published in *Today's Liturgy for Children* (TLC-052) by Oregon Catholic Press, Fall 2004. It was titled, "Interior Design for an Interior Life."

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