



Beyond Grace and Bedtime

Praying at Home with Children

By Susan Vogt

- *What's wrong with saying grace before meals and praying with our kids at bedtime?*
Nothing! In fact it's fundamental. It's where most Christian families start, but prayer and spirituality don't have to stop there.
- *Well, before you get into the "beyond" I could use some help with the basics. How do I get my kids to say grace. We're always so rushed.*
Before we talk about "grace" let's talk about the family meal. Many families are finding it harder and harder to honor a nightly meal together. Some have just given up. Don't! The meal is sacred in itself and deserves whatever hassle it might take to make it happen – at least more often than not. Work around sports schedules, work schedules, etc. Whatever it takes. For some families you might even have to take the drastic measure of cutting out an activity if it regularly interferes with the family meal. This applies to parents too.
- *Why is the meal so important?*
Besides nutrition, eating together feeds the soul. It's the time when all ages are united and doing something in common. Sure there might be squabbles and distractions, but it's a time to catch up on each other's day, share joys and unload burdens. Even if conversation cannot be sustained (as with babies and toddlers) it's a special time set aside to share our lives. It is the groundwork for understanding Eucharist at Mass.
- *So what's the best way to 'say grace'?*
Of course there are many best ways. Some families prefer the traditional "Bless us O Lord and these Thy gifts..." because of its simplicity. Others find that memorized prayer gets too routine after awhile and want to be more creative. The leader may invite spontaneous prayers of thanks or petition. Most families rotate who leads and perhaps let the leader decide the form of grace for that night. Some families sing a song like *Simple Gifts* or have a short reading. Holding hands during the prayer is a universal sign of unity and can keep little hands from going after the food.
- *Don't forget bedtime!*
Some of the same principles apply as for grace before meals. "Angel of God..." is a traditional bedtime prayer along with using this time to learn the basics such as the Our Father and Hail Mary for young children. As children get older, more creative forms are usually desired. Using this time to reflect on the ups and downs of one's day is like a mini examination of conscience. Many parents use the simple gesture of making the Sign of the Cross on their child's head to bless them as an ending.

The neat thing about bedtime prayer is that it can be a special private moment with each child during which things that are on his or her mind can be said in a safe and calm setting. No matter how tired you are as parent, it's worth getting into this routine. Consider the effort it takes as part of your prayer as a parent.

- *O.K. so we've been doing the grace and bedtime thing pretty regularly, what else is there?*
One of the beauties of our Catholic faith are the many seasonal and special occasion rituals that remind us of our faith and roots. Many families light Advent candles during the four weeks before Christmas or do special prayers or give something up during Lent. There are far too many other prayers to cover in this short article, have you considered praying at:

Times of Transition

- A “shower” of prayers upon the birth of a new baby
- Marking birthdays with a litany of why we thank God for this child’s life
- Blessing your children as they start a new school year
- A “coming of age” ritual when your child reaches puberty celebrating the awesome power he or she has to create new life and its accompanying responsibility
- Offering a blessing upon your teen and the car when he or she gets a driver’s license
- Blessing the engagement of your son or daughter after a family meal
- Making a couple’s retreat in celebration of a wedding anniversary

Times of crisis

- Praying with, and perhaps anointing, a sick family member. The water or oil doesn’t have to be blessed at church. Your use of it for a holy purpose makes it worthy.
- Creating a simple burial ritual upon the death of a pet.
- Praying with a family member who has lost a job and backing it up with research on jobs or a gift
- Being with a relative who is having marriage problems. Listening to him or her, getting resources for counseling or support groups, praying for wisdom.

Ordinary times

Just as the Church calendar has ordinary times, so do families. Prayer might include

- Saying a prayer for each person as you fold their laundry
- Making meals as “feeding the hungry” (one of the corporal works of mercy)
- Helping with homework as “teaching the ignorant” (a spiritual work of mercy)
- Forgiving each other for the inevitable hurts of daily life
- Try having a family night once a week. It can be just a time to have fun together or you can go deeper and focus on themes of faith, peace, justice, family issues, etc.

- *This all makes me pretty tired. I'm not sure I can do one more thing.*
Nurturing faith at home is bigger than just times of prayer. It has to do with how we treat each other, how we forgive, and the times we go out of our way to help out. Don’t beat yourself up with what you can’t do, but take time to do something. It will be enough! A big part of family spirituality is just taking the time to talk together. Isn’t that what prayer is? Talking to God.