

Praying as a family – some thoughts

The current situation has caught all of us on the hop. We are trying to work out how to keep things going, how to stay afloat, how to seize new chances, how to keep on top of both work and family life to the extent that that's even possible. We are basically trying to work out what a day looks like. For some, this is a wonderful opportunity; for others, this is a tough grind.

A major aspect of this is finding a new routine, not just for us, but also for our families. This involves prioritising certain things, and sometimes even rediscovering parts of our lives that we have previously delegated, even relegated. One such aspect might be spirituality, prayer and religious education. For some, this is a core value and so there is a routine to fall back on. For others, this is something lost and rediscovered, but at least there are things in our past to which we can return. For many others, this is a lost continent, something that has been submerged by busy lives, lack of formation and – let's be honest – lack of interest given all else that is going on.

However, now might be the time to take a second look, whether for the purposes of improvement, or rediscovering our bearings, or simply to see whether we were right to disregard it or not. To that end, I would like to share some thoughts that might be of use. First, I would like to recount a chat I had with a friend on this topic, as I think it sheds some light on what we mean when we say spirituality or religion. Then I would like to share some thoughts on some basics that might be useful.

However, before I go on, I want to say that I am of course always available for a chat on this or any other matters, so please do not hesitate to call the parish should this or anything else prompt some thoughts.

Spiritual but not religious

When I decided to enter the seminary, it led to some very interesting conversations with friends. Most of my friends were not religious at all, and so there were as many reactions to my news as there were friends. One really good friend who is kind of blunt (and that's a major reason we are friends) treated me like a case study. She had gone to a religious school, but was not religious herself. However, she was aware of the positive formation she had received through religious education, even if it was no longer central to her life. She therefore wanted to know what was involved in the training, what kind of decisions I had to make; really, she was just interested as a friend in what my life would now look like.

We had a number of conversations on these lines, but I remember one in particular. After I had been ordained, I was visiting her house for a meal, and she and her husband were asking me about all the stuff I was involved in. They had had two children by that stage, and my friend wanted to give her children the best of what she had received but without the baggage of institutional religion. She was considering exposing them to a bunch of different religions, I suppose with the idea that they could decide for themselves later on.

Putting aside for a moment the idea that this is the way to understand religion (or indeed the way to put children in a position to make such a decision in the light of their parents' obvious position on this topic), we discussed this approach. Our conversation was along these lines.

I asked my friend whether she thought spirituality of some sort is an important aspect of life. She thought it was: she thought not everything can be reduced to the empirical. I then asked whether, if in her investigations she found something really good, would she want to share it with her children? She said, "Of course."

"Do you think there's a chance that you would be successful in sharing and that your children will pick up what you want to share?" I asked.

"I don't see why not," she replied.

"Ok then," I said, "do you think that sharing this will make your children's lives better?"

"For sure, otherwise I wouldn't be doing it," was her clear response.

"And if your children's lives are improved, do you think it will be obvious? Might they be happier or more content or something along those lines?"

"Yes."

"I think so too. But if they are and it is obvious, might not other people notice? Might not other people see your children thriving, see you invigorated, see something different in the way you relate to your children? And if they do notice this, might they not ask you about it?"

"I guess so," my friend replied, "I hadn't really thought about it."

"Well, say this does happen. If someone asks you what is your secret, will you share it?"

"I guess so."

"Well, if you do share it, you are more likely to share it with someone who knows you, someone who is reasonably close, because these are the people who are going to notice a change in your family, who are more likely to feel confident to ask you what might be a personal question, and also they are the ones whom you are more likely to feel comfortable sharing such stuff with. Do you think that is fair?"

"Seems probable. I don't how good I would be at sharing it, but yes: I think I would be more likely to share it with someone I trusted."

"Now what if your friend gets it wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what if you teach your friend what you do, and your friend gets it wrong. Wouldn't this cause issues as they are close and therefore their mistakes might end up confusing your children?"

"I don't follow."

"Say you teach your friend what has worked with you and your children, and then your friend wants to get involved, and begins to teach his or her children. Isn't it likely that your children will come in contact with your friend's children? Might they not interact, and if this is important and significant, might they not interact precisely on this level? In which case, might not your children become confused as to what is the right way or the correct meaning?"

"I see what you mean."

“What would you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, would you want to take corrective action? Either correct your friend’s misunderstandings, or correct your child’s, or even assess your own understanding to see if you might be wrong? In any case, wouldn’t you want to resolve any misunderstanding so that your child was getting the best approach possible?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Welcome to institutional religion. Institutional religion is what happens when you successfully share good spirituality.”

Now, there are any number of other ways of approaching this question, and a library of books has been written on this topic, but I think my conversation with my friend covers the basics. Spirituality is either a thing or it isn’t. If it is a thing, there are better or worse ways of doing it. If you come across a better way, you either want to share it or you don’t. (And if you don’t want to share it, that raises a different series of questions.) If you do want to share it, then all the social questions of language, meaning and truth raise their heads, not to mention social organisation. This extended over time, together with developed answers and developed misunderstandings, makes up the history of a religion, or at least one aspect.

Intellectual barriers

Many of you will have spotted in this a key hurdle that stops many from getting to this type of conversation, namely, is spirituality a thing or not? Now, my friend had already got over this, but many people these days cannot, and it is not worth pretending otherwise.

However, this is not always a considered position. However, I don’t think there needs to be blame in this regard. As we all know, culture usually does most of the heavy-lifting in our lives. We adopt positions, often unconsciously, from our culture. In the past, it was often in favour of religion; these days, not so much.

The questions that our culture has posed to religion are legitimate. (Here, I am not talking about the many abuses in the name of religion. These are of course blasphemous, and should have been cut out as soon as seen.) But, in many cases, these questions are not new, and, indeed, can be found in the source texts of a religion. (How could a religion last, how could it persuade, if it could not address the most obvious questions?) Not only are most of the questions not new, but also the answers have not been heard. Many have thought the questions were a technical knockout, and so completely missed the answers that are there within a tradition, and many of them there for quite some time, even from the very beginning.

One serious problem in all this has been religious education. Here, I want immediately to state that I do not mean within our schools. I mean, more broadly. The very formulation of some of the key issues – faith versus science, spirituality versus religion, reason versus revelation – reveal how far we are from a coherent understanding of any of these terms. For many of the ancients, the precondition of science was the belief that there is something to investigate, the faith that something could be understood. Again, the idea that spirituality could arise or terminate outside of religions would have been ludicrous, even in the case of

mystics. Finally, for most thinkers throughout history, the most obviously spiritual reality is precisely reason, and the most obvious revelation has been one's awareness of this.

However, for any number of historical and intellectual reasons (and many different ones depending on whose account you read), the playing field has become overgrown, and it is quite difficult to cut out some space for a clear conversation. One of the key descriptions of modernity, even postmodernity, has been the redefinition of religious terms with secular meanings. This has made conversation very hard, because we are not always sharing the same language, even though we might think that we are.

All of this goes to say that the intellectual barriers that our culture has to religion are real. Since they are real, we should not shirk them. However, if they are intellectual, then they should be approached intellectually, and not ideologically. We should not assume that they are insurmountable: such an approach is not scientific – science understood in its broadest sense.

Intellectual or other?

Now, how many of these intellectual barriers are our own, is a personal question. For some, they are crucial, and without answers the whole thing is a non-starter. I'm sympathetic to this attitude; this has been my area of interest (along with the NBA and electronic dance music...and the first 10 seasons of the Simpsons). For others, though, the intellectual stuff is not the key. It might just be that they have never prayed and don't know how to. Perhaps, they have never felt welcomed into a religious community and therefore don't believe what the community says about itself. Perhaps, they were once religious and then drifted, and never felt like they lost anything in the transaction. Or, maybe, they are just too busy and don't know where to begin. But for many in each of these groups, maybe something has changed: curious children, or a death in the family, or an experience of suffering, or some other significant moment. Maybe now they feel drawn to ask/answer some questions.

I want to speak to both groups, those who cannot get over the intellectual challenges and those who have other reasons(?). First, I want to describe my process of welcoming people into the church. It might help imagine how I see all this. Second, I want to offer some initial approaches. Finally, I want to return to the intellectual issue. However, in this regard, I want to do no more than offer some resources and my assistance. Most of this ground is better covered in conversation or at the feet of masters (not me!) in the pages of some classic books, or, these days, good online videos and podcasts.

Adult formation

A little while ago, I read an article that made a very obvious point about prayer. But like many obvious things, they are too close to one's face to see. One has to step back and say it out loud for its outright obviousness to become clear. This article said that in most religions the most important thing about prayer is its regularity. Now this is obvious for prayer because it is obvious for life. All the most important things for health happen frequently or should do so; and if you want to get better at something, then you have to practice, and often. When it comes to many of the oldest traditions, the key aspect of prayer is its

frequency – many times a day and at set times. Prayer has never been a matter of sentiment. It has never been a matter of when the spirit takes me. It is too important to trust to one's own assessment. Like feeding children, the determining factor is the other person, not me.

And so this is the approach I take when someone expresses interest in joining the Church. The first step is getting the life right. When I hurt my back, the rehabilitation trainer told me what was crucial for long-term success was getting the basic movements correct first. Once this was done, then one could begin making progress. The basic movements in Christianity are love of God and love of neighbour, so prayer and works of charity. I therefore typically invite applicants to focus on this initially: develop a pattern of prayer and work out how to serve one's neighbour. For most, the second part is easier, and in some respects the thinking has already occurred. However, sometimes more focus and more time are required.

In respect of prayer, I usually recommend reading the Gospel of St Luke together with the Acts of the Apostles. These two give a way into the life of Christ, and an insight as to how that life is a) given to, b) forms and c) is received by, a community. I also recommend gradually building up one's spiritual muscles through gradual increases in time. I suggest reading a chapter in the morning, then initially for five minutes thinking about it in silence or through writing, and then reading the same section in the evening. The book of Psalms is also a great resource. And many people suggest beginning with some of the wisdom literature in the Old Testament, like the Book of Proverbs, as it is more obvious and more bite-sized.

The key, though, is developing a sustainable lifestyle, one that will nourish you, without overwhelming you or creating fatigue. That said, like anything in life, if you want to get better, then you have to push yourself. However, in the spiritual life, pushing oneself often looks like relaxing and letting God do the work. This can take the form of letting go of baggage through the sacrament of reconciliation, or learning how to be thankful for all that God is already doing. Many people these days speak of mindfulness, and prayer is at least this, but more so because it is in the form of a personal relationship.

All of this section is for the purposes of saying: if you want to offer something like this to your children, then it is wise to get a head-start on them, so that when they ask the obvious questions, you have at least asked them of yourself first. If nothing else, it fine-tunes one's bs detector, allowing you to sniff out all the wrong answers, even if the right ones escape us. (At least, that has been my experience.)

Family prayer

As I said above, a lot of work is done simply through pattern. If you can give your family good patterns of prayer, you have given them a lot. We often speak of the benefit of ritual. Ritual, at its most fundamental, is never irrational. However, it can often step in when reason struggles. A clear example of this is the funeral: ritualised mourning for when the moment is beyond us. Thus, ritual can carry us, and good ritual can take us even deeper into reason.

Some obvious moments for ritual are waking and before sleeping, as well as meals. The Morning Prayer of the Church is prospective in nature. One thanks God for the gift of the new day, seeks God's protection and strength for the challenges ahead, and makes concrete resolutions about how to move forward. The Evening Prayer of the Church, as well as that before bed, is more retrospective, in that it looks over the day, giving thanks for the blessings and seeking forgiveness for the errors and sins. However, it is never completely retrospective because the Christian lives in hope and so always moves forward, trusting in God's goodness and mercy. The Christian approaches the night and sleep as a mini death, handing oneself over into God's hands, believing in the resurrection and eternal life.

There are many different prayers one can use at such times. Usually, it is a question of finding something that works, the age old wisdom being: pray how you can, not how you can't. It is sometimes hard to get people together in the morning, given different schedules, but perhaps a simple prayer thanking God for the gift of another day, the gift of family and friends and all the blessings that will come through the day. A classic prayer for such times is the Morning Offering:

O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer You my prayers, works, joys and sufferings of this day for all the intentions of Your Sacred Heart, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, in reparation for my sins, for the intentions of all my relatives and friends, and in particular for the intentions of the Holy Father. Amen.

Or one might prefer the prayer to one's guardian angel:

Angel of God, my guardian dear, To whom God's love commits me here, Ever this day, be at my side, To light and guard, Rule and guide. Amen.

In the evening, there are also any number of options. A simple naming of the family is powerful:

Good night our Lord, good night our Lady. God bless Mum, and Dad, and (name all siblings). Make us good children and a happy family. Amen

Some also find a litany of family saints helpful, along the lines of:

Our Lady. Response: pray for us. St Joseph. Response; pray for us. Etc
(Add in any personal favourites or patron saints, making sure gradually to fill in their stories for the children, so the relationship can grow.)

Many families pray the Rosary together in the evening, and based on those families, I would heartily recommend it. Also at the beginning of the baptism ritual, parents and godparents are invited to make the sign of the cross on the child's forehead. I often mention to parents that this is a beautiful prayer to continue before bed, to make the sign of the cross on their child's head before they go to sleep.

I also mentioned prayers at meals. This is often called grace, and there are any number of versions, along the lines of:

Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The benefit of a standard form is to get children familiar with the ritual and to get them comfortable in leading the prayer themselves. When they are older and are familiar both with the structure and the responsibility of leading, then the prayer can develop.

The most crucial Catholic prayer, though, is of course the Mass. This requires participation. It also repays learning. Many unfortunately stop their understanding of the Mass at its most basic. This can be ok for some; however, for most such simplicity is hard-won. It takes years to simply pray, offer and communicate. It is hard to receive and be obedient to the Word: the whole of salvation history testifies to this. So, the best thing one can do as a parent is to insist on attendance, through the obvious witness of attending oneself (including the sacrament of reconciliation in preparation when necessary), as well as developing one's own understanding. Again, just as you would persuade someone in anything else: being credible.

There are many other prayers (Salve Regina, the Angelus, the Jesus Prayer, etc); however, it goes without saying that each Catholic should know the prayers that make up the Rosary: the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Glory be. These should be in everyone's quiver.

Intellectual resources

Now back to the intellectual challenges. Again, I would say the best resource is a good conversation. Those can be hard to come by, but please don't let this stop you from trying. You would be surprised how many people want to chat about these things, but also don't want to start the conversation. (There is always a fine line between opening up such a space and being a God-botherer; though, I do think the latter is normally one who cannot read the body-language following the initial approach.) That said, the parish office is always open (except Mondays) and there are many parishioners who can help in this way. Some people even ask for spiritual direction, which is the regular scheduling of such a conversation.

Sometimes, though, in this area people want to take the first steps anonymously. They want to listen to others talk it out or address their concerns, but with a cloak of invisibility around them. In this respect, the internet is an absolute boon. One can get lost in the thickets if one does not find the right guide, but there are many right guides; and, again, it is just a question of finding one that works for you. Two personal favourites are Bishop Robert Barron ([wordonfire](#)) and Fr Stephen Wang ([Sycamore.fm](#), and [Pause for Faith](#)). Also, on a more low-key approach, the podcast "[Catholic Stuff You Should Know](#)" are religious conversations usually fuelled by bourbon.

There are also any number of books. Classics include those by CS Lewis (*Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Screwtape Letters*), Cardinal Ratzinger (*Introduction to Christianity*) and my favourite, those by Fr Louis Bouyer, though I would not start here. Another book for those that struggle with the very idea of God is one by David Bentley Hart called *The Experience of God*. This is my wheelhouse, so if you should be interested in any of these or would like other suggestions, please get in touch, but be warned: I can talk for Australia.