



## Developing Family Spirituality

Talleyrand once told a friend, "If you wish to be agreeable in society, you must consent to be taught many things which you already know." I thought of him recently when I heard of the negative reaction of parents to their children's religion teacher's assignment.

It seems she asked the children to draw a picture of God. Easily done. She gathered a plethora of grand-fatherly pictures with beards, interchangeable with their pictures of Jesus or Moses. Her real genius showed, though, when she assigned the children's parents to draw God (not Jesus) as part of their homework. There followed a storm of parent panic. Some parents drew stick figures, others clouds or hands. One drew words coming from the sun. Many failed to turn in their homework.

It was a fine assignment because it forced adults to reflect on their image of God — which is often underdeveloped, a leftover childhood image, and because it engendered within the family a discussion of what God is like.

Each of us needs a personal God, one that speaks to us and our needs, hopes and fears. We can't just borrow someone else's God, although there are people

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Talks With Parents

who insist their image of God is the only authentic one (Indian theologian-writer Vine Deloria spoke cryptically of this when he said the usual white man's attitude toward Indian worship of God is, "You worship your way, and I'll worship His way.")

Some people have a God who is fatherly, indulgent, protective and always forgiving. Some have one who is a bookkeeper, keeping records of each of our good and evil acts. Some have one who is a judge, austere, distant, and just. There are thousands of other images of God, all of them developed by individuals building a personal relationship with God. Tevye, the delightful father in "Fiddler on the Roof," had a unique relationship with God who was his friend and boss.

My God tends to be a covenant God. We have agreements between us, much too elaborate and personal to go into here. But, as meaningful as my God is to me, I can't expect the other members of my family to relate to a covenant God. Each has to develop his or her own relationship with God and we as parents have to encourage this if our children are to be free of our image in life.

Some families try to develop a family God to whose corporate image each member must conform. It won't work. Some children will never relate to a stern, judging God. Others need one.

During this week, take a family lenten session to "draw" God. Ask members to describe their God, offer a sample conversation each might have with God, and draw a sketch of God with them alone. Talk about the differences in imagery. It isn't a silly exercise but one that is basic to developing a sense of family spirituality in that it permits each member to find a personal God who is a composite God shared by the family. And it starts them on the journey toward developing and refining their own image and relationship with God which will mature along with them and permeate their lives.

## Together for Life

"The day after our marriage I knew it was a terrible, terrible mistake."

The person who made that statement is still married a dozen years later, still trying to cope with the spouse's childish immaturity and total irresponsibility, still hanging on for a variety of healthy and unhealthy reasons.

In Catholic parishes of our country there are others like this distraught and unhappy spouse. There are also perhaps even more who simply could not cope or hang on in the midst of such stress. They finally left their partners, but only after extreme pain and with much uncertainty, or were abandoned by them, experiences filled with equal hurt and comparable fears.

This phenomenon in modern life places Church leaders in an awkward dilemma. We need to proclaim the sacredness of marriage, the unbreakable nature of the nuptial bond, the sacrament of matrimony and its sufficient graces. At the same time, however, preachers and priests must reach out to those hurting, often emotionally damaged individuals, who have divorced and either live alone or are beginning again with another partner.

Yet to stress from the pulpit one aspect of this complex situation means to complicate the other.

A strong homily, for example, on the permanent nature of Christian marriage and the evils of divorce can lay an added burden on the single parent and the remarried Catholic. On the other hand, a sensitive

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Our Church Family

sermon on the pain of divorce and the possibilities for the future may weaken the determination of a married couple to struggle through a temporarily difficult period.

In contemporary society, the notion of a life-long, faithful commitment to one person or profession or company possesses much less power than it did a few decades ago. Consequently, ministers of the Lord's Word have a special responsibility to repeat the ideal which Jesus taught his listeners. Current scripture scholars are more and more in agreement that despite the exceptions expressed in Matthew 19:9 and 5:32 our Lord maintained an absolute prohibition of divorce.

Those who spend hours of pastoral ministry with people in complex marital situations recognize how often serious doubt exists whether a true Christian marriage existed from the very beginning. If that fact can be established with reasonable, moral certitude through a Church process, it means both original spouses have the freedom to enter a second marriage.

In such cases, the Church does not break a nuptial bond, it merely recognizes one never existed from the start.

Fortunately, Catholic Church procedures for these judgments in the United States are vastly improved, much swifter, appropriately careful and yet not excessively burdensome. They have brought enormous spiritual peace to countless dejected or alienated Catholics in the past decade.

While these general principles are simple to state, their understanding and acceptance by the total Catholic Church family is not so easy.

The matter's extreme complexity and the issues heavy emotional overtones require of parishioners today a special patience, tolerance and gentleness as well as suspension of judgments about this person, that couple or those people.

St. Paul's pleas to the Ephesians are very pertinent to our discussion. We might address them to those in parishes who feel upset by the seeming change of Church policy on marriage and divorce.

"Live a life worthy of the calling you have received, with perfect humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another lovingly. Make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force. . . get rid of all bitterness, be kind to one another, compassionate and mutually forgiving, just as God has forgiven you in Christ."

## The Bible: An Old Sun Rises Again

I am reading the Bible, I tell a friend. For the first time. It is an embarrassing admission to make at my age. Not so much from religious aspects since only in recent years has reading it been stressed much.

Rather, the chagrin comes from the fact that I who have wanted to be a writer since age eight have bypassed the richest of all literary sources.

I began six months ago with the grandiose plan of reading it straight through. Genesis zipped by. Exodus almost as easy. Boggled down with Leviticus. Mired in Numbers.

Day after day I fight Numbers but my mind wanders.

I flip ahead to Ecclesiastes, read Esther, Samuel, Ruth, Job in haphazard order. They charm, thrill, inspire, amuse. I turn back to Numbers determinedly and am stopped.

Furtively (although no one cares but me that I am skipping) I jump into Proverbs. Proverbs is my cup of tea. I alternate it with the only part of the Bible previously familiar, the Gospels. In the quiet of the morning after the school buses leave, I sometimes

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All in the Family

weep over the beauty, the hope in certain familiar passages which seem to strike now with new clarity and promise.

Christmas approaches and with what I know to be euphoric zeal, I give Bibles as if they were bon bons. I debate over giving my father one. His reading has almost exclusively been the evening paper, supermarket manuals, seed catalogues and the Pennsylvania Fish and Game magazine. He surprises us all.

By the end of January he is already up to Kings. He is aghast at the killings thus far. "Thirty thousand here, twenty thousand there," he says. "Why did God allow it?"

I tell him we both should join study groups.

No, I think, I'm making it mine, and immediately realize how presumptuous the thought. Six months of reading and I am a paper tiger.

I finish Numbers, move with relief to Deuteronomy. The oldest daughter, now mired herself in Numbers, picks up my Bible and is aghast. "You've desecrated it," she says, looking at all the parts underlined.

Still, I have come a little way. I have, for starters, come across Hemingway's title "The Sun Also Rises" in Ecclesiastes, know where Warren Gamaliel Harding's parents found his middle name, discovered why the garden plant Jacob's Ladder is called thus and read for myself how Joshua "fit" the Battle of Jericho.

But, even in this small accomplishment I am aware of how much I have unwittingly missed in this first partial reading. I make another grandiose vow. I shall, like my husband's grandfather Michele, read all the way through and when I am finished read it again and again. I think about that a little and amend the vow. I will, I think, probably skip Numbers.