

Of prayer — kitchen tables, songs and park benches

By Suzanne Elsesser

One image of families at prayer that frequently comes to my mind has a bearded, Victorian father, a mother and a handful of children, formally dressed and with hands folded in front of them, seated at a round table.

The table holds an oversized family Bible from which the father is reading. All the others have heads bowed. A gas lamp with a stained glass shade hangs over the table, which is covered with a heavy fringed cloth.

Everyone is very serious.

The image makes me uncomfortable as a parent. For a long time I held it as my model of family prayer. But it certainly was not what happened in my own family.

At our house, the round table has a white formica surface, the overhead light is electric, nobody ever looks that serious and the phone usually rings when we sit down together. (Is it wired to the kitchen chairs?)

Besides, the one time I tried a family prayer service the kids looked at me as if I had dropped in from another century. I was not confident enough to try again. Now I am not so certain that is the only way the Holy Spirit leads prayer in families.

When I think of family people who pray, I think of my friend

Sandy. He's not Catholic, but he comes to Mass on Sunday. He sits way in back of the church dressed in blue jeans, scuffed shoes and an old sweater. "I pray a lot," he says, "and I like to come here to do it."

I know he prays. He's even shown me the stone park bench where he's spent hours in quiet prayer overlooking the waters of Long Island Sound. I don't know what words Sandy uses to pray, but I do know he credits God directly for help in raising his 14-year-old daughter alone. He's not praying with her but he is praying for her.

For me, prayer with family has tended to come in song. As a child I remember peering over my grandmother's shoulder to see the words in the hymnal as she hit the notes of favorite hymns on our old black upright piano.

I'm a Catholic now. But I grew up as a Presbyterian. For me as a child, those hymns around the piano were like the nightly rosaries of many Catholic families.

Song was important for me again recently as seven of us crowded into my mother's room to pray after she suffered a crisis in a chronic illness. We were led by a Methodist minister. My father, an active Presbyterian lay leader, suggested we start with a hymn. We sang, gaining confidence in our knowledge of the words as we went along.

Surprised by an enthusiasm for prayer and song he had rarely found in hospital rooms, the minister asked if we were "church people."

"We sure are," my father responded, "but you've got a real ecumenical collection here!" He introduced the family: "Cousin Evelyn, a retired nurse, a Methodist; her friend Helen, a Methodist; her friend Helen, a Congregationalist; my daughter, Sue, a convert to Catholicism; and Dolores, a Southern Baptist who helps us at home."

Together our family prayed. We prayed for mother's health and with tears in her eyes she reached out to take my hand as I sat next to her.

We prayed for my father who sat with head down on the edge of the bed mother had vacated for the room's one comfortable chair. We prayed in thanksgiving for Jesus who gave us so much.

And we sang again, "What a friend we have in Jesus... what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer."

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FOOD ...

...for thought

Prayer at home and communication in the home. How much does one influence the other?

Will efforts to foster communication help to foster the atmosphere for praying together, as people become more comfortable with each other?

Holy Cross Father Donald Guertin thinks there is a connection between communication in a home and prayer.

Prayer can become another way for people at home to express their care for each other, he said. Prayer can become something people share, not an action viewed merely as a burden.

A pastor for several years, Father Guertin now serves as a counselor at the Children and Family Center in Mishawaka, Ind. During a recent interview he discussed some of his thinking about communication in a home.

Part of communicating well involves letting family members know they are appreciated. Sometimes this can be done simply by telling others occasionally "how good it is to be together," he said.

A good measure of acceptance is another quality needed, Father Guertin suggested. Even when a family member has a problem with another, the concern needs to be expressed without appear-

ing to reject the individual.

The priest said that in his work the most difficult situations are those in which people have given up on each other. Then, the counselor said, he works hard to restore communication and trust. Often he begins by trying to get people to express how they feel and to say what they expect.

Being considerate of other people is also important for Father Guertin. And sometimes little things count — for instance, not dumping problems on family members right after coming home.

Father Guertin recommends that people spend their first few minutes together in the evening in a relaxed way, perhaps by finding something to laugh about and listening to the others.

Communication. It deserves attention at home.

On the other hand, praying together may heighten communication, trust and care among family members. There are times when families fear that prayer together will be awkward. But in actually attempting it, some discover this is not so.

When that happens, they may have the sense of discovering each other as well as God. For, as Gabe Huck wrote in "A Book of Family Prayer" (Seabury), prayer "is shaped by us and shapes us."

... for discussion

1. Communication. It is the key to improving many human relationships. From your experience, what can people do to improve communication at home?

2. What are some of the obstacles to communication at home?

3. Prayer can become another way for people at home to express their care for each other. Father Donald Guertin expresses that thought above. What does he mean? Do you think this should be viewed as one of the roles of prayer?

4. What are some ways you know of in which modern families pray at home? Is it difficult to do? What keeps families from prayer?

5. In her article, Katharine Bird discusses some of the ingredients of communication at home. What are some of those ingredients?

6. Suzanne Elsesser tells several stories of prayer in her article this week. But there are many such

stories of prayer to be told. What story of prayer would you tell?

Second helpings

"Prayer Talk. Casual Conversations With God," by William V. Coleman. This is a book that individuals or families and friends can use to get them going with prayer and discussion. The author says it is a book "written for people who are uncertain they know how to pray... Much of what holds them back from prayer is fear. They imagine that prayer requires a blameless life or, at least, a mind trained in the intricacies of meditation and the spiritual life." Each chapter of the book includes a dialogue between God and the reader; a story to help illustrate the chapter's point; a reflection; and a prayer. Among chapter headings: family; trust; strength; sex; prayer; peacemakers; freedom. (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556. \$3.95.)