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Prayer

Continued from page 1

have to find ways that are appropriate for them. And it may change."

The O'Tooles, in fact, learn from their children, even though Karen is a religion teacher and Terry is a music minister at St. Paul's Church.

"They are probably more open to it than we are, to the movement of the spirit and the presence of the Lord," Karen O'Toole said. "That's why Jesus said, 'You have to come to me with the heart of a child.' It's beautiful. I say, why can't I be like that. I must have been once."

She recalled how her own parents prayed the rosary every night before going to bed. "I always found that very comforting to hear that, the back and forth."

For now, the O'Tooles' nightly ritual is gathering in the living room to pray the Our Father, Hail Mary, Angel of God, and individual thank-yous for their day.

Another type of prayer diocesan children are learning is from ancient tradition - quiet meditation or centering prayer (where a child might center thoughts on the life of Christ). Sister Dolores Monahan, SSJ, uses it in prayer classes at St. Michael School in Newark.

"One thing I help them talk about is going into the 'heart room' and talking with Jesus," she said. "I help them to quiet down and breath deeply, to breathe in all that love Jesus wants to give us."

With fourth-graders she adapts traditional, methodical Ignatian contemplation. Imagining they were in particular Gospel scenes comes naturally to the children, she said, noting, "It is a beautiful way God leads them into insights."

With older children, she uses the Jesus Prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Adults can easily learn this with their children, she added.

Through the Sisters of St. Joseph Spirituality Ministry, Sister Monahan also presents workshops on teaching children

"Lord, Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

to pray. She asks parents to reflect on their own images of God first.

"If your attitude about God is a punishing God or that you have to be very careful what you say to God, or one you very formally go to in church, children can read some of these messages," she said.

The diocese also offers some guidance when it come to children and prayer, noted Mary Britton, diocesan catechetical consultant.

Diocesan religious curriculum guidelines, Britton noted, suggest that children in pre-kindergarten through second grade know the sign of the cross, Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, and An Act of Contrition, and be encouraged to say morning and evening prayer, grace at meals, the rosary, and responses at Mass.

For grades three through five, the Apostle's Creed is added to the list of prayers to know. Other prayers to be encouraged include the Stations of the Cross and the Acts of Faith, Hope, and Love.

For sixth grade, the Nicene Creed is added to the list of prayers to know, and prayers to be encouraged include the Prayer of St. Francis and Psalm 23. In addition, the students are taught that forms of dance, singing and art may also be prayers.

"You learn to say them in class, and memorize them through church and home," Britton explained, noting that class is usually only an hour a week.

From a historical view, she said, "In the 1970s parishes and schools had gotten away from using the catechism, and were looking for new ways for forming in faith. We always taught the sign of the cross,

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the Our Father, Hail Mary and Apostles' Creed. We never lost those." But Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity or Guardian Angel prayers were less emphasized.

Spontaneous prayer, from the heart, was what was taught," Britton continued. "It isn't a black or white, before and after thing. It is a continuing unfolding and deepening of our understanding of prayer."

Numerous parents find encouragement from author Kathleen O'Connell Chesto, who developed prayers for milestones in a child's life - losing a tooth, for example. Rote prayers seemed meaningless to her own son, so she instead taught him spontaneous prayer. But during a crisis later in his life, he was unable to pray in his own words, and didn't know the rote prayers that gave his mother comfort. Today she encourages a combination.

More than 100 "hungry" parents went to hear Chesto at St. Cecelia's Church in Irondequoit in October, according to Rinefierd.

Her audience also included Father Richard J. Beligotti of St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Leicester and St. Lucy's Church in Retsof, who arranged a car pool after hearing her in March.

"I got a lot out of it myself," he said. "I thought parents should hear her. It's a very practical, very real approach to prayer, not anything pie in the sky. It was dialogue with God about events in their lives.'

Referring to his own young parishioners, he said, "When you don't have Catholic schools, you don't expect them to know the Liturgy of the Hours."

He continued, "Kathleen Chesto

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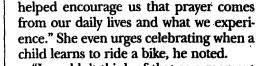
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"I wouldn't think of that as a moment for prayer," Father Beligotti laughed. "Now I realize every moment can be a teachable moment. Nothing is profane."

The priest's own upbringing was more liturgical, and he remembers in certain months his family lighting candles around statues in his home for evening prayer. "Statues or images or candles or icons are part of our sacramental dimension," he said.

Parishioners who accompanied him to Chesto's talk seem to appreciate the new and the old.

"We're getting more involved than just to have prayer at church," Debbie Stein, one such parishioner, said, adding she and her husband Peter hope to celebrate moments such as when their youngest children learn to tie their shoes.

Still, she noted the same 7-year-old son, Andrew, who is encouraged to pray at night for someone ("And it usually ends up being a cat or a dog") also is captivated by the rosary given to him for his first Communion and carries it everywhere.

Also combining approaches are Jack and Jackie Magiera of St. Lucy's Church. After Kellen, 4, walked five miles of the area churches' CROP Walk for hunger, they lit candles on a cake and sang congratulations. During more routine family prayer, their other son, Connor, 2-1/2, tries to keep up with the Our Father and Hail Mary. And without his contribution to grace - "Dig in" - meals wouldn't be the same.

Brenna O'Toole of Webster would be all for that. She can't imagine anyone not praying. Even if you don't know any prayers, she suggests, "make up your own, because they don't have to be formal. God hears all our prayers."

(EDITORS' NOTE: The page-one illustration is by the grandmother of staff photographer S. John Wilkin.)





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