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Rituals

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While home rituals may not be as religious as church rituals, there can be a parallel.

"The parallel to be made is that just as ritual in religious communities encourages community solidarity, it does in families, too," said C. Margaret Hall, sociology professor at Georgetown University.

New rituals "have emerged out of necessity," she said, explaining that families are becoming more willing "to experiment" to keep themselves together.

"The important thing is to dignify the individual through the ritual," Hall said. Often tradition — particularly any around holiday dinners — "subordinates people as helpers, and I think that has to change."

It defeats the purpose if a tradition is carried out even when perceived as a burden, she added.

The diocesan Faith Development Ministry has offered "Celebrating Family Ritual" workshops this past year to encourage successful rituals.

"We want to help families look at natural rituals they are already using, and the value of rituals whether they are religious or not," said Karen Rinefierd, coordinator of young adult, adult, and family faith formation.

What makes a ritual, she believes, is that it gathers the members of the family and supports them as a family.

"There is a more primary level than religious," she added. "It builds identity, it builds over time. It is what our ancestors did, what our parents did, what we will teach our children to do."

"Beyond that, it is part of our identity as a Catholic, as a Christian, or as religious," Rinefierd continued. "It helps make the connection to the larger community. ... It is almost impossible for kids to understand liturgy if there is not some kind of ritual in the home."

A ritual is a patterned way of doing something that is rooted in a common history, she said, and involves symbols (gifts, food, drink), words (singing, vows, blessings), or movement or gestures (dance, hugs, blessing signs).

We ritualize, Rinefierd said, to explain truths and relationships in our lives, to raise awareness of the meaning of every-

day experiences, to affirm the goodness of creation and discover God in our everyday life, to slow down the inner pace of our lives, and to demonstrate our connectedness.

A family's children will offer clues as to what is meaningful and joyful to them, she said.

For example, Rinefierd's own sons, Paul, 10, and Craig, who will be 8 on March 26, enjoy making things. One ritual the family has developed is making Valentines — some years, as many as 60 — for friends and each other.

"We make it a special night, with special food, whether it's popcorn or cookies or hot chocolate," Rinefierd said. "We try to incorporate a Bible story that talks about love and incorporate prayer at the end for people we love."

One year a neighborhood boy wanted to join in the tradition and the Rinefierds hesitated, knowing his parents were going through a divorce. In the end, "we included him and it was perfect," Rinefierd said. "He made Valentines for them both that told how much he loved them. ... It gave him some kind of peace in the middle of the whole thing."

Through the diocesan workshops, she said she has encouraged others to be as welcoming.

Noting that Rinefierd called rituals the "cement that bonds family or school or church," Mary Rita Kurycki, who attended one of the workshops, said, "I thought about that and it is really true."

"The workshop opened my eyes to recognize that things families do quite naturally are rituals," observed Kurycki, a member of St. Vincent DePaul Church, Churchville, and a marriage preparation team coordinator with her husband Robert. "It showed me things we do naturally are really important."

Kurycki said she has been so affected by this realization, she has told other people.

"I have gone to workshops on history and sacraments, but this is more real life," she said. "It is the most practically applicable stuff we have had (in recent years)."

One Kurycki family tradition is going out for dinner when the four children bring home their report cards. The four must reach a consensus on where to celebrate.

Kathy Callanan, of St. Columba/St. Patrick Church, Caledonia, also attended

a workshop and was particularly inspired by the thought, "You can work your way up."

As another mother of four, she said life is too hectic to give much thought to rituals. For now, she said, "We go to the library every Friday night as a family. ... People know if we aren't home, they know where we are."

In the summer, the family walks to the Mumford library together, with the baby in the stroller.

On Easter they attend the ecumenical sunrise service at the Caledonia golf course. Her husband Kevin used to play the trumpet for similar sunrise services, she said, and the sunrise services have become important to the children, too.

Such rituals are important and stabilizing for families, according to Tam Spitzer, associate professor of psychology at St. John Fisher College.

However, she said, "Ritual is not really a comfortable word to me. It's a word frequently tied to religion, but it doesn't have to be. If we all get a movie and sit in front of the TV and watch it, I don't know — is that a ritual?"

"The important thing to realize is that traditions, rituals, whatever word you put on it, the effect of bonding is incredibly important," she continued. "You don't throw up your hands, don't say dinner with the family is gone. Make another one!"

But, she cautioned, "They don't become rituals on a first doing. It takes time."

Spitzer also noted from personal experience that being divorced "changes the shape of a lot of holidays. ... Christmas comes around and it's horrible. Yet it's an important holiday and an important holiday for your children."

Rather than sit around "sort of looking at each other," she said, they built their own new traditions. Realizing she couldn't keep up all the holiday traditions herself, she fine-tuned the old ones. Whereas her own mother used to crank the old-fashioned grinder to make cranberry relish for the turkey, Spitzer's children take part in that and other preparations.

Traditions should change with time, she and Hall believe.

"Society changes around us," said Hall, author of the 1994 book *New Families: Revising and Creating Meaningful Bonds*. "We have to accommodate changes to survive."

That is all too true for some families. The family of Len and Denise LaCarà, of Corpus Christi Parish, check the computer to see what's new with each other. Working a late newspaper shift and long hours, Len LaCarà used to leave notes on the kitchen table for his three children. One was a congratulatory message to Peter, now 11, for a school honor and other ways he made his father proud — some families, in fact, call these notes "personal diplomas."

Now LaCarà is in Missouri, as assistant managing editor of the Springfield News-Leader, while the rest of the family remains in Irondequoit until their house is sold. They have a new tradition, according to Denise: "He e-mails them all the time."

"One time Laura (8) sent him, 'I miss you very much' and repeated about 50 very's," Denise recalled.

Meanwhile, Laura prints out all her father's e-mail messages to save. The absentee father also enjoys delightfully detailed accounts of snow forts from Andrew, 9.

Even living in the same city, getting together can be a challenge for the family of *Courier* Associate Editor Lee Strong. Because his wife, Nancy, has had to work evenings lately, the family began scheduling dinners earlier so they could all eat — and pray the "Our Father" — together.

The family also celebrates the feast days of each of the three daughters' saints. These family parties include cake, a gift such as a book with a religious theme, and a reading about the saint.

Among other rituals families have developed are:

- Setting aside one night a week to walk as a family, go out to eat or picnic.
- Posing for family portraits that reflect current activities, such as a son in his hockey jacket, or the family beside the bookcase dad built.
- Reading "good morning" books instead of bedtime stories, to fit a parent's late night work schedule.
- Using a special family cup or plate only to celebrate a particular member of the family.

Numerous other examples exist, Rinefierd noted, suggesting Susan Abel Lieberman's 1991 book, *New Traditions*, as a source.

"You can only do so much," Rinefierd stressed. "Do something that gives you life, that gives you joy."

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