

# MON

# ON THE



Christine Graves, right, prays prior to dinner Dec. 17 with friend Martha Alscheff, parents Earl and Janet, and sister Meg, left, at her Rochester home.

Story by Mike Latona • Photograph by Greg Francis

**I**t could be daily prayer before meals. Or weekly attendance at Mass. Or annual holiday activities.

No matter what form they take, family traditions are near and dear to many teens.

"They make people feel needed — like they belong somewhere," said Liana Eisenman, 13, a parishioner at St. James Church in Irondequoit.

Bill Schwarz recently learned just how highly he values a particular family ritual. Early last summer, Bill and his father attended 8 a.m. Mass at St. Joseph's Church in Livonia so that his dad could make his softball games on time. However, Bill said that his mother normally doesn't get up that early on Sundays, and went to the 9:30 a.m. Mass instead.

The arrangement quickly proved to be less than ideal, Bill said.

"We brought it up every now and then. It wasn't that great not being able to go to church together, because when we all get

busy, we don't go to as many things together," Bill explained.

Eventually, the Schwarz family solved its dilemma by attending Saturday-evening Mass at St. William's Church in Conesus. (St. William's is a mission church of St. Joseph's.)

"It was nice to have my mom there, too. It was nice to be together, not to come back from church and see my mom leaving for church," Bill remarked.

Meanwhile, Katie Juba said weekly Mass is such a strong tradition in her family that they work their other commitments around church — rather than work church around those commitments.

A typical Sunday for the Juba family finds them not only attending Mass together, but also stopping for breakfast at a nearby restaurant.

"It's a big thing with us. It's a priority; it's something we always do," said Katie, 16, from St. Lawrence Church in Greece.

Sharing dinnertime with each other is another family activity emphasized in her household, Katie said.

"You might think a lot of families eat dinner together, but they really don't," Katie said.

Christine Graves, too, believes that families must schedule extra carefully in order to preserve such traditions as family meals.

"We try to do it as often as possible — but it's not always possible," said Christine, 15, from Holy Cross Church in Rochester.

When Christine's family does gather at the table, the meal starts with a prayer.

"On the rare occasions we're all together for breakfast, we do it then, too," Christine said.

Family prayer before meals, Christine said, "gives me a sense that God is in everything we do, and should be first in our minds."

She added that this form of prayer also helps calm her down if she's having a rough day.

"Whenever I'm praying with a lot of people, I just can't be angry about anything," Christine remarked. "I always feel closer to God when we, as a family, pray."

Whereas "Bless us O Lord / And these thy gifts / Which we are about to receive / From thy bounty / Through Christ our Lord / Amen" may be the best-known meal prayer among Catholics, some families also improvise their prayers. For instance, at Sarah Vail's house, everybody has the chance to voice a prayer of thanksgiving before meals.

In fact, guests are extended this offer as well — "if they feel comfortable," said Sarah, 16, from St. Charles Borromeo Church in Greece.

Katie's family, also, opts for spontaneous prayer before meals. She said that friends are initially surprised at this less common family tradition.

"I like it. It's kind of a unique thing; it

gives us our own identity," Katie said. "It's kind of funny now. When people come over, they're prepared (to offer a prayer)."

Speaking of coming over, family gatherings and traditions are at peak level during holiday time. Shawna Donovan, for one, looks forward to visiting her aunt's house every Christmas to renew family relationships.

"Christmases are always fun — being with your family and seeing everyone again," said Shawna, 15, from St. Patrick's Church in Owego.

However, Katie noted, holiday visits and commitments can pile up quickly — so her family ensures quality time together by not overplanning for Christmas.

"We just kind of relax at holiday time. We just sit around and don't have too many people over," she said.

One of Liana's favorite Christmas customs is her family's ham dinner. The feast took on a different slant this past Christmas, she said, because her brother Shane became a vegetarian last year.

Out of respect for Shane, the family instead served a rice entree on Christmas. However, Liana also felt strongly about carrying on the family tradition.

"My mom let me have some ground-up ham. I put ketchup on it," she remarked.

Although the above examples cite religious and holiday traditions, family rituals can also include simple weekly customs. For instance, Sarah's family has established a routine where she, her parents and three younger sisters simply get together and chat once a week.

Each Sunday, Sarah said, her family holds casual meetings "to discuss what we're going to do that week, and to see if anybody's having any problems."

Sarah said she enjoys this open forum because she can talk about her struggles with schoolwork or friends — or even with her three younger sisters.

"We seem to not fight as much if we get to talk about it," Sarah said.

Bill remarked that preservation of these various rituals is an essential component of family life.

"It's basically a way of unifying the family — the more tradition you have, the closer you tend to be to each other. You don't really have a tradition if it's just one person doing it," Bill said.

"You can't imagine not doing them," Katie said. "It's such a part of you; a part of the way you were brought up."

"It gives you a sense of where you come from, and *who* you come from," Christine agreed.

"I think it makes you a better person, doing things from when you were little. It helps instill values in you," Katie added.


"If you don't have values at home, where are you going to get them?"

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