

Children learn from their parents' faith

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

At home, Nate and Theresa Kench read Bible stories and talk about Jesus with their 3-year old son, Joey, and their 2-year-old son, Danny. Each weekend, they load up the car and take their children with them when they attend Mass at Church of the Good Shepherd Parish in Henrietta.

"When we go to church we do the sign of the cross with the holy water. They enjoy giving peace to everyone, and they like holding hands for the Our Father," Theresa said, although "you don't know how much they really understand."

Shannon Loughlin, diocesan director of young adult and campus ministry, offers hope to the Kench family and other parents who are trying to raise their children in the Catholic faith. It's not important that young children understand deep theological concepts or the history of church traditions. What is important is for children to see their parents worshipping and actively living out their Catholic faith, she said.

"I think raising the awareness that everything we do speaks about our faith is important," Loughlin said. "(Being a parent) can be overwhelming. You spend a lot of time going sort of from moment to moment (without thinking of) what those moments really mean in connection with our faith."

Sister of St. Joseph Karen Dietz, diocesan coordinator of sacramental catechesis, said many adults have a habit of compartmentalizing their lives, separating their church life from their home and work lives.

"What God really calls us to do is to see everything connected. Spirituality isn't an add-on, but it's something that's part of your life," Sister Dietz said, noting that there are many ways to be "holy" in everyday life without even realizing it.

For example, she said, when parents celebrate their child's birthday, they're celebrating new life. Another way of integrating faith with everyday life would be to celebrate not only the child's birthday, but also the anniversary of the date they were baptized, she added.

Loughlin agreed that small things can have a huge impact on children. She and her husband, Sean, recently taught their 1-old daughter, Lilliana, how to make the sign of the cross. Although Lilliana probably doesn't understand the concept of the Trinity, she loves making the sign of the cross.

"It's such an experience for her to build upon for later times," Loughlin said. "My husband and I just do

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(that) automatically, and to see her really just love it and latch onto it, it brings it more to our minds."

Parents often find that teaching their children about the Catholic faith reinforces their own beliefs and helps them reconnect with their faith. It makes the beliefs new again and "you never learn something as well as when you teach it to someone else," Loughlin added.

Teaching Joey and Danny that Christmas was not merely a commercial holiday but was in fact the birthday of Jesus helped reinforce that in the minds of their parents, Kench said.

Raising a child can make it hard for parents to find time for their own prayer and reflection. New parents especially need to realize that when another new life enters into the family unit, nothing is ever the same again, Sister Dietz said. Parents will need to rely on others for support, and the church and other parents are good sources of that support, she noted.

For that reason, she and Loughlin recently made resources for an evening of reflection for new and expectant parents available to parishes in the diocese. The suggested schedule for the program includes dinner, prayer, discussion and talks about how becoming a parent changes a person's sense of self and about the spirituality of parenting — including tips on how to incorporate faith into everyday life.

At an evening such as this parents who are expecting or who already have young children have an opportunity to meet other people in similar situations, thus building a network of support within the parish. Giving parents the opportunity to talk to each other is as important as the more obvious goals of the evening, Sister Dietz said.

"I just think that it's so important to build those relationships; that's what church is all about," she added.

There can occasionally be a tendency for parents with young children to feel like they are intruding on the Mass or disturbing others if their child starts to act up. Kench said she and her husband often have to decide between taking the child out so it won't disturb others and staying inside and teaching the child to be quiet.

It's important for parents to know that there are others in the parish who are in the same situation and face the same challenges, Sister Dietz said.



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Theresa Kench, a parishioner of Church of the Good Shepherd in Henrietta, reads June 15 to her sons, 3-year-old Joey (left) and 2-year-old Danny. Kench tries to incorporate faith into the family's everyday life.

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