

Pass the potatoes, pass on faith

David Michael Thomas/CNS

As a father of seven, I see the dinner table as the "classroom" of our little household of faith. Children come to the table hungry for food, and for God and all that's associated with our life with God.

Children usually have a deep curiosity about matters of faith. The family is a perfect place for this to surface and to be respected.

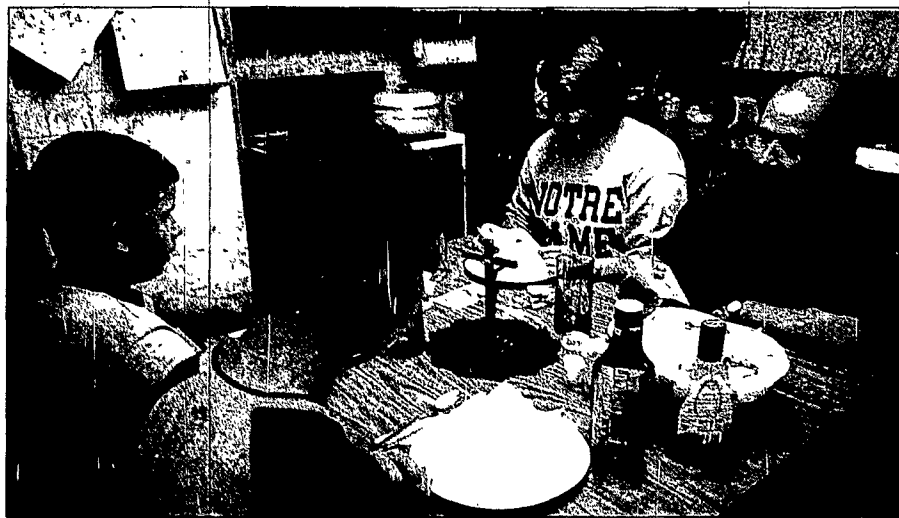
One time, our youngest son, then age 5, informed us over dinner that he was an atheist. He didn't use that word, but that was what he was driving at. As I recall, he simply asked, "How do you know there is a God?"

I had the wisdom to keep quiet while his three older brothers tore into him. And as I listened to their "conversation" and reasoning, I thought I recognized vestiges of the five proofs for the existence of God as formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas. One was simply: "Who do you think created the world? Boy, Tim, are you dumb!"

That evening I learned that parents don't always have to be the "answer people" or even the main speakers. Let the children speak. Allow the dynamics of the family to work their magic.

When parents find themselves lecturing, I suspect they already have lost their influence. Family conversation is best when it is informal, when it involves give-and-take and listening, and when it is honest and never-ending.

Quite recently our 12-year-old



Karen Callaway/CNS

Karen and Glen Mis of Whiting, Ind., lead their children, Justin and Jeff, in a prayer for vocations before the start of dinner.

daughter asked about angels and devils and hell. First, my wife and I sought to learn if there was a question behind the question, such as, "Is so and so in hell?" Or, "Do I have to worry about devils?" Or "What's a guardian angel?"

It turned out she was asking about people like Saddam Hussein, about whom she'd read in a newspaper. So we talked about creation and free will, good and evil, covering quite a bit of theological ground.

This points to another benefit of religious table talk: It can range far and wide, and you don't even have to force it. It flows quite naturally.

When the family creates a climate of openness, very little needs to be done to create conversations like

these. And it's quite acceptable for parents to say they don't know about this or that. Let's all learn together.

The family is where children learn the social virtues of respect, compassion and forgiveness. It also is where the faith is first communicated and even taught.

Many good books explain the basics of our faith. Of course, the "method of learning" scribed here presumes that families gather for a meal now and then, though studies indicate this is on the decline.

Is there an alternative? You bet. The car!

Thomas is the general editor for Catechetical and Family Life Publications, Benziger Publishing, Woodland Hills, Calif.

Faith Alive!

This month's adult-education package notes that many adults pursue their own faith formation in order to participate more fully in the faith formation of their children. Undoubtedly the home — the domestic church — is where they do this best.

Food for Thought

Often parents are astounded — other times confounded — by questions children raise and conversations they initiate about faith. Baffling, perplexing questions are the child's expertise!

With that in mind, consider the approach of Karen Henry of Oregon City, Ore., who has five children ages 16 to 25:

"I found the best way to share our faith is to ask ... what they think, then what they think the church teaches, then go from there. I am very careful to listen closely and answer truthfully.

"When I don't know what the church teaches I admit that, then we look in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and talk about what we read. We've had some really interesting discussions! I've learned from them as well as the other way around.

"So many parents and other adults don't listen, they just talk. Adults don't like 'conversations' like that and neither do children."

Faith in the Marketplace

Earlier this year, Faith Alive! posed this question to readers around the country: What approach worked for you in sharing faith with children and teens at home?

Selected reader responses:

"I think example is the best. If you're not living the faith, you can't teach it." — Gerry Buckley, Bethany, Del.

"My husband and I focused on two things ... We kept our teaching age appropriate, and we kept it honest." — Judy Michaud, Frenchville, Maine

"For me, it's by saying our Catholic devotions at home such as praying the rosary, grace at meals and nighttime prayer before bed." — Steven Woodbury, Rio Rancho, N.M.

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Discover God at work in your home

Father David K. O'Rourke, OP/CNS

We don't have to bring God into our families. We couldn't keep God out even if we tried.

The challenge is to learn how, when and where God already is at work in our families.

For that we may need to shift gears because so many have become accustomed to separating life from religion. We think of religion as something that takes place in church. Formal, public worship does take place in church. But living out our faith, or lack of faith, is something we do all the time and everywhere. For most of us the principal setting for this is the family.

Church teachings speak of the family as a domestic church or a house church. The reason for that has to do with the sacraments. Living out our faith means living out the sacraments. And the sacraments are

interwoven with family life.

Baptism, first Communion, marriage and caring for the sick are all family realities. They are connected with life events that take place in the family, from birth and growing up to getting married and growing old. But they are more than just life events. They are acts of faith in the goodness of life itself.

I have friends who take the idea that the family is a domestic church very seriously. Bill says, "Being our own family church doesn't mean that, together, we do 'churchy' things," as he puts it. "It means that we do human things, and (it means) seeing how good life can be."

As pastor I celebrate such rites as baptism and marriage. Recently, after a baptism, I went to the family's home for the customary celebration with all the clan. These family gatherings are a lot of fun and really great get-togethers. But I think they

are much more. They are genuinely religious events as well.

These events are religious because they are celebrations of life and acts of faith in the future. Catholics believe that God is a God of the living. And it is so often in our families that we see that great gift of life close up — in all its fun as well as its seemingly unending challenges.

Learning to see how God is at work in our families is learning about faith. This helps us to hang in there, giving us the courage to meet challenges and showing us how good it is to have people to love.

Faith is at work in our domestic church when we're figuring out how all this comes together and what we can do to keep it going.

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