

# **Living the Faith: Ideas for Catholic Families**

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## **Part I: Family Module**

### Foreword

*The family is the domestic Church.*

*-Lumen Gentium*

When we think about the Catholic family, the first thing that might come to mind is an image of a well-dressed family sitting in a pew or praying at the table. However, being a Catholic family is much deeper than that. To be a Catholic family is to center family life around God, to allow Him into your home and your life - as individuals and as a family - and let Him take the lead. It means to keep God as part of the relationship between husband and wife and passing on that relationship to your children. It means teaching your children the Faith, not always by textbook or school program, but by living out our Catholic faith in daily life and setting an example for your children to follow.

Children, especially young children, learn better by example. Witnessing their parents in their daily life gives them a template on how to live out their own daily lives. For this reason, Catholic families should have a Catholic culture, so that children can start learning how to live their faith long before they sign up for their first faith formation class at the parish. Parents are the first teachers of their children, after all, so it makes sense that they should be the first to pass on the practice of faith to them. When parents live Catholic lives, they pass on that way of living to their children who come to see Catholic living as a natural part of their life.

And herein lies the purpose of this Family Module.

This resource provides suggested activities and ideas for how to strengthen Catholic culture in the home. All these activities are for the purpose of cultivating Catholic family values in both a spiritual sense and a practical sense, teaching the children by passing on the Catholic faith through little acts. This is not a list of required activities. Rather, look at it as a group of suggestions to pick and choose from, depending on what your family is comfortable with. It should also be mentioned that these activities are not meant to be followed to the finest detail. They may be tweaked and changed to help suit your family's culture and situation. Not all these ideas will work for your family. Feel free to be creative!

## **Praying as a Family**

Prayer is an essential part of Catholic life. It is the way by which we speak with God. For all the faithful prayer is a necessary part of life, as it is through prayer that our relationship with God is established, maintained, and enriched. Like any other relationship, we need to talk to and listen God if we are to have a real relationship with Him.

As Catholics, we have many different styles and ways of prayer. One way to look at it is to divide prayer into two methods: personal prayer, which is the one on one dialogue with God, and common prayer, which is the prayer of many people coming together in a community. The family is the most basic community, and so part of our prayer life must be to pray as a family, just as a part of it is for us to come together for Mass.

A good family is one that spends time together. For us Catholics, one member of that family is Jesus. We are a part of His family, and He is a part of our family, so we should make sure to set aside time where He is the center of attention. When a family prays together, not only are the children learning how to pray, they also are learning from a young age to see Jesus as a part of their daily life and carry that into their futures. This is incredibly important today, because it creates a good foundation for a relationship with God later in their growth so that they do not leave Him behind later in life.

Every family should set some time aside for prayer as a family, but what does that look like? Well, that depends on the family. Parents should discern what type of prayer life they want as a family. Luckily, the Church is full of different prayers and prayer styles to suit each person, family, and culture. Here are just a few.

- **Family Rosary** – A more traditional family prayer is to say a rosary together, with each member of the family taking turns leading a decade. The rosary itself provides many graces to those who pray it, and it is a wonderful devotion to pass on to children. In addition, since the rosary is comprised of a number of prayers, it can become a good way to teach kids some of the cornerstone prayers of the Church, including the Sign of the Cross, Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, the Apostles Creed, and the Hail Holy Queen.
- **Bedtime Prayer** – Have you even seen a movie or picture with a child kneeling at the foot of their bed saying their prayers? Well, that does not just exist in movies. Praying before bed is one of those smaller ways to keep God in a child's daily life. It can be simple and quick, a little last-minute reminder before sleep. This is a good way to teach your kids how to pray. You can teach them how to thank God for their day and all the good things in it, how to pray for other people, some of the common prayers of the Church, like the Hail Mary or Our Father, by praying it together with them. Younger children have good memories, and as you recite something again and again, they will soon pick it up and start praying it with you. This is another good way to slowly introduce the prayers of the Church to children; not by making them actively memorize it, but by praying it with them. Do not force them to recite it, but be patient and let them learn it naturally, at their own pace.

- Prayer Roundtable – If you want something formal, but not too formal, one idea is to have the family gather at a usual time for a family conversation with God. This can give everyone a chance to talk to God while gathered. Parents should lead by example and be the first to talk to God, giving thanks for all the blessings they have received and asking God’s help for whatever they need. Then, parents turn to their children and ask them, “Do you have anything you want to pray about? Anything your thankful for? Anything you want to ask God?” This can take as much time as you like or as little time, just make sure you give everyone a chance to speak. As an aside, this also could help parents understand what is going on in your child’s life.
- Praying with Music – There are scores of good Christian music readily available, and it might be nice for the kids to experience God through song. This is a kind of prayer that does not need a lot of talking, because it can be about the music. The goal of this practice is simply to get everyone into a more spiritual attitude.
- Prayerful Quiet – This one, admittedly, is a little difficult for a lot of young children, but it can be the most rewarding. Our days are filled with noise and excitement, with little opportunity to slow down and just breathe. Silence can be a way to feel God’s presence by its sense of calm. If your children can spend even a minute in quiet, it will work wonders for them. No words. No sound. Just God.
- The Lord’s Prayer – One of the earliest prayer traditions of the Church is to say the Our Father together three times a day: morning, at Mass, and evening. For families, this simple prayer can be how the family begins and ends their day together, by reciting the Our Father together. This prayer is head and shoulders above other prayers because the prayer was given to us by Jesus Himself. When we pray the Our Father, we are praying the way Jesus taught us.

### Home Altar/Shrine/Prayer Space



As Catholics, God has a place in our lives, so it makes sense for Him to have a place in our homes. Set aside a place in your home where Jesus is the main focus; a small table or a shelf is all you need, set it up with a crucifix and some other appropriate items that you might have, such as a statue of Mary, any prayer cards, your favorite rosary, a bible, some candles, or pictures of loved ones who have gone to their reward. Every family should have a little shrine because God is present in every family.

What makes this shrine so valuable is that it is not meant to be only for stagnant decoration. It is a living altar, changing with the year, reflecting the larger Church's changes throughout the liturgical year. With each liturgical season, this home altar can be rearranged to reflect the new season, and the children can help redecorate it, learning about the holidays and seasons of the liturgical year as they do. As Advent begins, the Advent wreath can be placed there and lit when the family comes together for prayer. At Christmas, decorate it with a festive look, nativity scene, and a new white candle for the birth of Jesus. During Lent, the altar can be accented with purple cloth and draped crucifix, while Easter brings with it a white cloth, flowers and a look of celebration. Make it a family tradition to decorate the shrine, just as you would decorate a Christmas tree together.

This shrine can be the place where the family gathers to pray together. Do not hide the altar away and forget about it but make it a part of your family's spiritual life. If you decide to have your family come together for a rosary, a prayer round table, or even just the Our Father, this shrine would be the perfect place to make that happen.

## **Bible Stories**



Every child grows up with stories. Catholics have stories too, but ours are not fairy tales or legends. They are the events of scripture, our history passed on from generation to generation, like all great stories. Parents can easily pass on key stories of scripture to their children so that they know some of the key events in our history, giving them a foundation for scripture that they can have as they learn more about their faith later on. This is like any other story time, but with a Catholic flavor.

Not all books in the bible may be appropriate for young children. Some books, such as Numbers and Leviticus, are more like instruction manuals, which may have little appeal to kids. Some stories however, are perfect, such as Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, the story of Abraham from the Book of Genesis, the story of Moses in the Book of Exodus, David in the Book of Kings, and of course, the Four Gospels and the Acts of Apostles. Children should especially learn about Jesus and His ministry early in their life.

As the kids get older, parents can ask them what they thought about the story or what they believe God is trying to say to them. When a parent asks this, they are teaching their children

how to reflect on scripture, which can create a good habit for them to use when they turn to God and need to hear Him speak through the Word.

Reading the stories straight out of your bible is not the only way to share these stories. There are animated features and movies available out there that depict different stories from the bible. There are also picture books and even pop-up books with a biblical theme that parents could read with their children at bedtime. Find out what works best for your children.

## **Family Meal**

Eating together with the family daily has a great number of benefits spiritually, psychologically, and relationally. In fact, it is not beyond reason to say that the family meal is a key event of the day. Looking at it from a Catholic perspective, if the family is the domestic church, then the dining table is the domestic altar. Just like at our parish church, we gather around this domestic altar as a family, we bond together in the presence of God, and partake of His gifts. The dining table is a place of spiritual, relational, and even psychological value.

Most of us have a good idea of what a family meal should look like, but there are many layers of meaning in the actions of a meal, and they deserve to be known well. The meal is a fruit of our labor, and it takes time and effort to prepare before the family sits down to eat. Even the children can take part by setting the table. Once everything is ready, the family gathers around the table to begin eating, but before everyone digs in, we should first acknowledge our God who provided us with all our blessings, including the food which we are about to receive. As stated before, God is a part of our family, so we should include Him in the family meal. After we have given thanks through prayer, the time has come not only for us to eat, but to bond as a family.

Many families today do not have much time to spend together because of work and other obligations that family members cannot get out of, which just raises the importance of the conversation at family meals. No television or phones should be used during these meals, just family conversation. At the end of the meal, the family works once again to clear the table and clean the kitchen and dishes, but not before again acknowledging God with a word of thanks to end the meal. The family meal is a simple daily ritual of social family time, but the fruits of this action are beyond count.

Parents can use the time spent at the table to help understand what is going on in their children's lives. Asking, "how was your day," or "what's new at school," can give parents insight into the parts of their child's lives that they do not see. It is also good for all the members of the family to be themselves around each other, to experience some small bit of family time, even when there is no other opportunity. It also shows the children that they are worth their parents' attention, that mom and dad are not too busy for them.

The family meal is also a time of learning for children, especially younger children who have yet to make meaningful relationships outside of the family. Since children learn by watching, it is important that the parents act in the way they want their children to act at the dining table, teaching them polite and clean eating habits. These small habits can help grow a sense of good

attitude in kids. As they get older, kids can learn to help in preparing and cleaning up, teaching them to do their part and share responsibility. All these things are sanctifying parts of family life. They are not simply chores or scheduled activities, they have a dignity to them, a value in their being done.

### **Family Game Night**



Not everything on this list has an actively Catholic theme to it. Some, such as this one, are Catholic in that it is a tool to strengthen relationships within the family. It is important for Catholic families to come together just to have fun. Catholic culture is not an always serious, solemn kind of mindset. It is fun, festive, and happy. It is in this culture that relationships thrive as happy memories are made over a good-natured competitive time.

Kids need to have fun, but their entertainment should not be done in total isolation. Instead, fun should happen together. God created us as communal beings, meaning that we are not meant to be alone. People are naturally happy around other people. Therefore, whether it be occasionally, once a week, or every night, the family should share in each other's fun. In the past, this often took place over a deck of cards or a board game, and while those are still good choices, there have come about new ways to play together in recent years, such as certain multiplayer videogames, so long as they are child-friendly. Family sports is another good option, especially for parents with very energetic children.

This coming together for fun strengthens the bonds of family because it helps diversify the ways family members interact with each other. Sharing laughs and enjoying each other's company is a practice of love. It is good for a healthy soul because a happy family that spends its time together reflects Heaven itself, where the family of God is gathered in eternal joy and happiness. Part of our lives as Catholics is to live our lives as citizens of heaven. That is how we know that a happy family is a Catholic family.

### **Arts and Crafts**

Quite like the last one, gathering the family together for arts and crafts is another way to be with each other. It allows children to use their imagination. It stretches their creative minds and come into their own, making what they want at their own pace, which is a nice change from the systematic life many people have today.

Even if done occasionally, arts and crafts can be memorable. One suggestion is to make it part of your family's Christmas tradition. Every year, just as you decorate your house and put up your

Christmas tree, have the family each make a handmade ornament. As the years go by, you will have keepsakes from every year, making the Christmas tree a kind of time capsule of your family.

### **Celebrating Your Child's Baptism Day**



We all know how birthdays work. Cake, presents, and parents thinking back to that first time you held your child in your arms. Yes, we have a lot of fun when we celebrate the day of our birth. What about the day we became God's child?

The day of our baptism is of great significance for us. It is the day when our soul was washed clean and we were adopted by God. Such a day deserves to be celebrated. The manner of celebrating this day can be whatever you want. It can be like a second birthday or it could be something simple like just having a cake, but it should be acknowledged with something special.

Celebrating your baptism day is another way to deepen your connection to the reality of heaven. One of the great weaknesses that people have is that we often think in terms of the earthly life while heaven is an afterthought. When we celebrate our baptismal rebirth, when we were made citizens of heaven, we remind ourselves that heaven is real and that we desire to be there after our death in this passing world. By no means should a baptism day replace a birthday, but rather it should add to our reasons to come together and celebrate. After all, it is an important day to remember.

### **Being an Active Parishioner**



Family is important, and there is more to family than being in the same household. For Catholics, our family includes all baptized men and women, whom we call our brothers and sisters, with our one Father in heaven. If we have this mindset, we can see that our parish is like our extended family and should take the opportunity to meet some of our baptized brothers and sisters, coming to know them as more than just fellow worshippers.

We are called to form real friendships with our fellow Catholics and be an active member of our parish community, even if only to socialize and pray together. In an ideal parish community, the members can rely on each other for help, advice, and opportunity, and this especially applies to young families. Parents can meet other parents and exchange parenting ideas and experiences, comparing parenting approaches and ideas on how to integrate faith at home. For children, it is an opportunity to make friends with other Catholic children. This can lead to long term faith-based friendships, some of which could last long after they grow up into the next generation. Parish friendships can also be an avenue of support of people when times get hard, as all Catholics are called to assist one another in our various needs. See your parish community as your family, be there for them, and let them be there for you. Let your parish be your second home and raise your kids within its walls made from living stones. A parish church is not only the building where people pray together. It is an entire community of people and families that share the same faith in Christ. You have heard the phrase, “It takes a village to raise a child,” well the parish is your village, and families should always be able to find support in their parishes.

### **Celebrating the Lord’s Day to Its Fullest**



On Sunday, we recall and celebrate the Lord’s resurrection. For many, this means going to Mass and then maybe brunch at a nearby restaurant. As Catholics who like to celebrate, Sunday should be a much bigger deal. Within this one idea, there are several good, suggested practices to choose from, even if not all of them will work for your family. Regardless, what matters is that Sunday is meant to be a day set aside for God. That means that the whole day, not just the hour that we are at Mass, should be spent with God in mind and heart. Families should be aware that God is pleased when he sees families together and happy, especially on His day. Sundays should be special for families. Many of the practices already mentioned are especially appropriate for Sundays, especially for families that cannot spend much time together otherwise, but there are also practices which are meant for celebrating Sunday specifically. These practices focus on enriching families spiritually on Sunday, which should be the goal for all Christians on the Sabbath. Here are a few suggestions of ways to enrich your Sunday experience as a family.

- **Attend Mass Together as a Family** – Let us start with the basics. Attending Mass on Sunday is an obligation for normal Catholics. Yet, it is far more than that. Yes, it is an obligation, but it is also a privilege. When we participate in the Mass, we receive countless graces and blessings from this Divine Liturgy as we stand in the very presence of God. See the Mass not

as something we “must” do, but rather as something we “get to” do. See the Mass for what it is:

- A chance to worship God in His very presence
- A coming together of the whole Catholic community
- A recharging of our spiritual batteries
- A participation in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus
- A proclamation and teaching of the Word
- A meal of the Body and Blood of Jesus
- A recommissioning to spread the Gospel

Families are called not to attend Mass only as individuals, but together. They pray together. They listen to the Word together. They adore the Lord in the Eucharist together. They are commissioned to announce the Gospel together. If it is at all possible, families should attend Mass together, even extended family if they can. Remember that Jesus told His disciples to let the children come to Him and do not stop them. Jesus loves to see families with children in His house

- Have a Sunday Attire – We are not talking about a three-piece suit or ballroom dress, but it is a good idea to have something set aside for wearing to Mass. If we know what the Mass is, we know that when we are there, we are in the presence of Christ, who is the King of kings and Savior of the world. It is a good habit to have something special for when we go to see God. It is not mandated, and it does not have to be an expensive project, but it sends a good message to children to wear something special for Mass. Having a “Sunday Best” is a good way to teach children about how important God and church is. When your children ask why they must wear a button up shirt, you can simply say that visiting Jesus is worth dressing up a little.
- Rest on the Day of Rest – It remains a part of our Catholic tradition to rest on the Sabbath and to avoid any *unnecessary* work on this day. It is important to qualify that it is not a sin to do necessary work that cannot be put off for later. However, we are called to set aside the Lord’s day to slow down and quiet ourselves, to reflect on life, love, and most importantly, God. For Catholic families, this is a day to express the value of the Sabbath through one another. A good Christian is someone who lives his or her life for others, and what better place to accomplish that than within a family? Take time on Sunday to simply be with your spouse and children in whatever way you wish. Remember, it is not that you are *doing* something, but that you are *being* with someone, namely your family.
- Limit Electronic Entertainment – Sunday is a day set aside to refocus rather than lose focus. On Sunday, we return our main attention to God after spending a week with so many other things on our mind. The purpose of having a Sabbath is to refocus and strengthen our Faith and relationship with God, so we should work to limit our distractions, but without it turning into a chore. A good middle ground to consider would be to limit or even remove the amount of time spent on television and social media. Instead, focus on the reality in front of you, especially God and your family. Sunday is a day to focus on what matters.
- Sunday Dinner – The importance of a family meal has already been emphasized, but the importance of a family meal for Sunday is only magnified. Sunday dinner should be a big

deal for the family. It should be a feast to close out the celebration of Sunday, with something a little extra. If you have extended family in the area, such as grandparents, invite them over to join for dinner. Extended family should always remain close and try to visit often, because family is not limited to the people under the same roof. The relationships within a family should never grow stale either, so make sure to get together often.

- Appreciate the Home You Have Built – When God created the universe, He rested on the seventh day. He did not rest because he was tired. He is God, after all. He rested because he wanted to look at all His creation and behold the world He had made. When a husband and wife come together, they become cooperators in God’s creation as they bring forth new life in the world. This is how families come into being. Parents, you built your family, your household, your home. Take time to adore the family you have built, look upon it with love, just as God looks upon us, His creation.

## **Parish Module**

### Foreword

The parish can be likened to one big family. Throughout the liturgy, we address each other as brothers and sisters, and for good reason: we all belong to the same Catholic family. Within the larger Catholic family, the Church consists of many parish families who come together in common worship, and within those parish families are many families who live and grow together. Those families are the focus of this module.

Families are the life of a parish. The children of these families can become the future generations of the parish. One of the calls of parishes is to support these families by providing for them not only sacraments and catechesis, but also a community that they can be a part of. Families should see the parish as a second home. It only follows that a parish should build up its community to be bound together as a family, with ways for families to feel welcome in their parish and participate in its life. The community life of the parish should be rich and busy, giving parents and children many opportunities to feel at home and comfortable around their Catholic brothers and sisters.

This module is meant as a tool for parishes to create a family friendly community. What follows is a handful of possible ideas to grow the community, not necessarily in size, but in closeness. Some of these ideas are aimed directly at families and their needs that the parish can provide, while others are geared toward the community as a whole, including families. Every parish is different, so while not every one of these ideas could work out for your particular parish’s circumstances, the hope is that some will. Also keep in mind that these ideas are not meant to be step-by-step instructions, but rather suggested practices that can be changed as circumstances dictate. Feel free to experiment and expand these ideas and shape them to your parish needs. Keep in mind that the goal of all of this is to strengthen the parish’s relationship with the families within the community.

The module is divided into three sections: items recommended to be done weekly or monthly, items that can be done less often and at any time, and items that can be done annually in relation to specific feasts and occasions.

### Weekly/Monthly

#### **Fellowship**

The Sunday experience at a parish should extend beyond worship. If you look at a typical parish, it is not unusual for Mass to conclude with a mad rush out of the church doors with everyone flooding outside just to get to their cars and be the first one out of the parking lot. Why the rush? Why not stay a while and enjoy each other's company? After all, should we not get to know each other as brothers and sisters?

Encourage your parishioners to stay behind and get to know each other. Parishioners are diverse in their cultural backgrounds and walks of life, but they are united in their Faith. Bring the worshippers together into a community of friends and family where people can socialize with each other and form friendships, whether they are businessmen, retirees, or the kids running around on the grass. Make the parish a close-knit family, knowing each other not only by which pew they sit in, but by who they are on a personal level. Open your parish hall and lay out some donuts and coffee, and let your parishioners do the rest. A parish should be a second home, and what is a second home without food? Let the glory and joy of Sunday Mass spill over into people's time together. This can even work as a way for parents to occupy themselves while their children are in CCD class.

The important thing about this approach to fellowship is that it must become part of the norm; it cannot be an occasional event. The parishioners should come to expect a social opportunity as part of their Sunday experience if it is to take root in the parish. For this kind of fellowship, the more the merrier. Yes, it will cost money for the food and drink, but it is worth the cost. Post-Mass fellowship can act as a comfortable and friendly place not only for devout parishioners, but also for guests and those coming to Mass for the first time. All in all, just allowing time for social activity after Mass can bring abundant blessings.

#### **Lay-led Social Groups**



There are so

many parochial groups led by the laity, and most parishes have some. These small groups can help people find a place in the parish that lines up with their strengths and preferences. A parish can never have too many small groups, especially with the rich diversity of our parishes these days. There are groups for youths, young adults, married couples, parents, older generations, different cultures, men, women, etc. The parish should make use of as many of these groups and programs as they can. Everyone in the parish should be able to find a group that they can be a part of, so the pastor should strive to create groups for every kind of parishioner. The pastor does not need to be too involved, depending on the program, he only needs to get the ball rolling, find good leaders for these groups, and show support on occasion.

The purposes of these groups vary, some have a catechetical charism, some are more organizational, and some are more spiritual. Regardless, a good group should include a social aspect because of the important role of community in the life of the parish. Parishes should be places where people come together to enjoy each other's company as well as to deepen their faith. These small groups offer a social environment that is less crowded, allowing people to bond with others with similar age, culture, or interests.

Another benefit of these groups is that they can further the ministry of the parish. Different groups have different gifts that they can offer, whether it be community service, financial support, spiritual charism, or assistance in a specific ministry. Having such groups allows the pastor a way of getting people together to help build the parish up.

Some groups to consider:

- EPIC
- Life Teen
- Team Edge
- Knights of Columbus
- Women of Grace Ministries
- That Man is You
- Legion of Mary

Not all groups need to have a program. Some can simply be a gathering of people. Feel free to start your own local group.

## **Support Groups**

In addition to social groups where people gather to enjoy each other's company, there are also groups that come together to help each other through the trials of life. People need support when they encounter new experiences, stress, and struggles. Because of the rich diversity of people in a parish, we can often find those who can help their fellow parishioners carry different crosses they may be bearing.

Churches are places where many people go when they cannot find the answers they are looking for. Sometimes, priests have the answers, sometimes they do not. If they do not, there might be some others in the parish who can help. Who could give advice on parenting better than a parent? Who could help a mother cope with the loss of her child better than a woman who when through the same tragedy? Addicts, grieving spouses, and any who have experienced hardship can find support from someone, and the parish can be the place where such people meet.

An especially good support group to have would be a group for parents. Parents deal with all kinds of problems, from behavioral to financial. Parents should be able to come together as a group and compare ideas and parenting strategies.

## **Journey Partners**



Support can also happen one on one. People need someone who can guide them through the hardships of life and give them advice on a more personal level than a group. The idea here is to have people available for others who know about the different aspects of life and can give advice on such things on an individual level.

There are a few different ways to present these folks who journey with you through life. One way is to have a group dedicated to meeting and pairing up people based on the guidance that they need. Another way is to simply have volunteers after Mass who are available to pray with people that need someone to pray with them. The clergy of the parish should, of course, make themselves available to offer advice, but there are also many qualified lay people who can assist in this ministry. It does not even need to concern tragedy. Sometimes, an experienced father or mother can offer advice and guidance to a new parent. Sometimes a parent is having trouble with his teenager and they need someone who has experience with that rebellious stage to help them figure out how to overcome whatever obstacles might exist. Life is complicated, and the parish can be the place people find others who can help them sort it all out.

## Once in a While

### **Date Night for Parents**

Parenting is a full-time vocation without any days off or vacations. Parents make a lot of sacrifices in order to be good parents, including the time they would spend with each other. There are different ways parents try to make time for each other, such as having the grandparents or babysitter watch the kids while the parents enjoy a dinner to themselves. This need for parents to have a night or even a meal to themselves is something the parish can accommodate.

For parents to have a date night, they will need to find someone to watch their kids. Once the kids are taken care of, they will need to find a venue to eat at. A parish can provide both. Set up a restaurant-like area in the hall, with tables set up for two. Cater it either with a simple buffet style or something more elaborate, depending on how much work you can give to volunteers. Give each couple some space to just be with each other. No speeches, no appeals, just a place where couples can enjoy each other's company. In a separate area, host a place where the parents can have their kids play while they have dinner. Feed the kids with something they will like and have volunteers who can safely watch them and take care of them for a couple of hours. Keep them entertained, maybe with a movie or some games. Have someone who is experienced with a large group of kids to oversee this part of the event, perhaps a preschool teacher. The idea is to entertain the kids while their parents can enjoy themselves in the next room or across the hall.

When parents need a break, they often turn to relatives to watch their kids while they are out. Through this ministry, a parish is letting the family know that they are here to help them, that they are family, that the parish is more than just a Sunday affair. This ministry can help families in several ways. It helps couples spend time with each other to keep their relationship strong, while keeping their children close by in case they want to check on them. It provides children a chance to be with other children in the parish and make friends. It can even be a time to teach children a little bit about the faith by showing them a Christian movie or biblical cartoon. Most importantly, it provides some small support for families, something which is always in demand.

### **Bring a friend to Church Day**

A tool sometimes used to bring new blood into a parish is to task the parishioners to bring one unchurched friend with them the following week. It is recommended to do this in conjunction with post-Mass fellowship because it allows these newcomers to experience not only worship, but community as well.

With families in mind, this approach can address another issue. An average survey of a diocesan parish will tell you that there is a much higher population of women attending Mass than there are men. Some surveys are as high as a 2:1 ratio, women versus men. Sadly, many wives are attending Mass without their husbands. Encourage your parishioners to bring their families to Mass with them. Wives, bring your husbands. Parents, bring your children. Grandparents, bring everyone. Make Mass more family oriented by letting it be known that families, even extended families, should come to Mass together.

## Movie Night

When a parish has an event, one of the purposes should always be to build community. Various meetings and conferences, as important as those are to the life of the parish, do little to inspire community by themselves. There should be events that are geared towards building up the life of the community by encouraging their presence, even if they are not doing much. People are busy, especially young families, and what they often need is a break from working. A movie night is a great way to bring families together without that much effort for either the parish or the family.

All that is needed is an area large enough, a projector, sound system, and enough snacks for everyone. Parents bring their children and their lawn chairs and have a nice evening. All this event tries to accomplish is to provide for families, to make them feel at home, to get them to see their parish as more than just the Sunday experience. The more events like this that we can provide to young families, the more opportunities we have to allow these families to see the value of their parish community. This feel of community will lead to more participation from these families in the parish life, which will help the parish thrive.

## All-Church Picnic



Many ideas in this module have two common themes: social activity and food. They do not have much in the way of agenda or presentation, no long lectures or appeals, just enjoying the company of our brothers and sister. This idea takes things outside, with the Feeding of the Five Thousand as our inspiration. No preaching or multiplication of loaves and fishes here, but there is certainly a coming together of believers to be fed. It requires almost no preparation aside from food, only an open area to have it in. Have families come together and just enjoy themselves outside, having fun with each other and with the other families in the parish.

## Parish Potluck



Got something to celebrate? New priest? New deacon? New staff member? Oldest parishioner's birthday? School getting out? Church got painted? Whatever reason you have to celebrate, do so with food. Instead of having a catered meal in your hall, have the families of the parish chip in a dish here and there. With such a diverse group of people in

your parish, there is sure to be a variety of delicious foods for anyone's preferences. Like other ideas in this list, having a potluck is all about providing opportunities for the parishioners to come together. It also has the added bonus of sharing each other's cooking as well as their company, and people can always bond over food. Look for any excuse to get your parish together for a potluck and get together.

### Once a Year

#### **Various Blessings Associated with Memorials or Feasts**

Many parishes bless those with birthdays and anniversaries each month, and most have a special blessing for mothers on Mother's Day and fathers on Father's Day. Since there are patron saints of different things and people, why not also bless these things or people on the corresponding feast day. These are but some ways parishes can enrich feasts and memorials by adding a unique blessing, prayer, or intention to that day.

- Blessing of Navy and Coast Guard Sailors and Veterans on the Memorial of Elizabeth Ann Seton (Jan 4)
- Blessing of Teachers on the Memorial of Thomas Aquinas (Jan 28)
- Blessing of Candles on the Feast of the Presentation (Feb 2)
- Blessing of Nurses on the Memorial of St. Agatha (Feb 5)
- Blessing of Bread and other foods on the Feast of St. Joseph (Mar 19)
  - This food can either be for the parishioners to take home or for the poor
- Blessing of Computers on the Memorial of St. Isidore (April 4)
- Blessing of Tools on the Memorial of St. Joseph the Worker (May 1)
- Blessing of Civil Servants on the Memorial of St. Thomas More (June 22)
- Blessing of Plants on the Memorial of St. Kateri Tekakwitha (July 14)
- Blessing of Army and Marine Soldiers and Veterans on the Memorial of St. Ignatius of Loyola (July 31)
- Blessing of Cooking Equipment on the Feast of St. Lawrence (Aug 10)
- Blessing of Airforce Airmen and Veterans on the Memorial of St. Joseph of Cupertino (Sep 18)
- Blessing of Doctors on the Memorial of Sts. Cosmos and Damian (Sep 26)
- Blessing of Volunteers on the Memorial of St. Vincent de Paul (Sep 27)
- Blessing of Phones on the Feast of Sts. Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael (Sep 29)
- Blessing of Books on the Memorial of St. Jerome (Sep 30)
- Blessing of Pets on the Memorial of St. Francis (Oct 4)
- Blessing of Children on the Memorial of St. Jude (Oct 28)
- Blessing of Catechists on the Memorial of St. Charles Borromeo (Nov 4)
- Blessing of Musical Instruments on the Memorial of St. Cecilia (Nov 22)

There are many more. A good rule of thumb is to bless whatever the saint is the patron saint of.

## **Halloween at the Parish**

One of the great neighborhood pastimes of childhood is to dress up in costume and walk through the neighborhood, knocking on doors to get some candy. This is how American children have celebrated the vigil for All Saint's Day for generations, even if the connection to All Saints Day has been almost entirely lost. Unfortunately, there are a lot of neighborhoods where it is not so safe to go knocking door to door anymore. Kids should have a safe alternative.

Why not host a Halloween party at the parish? This brings a lot of possibilities for fun for kids, while parents can rest assured that their kids will not knock on the wrong house. It may not be the most traditional Halloween event, but it can still have some common themes. For example, if your church has a well-lit parking lot, you can get parents to line their cars up, decorate the backs and trunks of their cars in a Halloween theme, set tables up to place the candy on, and have the kids go trick-or-treat from car to car.

Your Halloween party does not have to only be about trick-or-treating, it can also be a fun party for all the costume-clad kids. Since we are celebrating All Saints' Day, make it a big celebration. Have some cake and other foods. Have a costume contest where the kids dress up as saints. Maybe a pumpkin carving contest for families to compete in together. Make it a great big parish event with lots of activities and fun. The goal of these Halloween ideas is to be another opportunity to get families interested in parish life by providing them a safe and fun evening.



## **Thanksgiving Feast**

Thanksgiving is traditionally a time to spend with family and be thankful for the many gifts God gives us while also enjoying some of those wonderful gifts. But what about those who cannot spend it with their families, or those who cannot afford a turkey dinner, or those who just do not want to cook? If the parish has the means, it can provide a great feast that fits the day.

It does not have to be catered. Part of the tradition of the Thanksgiving Day meal is that it be home cooked. Get two or three parishioners who are interested to each donate a cooked turkey to the dinner. It can be a semi-potluck, where willing people or families can volunteer to bring a big dish to share with the wider community. This meal can be tied to the Thanksgiving Mass, like a reception or fellowship, but on a whole other level. If we view our parish as a family, then it is only natural that the parish family should have Thanksgiving together.



### **St. Nick visiting on Christmas**

We have all seen Santa Claus in our local malls taking pictures with kids and asking them what they want for Christmas. Doesn't it seem right that St. Nicolaus would be more at home at a Catholic church than a mall? Why not have him visit with the kids after Christmas Eve Mass, especially if your parish has a Children's Mass.

Have a setup like what you might find at a mall, but with a few changes to accurately depict the saintly bishop. Have a nice photography area so parents can take pictures, or even a designated photographer and picture printing station. Find a nice jolly man who can play the part and wear a nice white beard, but instead of a sleigh, find a nice cathedra-like chair for him to sit in and

instead of a red suit, dress him like a bishop so kids get a look at the real St. Nick. If you want to sweeten the deal, instead of having him ask kids what they want for Christmas, have your St. Nick tell the kids how Jesus is the greatest gift of all, and that even if they don't get everything they want, they have everything they need. What we are going for is basically a Catholic version of a typical mall Santa. He is our saint, so we should reclaim him as a part of our church culture.

### **Easter Egg Hunt**

Easter morning is an interesting time for parishes. It is the conclusion of the most intense set of liturgies of the liturgical year, as well as a unique dynamic in that many people attending Mass that morning only go to church once or twice a year. One interesting thing about congregations on this day is the increase in the amount of families present, many of them unchurched. How can we get these families to come back? To approach this question, perhaps we should start by looking at what Easter looks like outside of the liturgy.

In the secular world, Easter is associated with three things: Easter bunny, Easter eggs, and candy. Many families still have the tradition of waking up on Sunday with an Easter basket full of goodies. For many kids, Easter morning Mass seems out of place, and many are not interested; many families only going out of some lingering sense of obligation. Parishes should provide something fun for the kids when they come to church. If we are to get these families to come back, we must show them our festive side when they are here. Combining fellowship with the celebration of Easter, invite the congregation to stick around after Mass for an Easter Egg Hunt.

Preparing for an Easter Egg Hunt is relatively simple. As Holy Week arrives, gather a lot of plastic eggs and candy and have some volunteers fill the eggs with the candy. Then, at the right time on Easter morning, scatter the eggs across a grassy area on the property where the hunt will take place. You don't need to hide the eggs like a traditional Easter Egg Hunt, just spread them across the lawn. This area should be taped off beforehand so that everyone starts at the same time. Make sure you have enough out there so that kids can all grab several. Then, at the Mass, invite the families to stay behind and gather outside for the Easter Egg Hunt. Have all the kids gather at the edge of the designated field and give them a signal to start hunting. Let kids play and their parents socialize. Make it a point to make these families feel welcome. That way, they might just come back next week. And as always, do not shy away from offering them food.

### **Procession on Corpus Christi**

We have a wonderful diocesan procession of the Blessed Sacrament from the Co-Cathedral to the cathedral-basilica every year. Every year, we bring Christ to the street and sanctify the places it passes by. This great tradition can easily be brought to the parish level. You do not have to process it through busy streets with a police escort, instead process it through the church property to a second outside altar for benediction. This will add a bit of flair to your parish's Body of Christ Sunday, breaking out from the usual formula and enriching the liturgical experience. This will generate a sense of importance to the day. It can also generate interest from onlookers, wondering what on earth those Catholics are doing.

### **Parish Feast Festivities**

Every parish should in some way celebrate the feast of its patron saint. This can be done in a variety of different ways, from a potluck dinner to a full-on festival with food, games, and entertainment. There are a variety of ways to make this day a special event in the parish calendar.

Liturgically, you can begin the feast with Mass ending in a grand procession to the hall or wherever the festivities are going to happen. At the end of Mass, have a statue of the patron saint carried out with the procession and enshrine it in an appropriate place where it can be seen during the reception. Bless the statue and give thanks to God for the parish and the Catholic community it serves, asking the saint for his/her continual intercession for the wellbeing of the parish and its people. Afterward, let the feast go into full swing.

Many of the other ideas in this module can be applied here, if not taken up a notch. It can be a potluck or a catered meal. It can have a place set aside for kids to play and enjoy themselves, be it just some board games and a movie or something more elaborate with prizes. Live music, even some hula, can add to the festive attitude of the event. What is most important, however, is that it be a staple of life at the parish. Get people involved in the life and spirituality of the parish by giving them opportunities to celebrate. With all the craziness in the world today, the parish can be the place to provide happiness and stability to the members of its family.