



“Eat

TOGETHER...

Pray

TOGETHER...

GO TO **Mass** TOGETHER...

Marriage and Family in the Year of Faith

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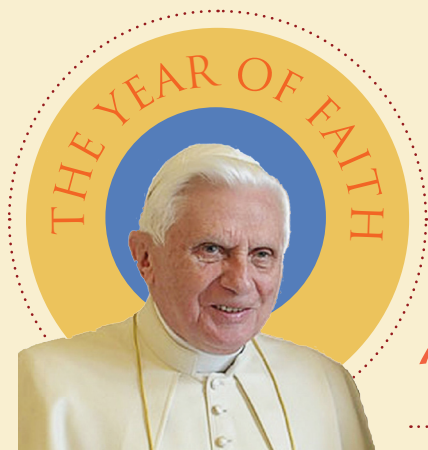
In 2006, an American writer’s account of her travels through Italy and Asia became an international bestseller.¹ Her memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*, struck a chord with millions of readers around the world because it touched upon a simple but profound human truth: the need to experience in the ordinary, simple things of daily life the truth that we are not alone – that we are made to love God and to be in communion with Him and with others. As Pope Francis has explained, “*In giving ourselves, in emerging from ourselves, we have true joy*.”²

The family is the place where life is welcomed and the human person first learns to give and to receive love. The family is “*a communion of persons*”. Eating, praying and worshipping together are things that are deeply a part of our humanity and found in family life across all cultures. Sharing a meal with those we love, praying together, and going to Mass together are special times in our lives. Indeed, the Eucharist is the most intimate and beautiful form of communion, where Jesus Christ feeds us with his own body, given up for us.

In many of today’s households, often both mothers and fathers need to work outside the home and children have busy schedules with

school, homework, sports, and extracurricular activities. Finding time for the traditional family dinner, for family prayer and to attend Sunday Mass together can be challenging. But as Christians, we have committed to live our lives, publicly and privately, in a way that witnesses to our faith in Jesus Christ. If we mean what we say and we say what we mean, we will hopefully draw others to know, love and believe in Him too.

The simple and ordinary traditions of Catholic family life are something precious and profound. When we eat, pray and go to Mass together as a family, we are professing, celebrating, living and praying our faith in Jesus Christ.



TO
“Profess, Celebrate, Live and Pray”

When Benedict XVI announced that the Church would celebrate a *Year of Faith* from October 2012 to November 2013, he spoke of his hopes for what this would bring for all Catholics:

“We want this Year to arouse in every believer the aspiration to *profess* the faith in fullness and with renewed conviction, with confidence and hope. It will also be a good opportunity to intensify the *celebration* of the faith in the liturgy, specially

in the Eucharist, which is “the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; ... and also the source from which all its power flows.” At the same time, we make it our prayer that believers’ *witness* of life may

grow in credibility. To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year.”³

WHAT DO STUDIES REVEAL ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF FAMILIES *eating, praying, and worshipping TOGETHER?*



Children who regularly attend Sunday worship with their families are significantly less likely to engage in high-risk behaviour as adolescents, and significantly more likely to achieve higher educational grades, to delay sexual activity and to enjoy happy, intact marriages as adults.⁴



Praying together as a couple and as a family is strongly associated with higher relationship quality, deeper intimacy and relationships that model high levels of communication and forgiveness.⁵



Eating together as a family not only benefits children in terms of their physical and academic well-being⁶, but builds character and conveys important social and emotional benefits. Family meals help children to learn to listen to others, to open up and share about their day, to serve, to wait, to practise kindness and consideration, to solve conflicts and to learn to compromise.⁷



The intimacy and experience of eating together as a family contributes to children feeling greater closeness and trust with their parents. A recent study found that compared with teens who ate family dinners less than 3 times a week, teens who ate meals with their family 5-7 times a week were 150% more likely to report having an “excellent relationship” with both their mother and their father.⁸



THE GOSPEL OF *Marriage & the Family*

Christian marriage is ordered to the happiness and holiness of the spouses, the life and happiness of their children and the evangelisation of the world as a powerful sign of the faithful, life-giving love of Christ for the Church. In the loving dynamic of the family, with all of our human flaws and selfishness, we encounter Christ and receive the grace to change and to grow. Family is the messy, sometimes painful and deeply challenging environment which helps us to understand, love and forgive others, as Christ understands, loves and forgives us. The vocation of marriage and family is a “living Gospel” which witnesses to the world Christ’s love and his power to redeem, heal and sanctify each one of us.

“See how they love one another”

HOW THE FAITH GREW

The Apostolic Letter for the Year of Faith declares that *“One thing that will be of decisive importance in this Year is retracing the history of our faith”*⁹. The growth of the early Church, through both adult baptisms and through Christians marrying and bearing children, averaged an extraordinary 40% per decade. Historians estimate that from a small group of around 1,000 Christians in the year 40AD the Church grew to over 30 million in 350AD, forming a majority of the population of the Roman empire.¹⁰

At the time of this growth, the people of ancient Rome were amazed by the lives the Christians lived and were deeply moved by the love to which they bore witness. *“See how they love one another”*¹¹ was the comment that echoed throughout the Roman empire and brought about the conversion of many people to the Faith.

“*Like others, [Christians] marry and have children; but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law.* (Letter to Diognetus, 1st century AD)¹²”

The Church’s teachings on the equal dignity of men and women, the blessing of children and the beauty and goodness of sexual expression and fidelity within marriage contrasted starkly with the culture of pagan Rome, where infidelity, divorce, contraception, abortion and infanticide (particularly of baby girls) were widely practised. The concern of the early Christians for the poor and the unborn¹³, their commitment to respecting the dignity of women and to caring for the sick and the elderly, and their belief in the sacrament of marriage as a faithful covenant between husbands and wives were a powerful witness to the society in which they lived.

Today, we can see in our own society a resurgence of some of the evils that plagued the pagan empires – challenges to life, marriage and the dignity of women, individualism and social injustice. As Christians our response must be the same as the early Christians’ – to love one another, purely and generously, and to let the world see the love of Christ, made visible in us.



IDEAS FOR FAMILY PRAYER

Grace before and after Meals

www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=128

Rosary around the table

www.familyrosary.org

Scripture reading and reflection

www.familyrosary.org/en/Prayer/FamilyPrayer.aspx

Prayer to our Guardian Angels

www.ewtn.com/devotionals/prayers/angel2.htm

St Michael Prayer

www.ewtn.com/devotionals/prayers/michael.htm

Prayers to our patron saints (e.g. St Anthony for finding lost things, St Christopher for safe travels)

<http://saints.sqpn.com/>

“By faith, across the centuries, men and women of all ages, whose names are written in the Book of Life (cf. Rev 7:9, 13:8), have confessed the beauty of following the Lord Jesus wherever they were called to bear witness to the fact that they were Christian: in the family, in the workplace, in public life, in the exercise of the charisms and ministries to which they were called.” (Apostolic Letter on the Year of Faith)

SIMPLE THINGS FAMILIES CAN DO TO “profess, celebrate, live and pray” THE FAITH

Professing our Faith

Making the Sign of the Cross and saying Grace before Meals, attending Mass together and receiving the Sacraments;

Listening

Listening to each other and taking turns to contribute to the conversation at family meals;

Welcoming

Welcoming others to share meals with your family;

Sharing

Making a meal for someone in need, donating food to a homeless shelter, remembering to pray for the hungry;

Expressing Gratitude to God

Inviting each person at the table to share one thing about their day that they are grateful for and to thank God for those blessings;

Fasting

Serving others food and drink before ourselves, fasting from meat or another penance on Fridays to remember Jesus’s sacrifice;

Praying

Taking quick moments to pray together as a family, e.g. when travelling in the car.

For more ideas, see Kimberly Hahn, *Beloved and Blessed: Biblical Wisdom for Family Life*, Servant Books, 2010.

For those not living with family...

For those who are single, widowed, separated or divorced, and living alone, the call to “eat, pray and go to Mass together” can present larger challenges. It can be painful to experience loneliness and the breaking apart of a family that was once united, or the longing for a family of our own. But our situations can also mean that we have the freedom and opportunities to love and reach out to others. Some ways that we can “eat, pray and worship” with others include:

- ★ Commit to get together with our families as often as we reasonably can, for meals and to attend Mass with them on special Feast Days, even if this means travelling and planning ahead;
- ★ Invite others to our home for meals when we can, especially people who are also living apart from their families;
- ★ Offer to organise a simple morning tea after Sunday Mass in our parish to provide hospitality and friendship;
- ★ If we have special children in our lives (e.g. godchildren, nieces, nephews) invite them to Mass with us, take them out for a special meal, or invite them to our home for a meal and pray Grace together;
- ★ Donate a meal to a family in need or donate our time or money to a charity that feeds the homeless.

THE Four Tasks of the Family

Catholic families today continue to do what they have done for 2000 years – the four key tasks of the family identified by Blessed John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*:



- 1 TO FORM A “COMMUNITY OF PERSONS”;
- 2 TO SERVE LIFE;
- 3 TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY; AND
- 4 TO SHARE IN THE LIFE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH.¹⁴

The Church recognises that the public and private purposes of marriage and family work together, so that what is good for couples and families personally is also good for the whole society.

When we eat, pray and go to Mass together as a family, we witness both publicly and privately to our faith in Jesus Christ, to our belief in the life-giving Eucharist, and to the family as the place where the human person learns to give and to receive love. We follow in the footsteps of the first Christians and their families, whose

humble but powerful example led millions throughout the world to embrace Christ.

Eat. Pray. Mass. These simple but profound family experiences express our love for God and for each other, shape our children’s faith and provide an important witness to others.

They are a sign and an invitation to all men and women to experience the love of Jesus Christ and to discover that our deepest and truest identity is found in Him and in His Church that feeds and sustains us with the Eucharist.

“The Mother Church that gives us Jesus gives us our identity that is not only a seal, it is a belonging. Identity means belonging [and] this belonging to the Church is beautiful.”¹⁵
Pope Francis



Cover Image: Guido Reni school, Sacra Famiglia a tavola
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Endnotes

1. Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*. Viking, New York, 2006. 2. Homily of Pope Francis, Mass for the Celebration of Palm Sunday, 24 March 2013. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130324_palme_en.html 3. Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Letter on the Year of Faith*. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_en.html 4. http://blog.beliefnet.com/on_the_front_lines_of_the_culture_wars/2011/08/church-kids-are-less-likely-to-divorce-or-live-in-poverty.html, citing Dr Patrick Fagan, “The Benefits of Family Worship”, Family Research Council, 2011. 5. Christopher G. Ellison et al, “The Couple That Prays Together: Race and Ethnicity, Religion, and Relationship Quality Among Working-Age Adults”, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72(4):963 (August 2010). 6. CASA, *The Importance of Family Dinners* research series. Columbia University, 2003-2012. Available at: http://www.casacolumbia.org/templates/Publications_Reports.aspx#r8 7. Miriam Weinstein, *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*. Steerforth, Hanover, 2005. 8. CASA, *The Importance of Family Dinners VIII*, September 2012. 9. *Apostolic Letter on the Year of Faith*, op cit. 10. Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion*. Harper Collins, New York, 2011, p 157. 11. Tertullian, *Apology*, Ch 39. <http://www.logoslibrary.org/tertullian/apology/39.html> 12. http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010522_diogneto_en.html 13. *Letter to Didache* (1st century AD). <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html> 14. *Familiaris Consortio (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World)*, 17. 15. Homily of Pope Francis, Mass for the Feast of St George, 23 April 2013. <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-mass-on-feast-of-st-george-full-text>



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY
lifemarriagefamily.org.au