

## *Practicing Our Faith at Home*

**By Susan R. Briebl**

Where does one begin teaching the Christian practices in the home? How shall parents raise their children to practice lives marked by hospitality, forgiveness, healing, and Sabbath keeping? When does a child learn to honor her body and to honor the bodies of others? How can faith shape the daily tasks of living together in a household, as well as preparing the young to practice their faith as they move from the home into a wider world?

Parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors, godparents and others ask these questions. This section of the Guide helps such people move toward answers that fit their circumstances and households. It shows how awareness of practices can help us to draw the connections, always present but often invisible, between the corporate worship of the Church, the rhythm of daily life, and faithful engagement with the world.

**Your home.** Picture the place you live, whether it is an apartment or a house, modest or grand, on a farm, in the suburbs, or at the heart of a city. Draw a simple floor plan of your home. Each person in the household could draw his or her own, or the family could make it a joint project. Add the table at which you eat, the bed in which you sleep, the sink at which you wash your face each morning and brush your teeth at night. This is the place you practice your faith with your closest

neighbors, the members of your family. In the ordinary fabric of your life together--the food you buy, prepare, and share, the celebrations you keep, the stories you tell, the decisions you make about spending time and money, and the chores you do--God is present.

Look at your floor plan as you name where and when and how you already practice your faith in your home. Share with one another creative and concrete ways in which you might deepen and expand the ways you practice your faith. You could move from room to room, practice by practice. For instance, you could begin at the door with the practice of hospitality.

**The door.** Picture the door to your dwelling, the threshold you cross when you come home and when you leave to enter the world of work or school, commerce or play. What does your door say about you and your way of life?

Each door tells a different story. Some doors swing open and shut all day long as children run out to play, run back for juice or mittens, run out again to meet friends, and back when supper time or sheer exhaustion draws them in. Other doors are opened rarely, timidly, or fearfully. Some seem to welcome all kinds of people for any number of reasons, and others receive only those people who live behind them.

During a time of persecution, early Christians marked their doors with a simple drawing of a fish. Ichthus, the Greek word for fish, also bears the beginning letters of Jesus Christ. Only those who knew its meaning recognized this sign. To every

follower of Jesus this sign said, "Welcome. Here you will break bread with those who call you brother and sister."

On the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6th, many Christians mark their door posts in chalk with another sign. They write the numbers of the new year (2001) and the initials of the traditional names for the three magi who followed the star to bear gifts to the Christ child: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. It looks like this: 20+C+M+B+01. To those who know its meaning, this sign says, "Welcome. Those who live in this place will receive friend and stranger from near and far."

The chalk mark above the door says as much to those who live behind the door, as to those who come knocking. Every time they enter the door they are reminded who they are: people whose faith calls them to practice hospitality. Even the small child can learn to "read" the message written in chalk and renewed each year in a family ritual: "Our door opens to receive others. This is who we are. Jesus received us, just as he did the magi. Now we extend to others the welcome we have received."

During the Great Depression, men without jobs, sometimes called "hobos," traveled from town to town, knocking on doors, asking for food. When a man was received and fed from the table at which the family ate, he would scrawl a form of graffiti on the porch as he departed. Other hungry men knew what it meant: "What this household has, it will share with you." This was a statement not only about the hospitality practiced in that home, but also about their household economics, the use to which they

put what goods they had.

How do people in your neighborhood decorate their doorways? In what ways might your door become an invitation to others? How could it become a reminder to you about who you are and how you practice your faith? How might a traveler mark your back porch? Who is welcomed in your home? What gifts do they bring? How might you extend the hospitality you have received from God beyond the walls of your home? Who, near or far, hungers for food, safety, or friendship? Is your "door" open to them?

**The table.** Picture the table in your home. Where do you eat together? When? Many families live such hectic and divided lives that table times for shared meals and conversation are infrequent at best. Yet the table can be a wonderful place to begin to focus the practices of the household. Christians always have been a people of the Table. Jesus ate not only with beloved friends but also with sinners and outcasts, creating a scandal among some people of his day. At table with others, Jesus practiced God's hospitality.

Wherever Christians gather to break bread and share the cup in Jesus' name, he promises to be present as host and feast. At the Table of the Eucharist--also called Holy Communion and The Lord's Supper--God's gifts of hospitality, forgiveness, and healing are given and shared. Everyone is fed and none go away hungry. In this, God's household economics are made visible. At this meal, leadership is known in servanthood and the community is shaped accordingly. Around this Table we share the stories of faith, bearing testimony to the marvelous acts of God

throughout history and in our time. Here we raise our voices in songs of thanksgiving, lament, and hope, singing our lives to God, even as we long for the promised day when all creation, united and whole, will sing God's praises. Finally, we are sent into the world to be to others the gifts we have received.

Think about how your family table is like the Table of the Lord. Who is invited? Do you give thanks for the food and those who labored to bring it to your table? Who shops for groceries, cooks, serves, and washes dishes? What does this say about how the community of your family is shaped? Is there time to tell and hear one another's stories from the day? When might these become testimony? What does the food you eat say about your household economics? How might your table practices extend to a world where many are hungry? Do your household economics reflect a longing for the healing of creation?

**The bath.** Besides singing in the shower, you might wonder how this humble room becomes a place for practicing your faith. Yet we are a people of the Bath as well as of the Table. The great bath of Baptism is the source of our identity and our entry into the Body of Christ. Water is a sign of God's presence and promises. The sink, the tub, the shower are places of cleansing and renewal. With a little help, children can make the connections between their daily washing and God's refreshing and renewing promises.

Besides the mirror above the sink in one family's bathroom is a sign: Remember you are a child of God. The morning ritual of washing their faces becomes for the members of this household

a baptismal reminder, a declaration of their identity and a call to cherish themselves and one another because God has declared them to be precious. What a powerful message. It counters the other voices in a child's life, voices that tell him that his worth is measured by how he looks, what he owns, and how he performs.

Perhaps in this room above all others a child learns to honor her body and to have her body honored by others. How a baby is touched and bathed speaks of how his body is cherished and honored. When bathing is a time for playfulness and joy, for the sensual feeling of warm water and soft towel, a child comes to know how precious is this body. Here a child learns to care for her own body for the length of her life and to treat the bodies of others with care. How we treat our own bodies as we age, as well as those who are frail and infirm among us, may find its root in how we were treated as children.

Later, privacy appropriate to the child's age and needs honors the child's body. Rites of passage often are associated with the bathroom: a boy's first shave, a girl's first menstrual period, the physical changes the mirror reflects back to each of us. These changes can be celebrated simply and powerfully, when you connect such milestones with growth in faith, discernment, and responsibility.

The bathroom is also a place of healing. Any parent who has knelt beside a sick child in the middle of the night knows this to be true. Anyone who has locked the bathroom door to weep in private when her heart is pierced by grief or guilt or

shame knows this to be true. Washing the tears from your own eyes or wiping another's feverish forehead with a cool cloth, cleansing the scrapes and scratches of childhood, anointing wounds with healing balm, removing splinters and bee stingers: all of this happens in the bathroom. Such common acts take on deeper significance when they are woven with prayer, the laying on of hands, and anointing with oil, for these are signs that healing is more than the body's route to recovery, it is bringing the peace and power of our suffering and healing God to the whole person.

**The bed.** "Now I lay me down to sleep." Many children learn this prayer at an early age. It speaks a simple truth, not only to children, but to adults as well. Falling asleep makes us vulnerable. We need others to watch over us through the night. We sleep best, as we live best, embraced by God's presence. Inside this embrace, our beds become places of prayer, rest, and healing. For the same reason, they often are places of struggle and discernment. When the noises of the day are quieted, we can hear the deepest questions of our hearts. Steeped in a lifetime of nighttime prayer, we learn to listen for the voice of God from the sanctuary of our beds.

Sometimes beneath the cover of night's darkness we can speak of things to one another that seem impossible to say by day. Siblings who share a room and spouses often have their most intimate conversations after the lights are turned out. Tucking a child into bed can become a time of testimony as the stories of the child's day are met with the story of God at work

through Jesus Christ. Bedtime stories can be biblical stories, as well as historical, cultural, and familial stories of faith. These stories bear witness to God's faithfulness in the past and God's promises for the future, thus tucking the child inside the embrace of faithful love.

The bed is a place not only of intimate conversation, but physical intimacy, too. Think of the loving and tender touches you share in your home. How are rocking a baby to sleep, kissing a child good night, and snuggling on Saturday morning expressions of love? Sexual intercourse between faithful partners can reveal the life-giving love of God. In bed, when trustworthy touch honors our vulnerable bodies, we are reminded that God knows us in our nakedness and loves us still.

Nighttime also can be a time for confession, which is another kind of nakedness, the bearing of our wounded hearts. And the forgiveness that follows is a powerful form of healing. Making a space for apologies, reconciliation, and sharing Christ's peace can be part of the regular rhythm of saying goodnight. You can make a simple ritual woven of silence and word and gesture. In this way, parent and child, sister and brother, husband and wife all are granted a time before sleep to let go of the hurts and angers of the day and to commit themselves and one another into God's keeping.

Perhaps the practice of forgiveness at twilight could give us the courage in the light of day to create simple rituals for reconciliation in our relationships at school and at work. How might a family that practices forgiveness in the home effect

such healing in other places? How has unresolved conflict with someone in your family spilled over into your other relationships? When have you experienced forgiveness at home?

Forgiveness is one form of healing. Often when we are sick and in need of other forms of healing, we long to be at home in our own beds. Families and the community of faith gather around hospital beds to watch and pray during sickness and when death draws near. Many of us hope that when death comes, we will be surrounded by the people, the practices, and the promises that spoke life to us throughout our days. The practices of our faith that help us make the twilight transition into sleep each night, help prepare us for death, the death of those we love and our own. Dying well is learning to fear the grave as little as our bed as we let go, one last time, releasing our lives into the arms of God, saying "Now I lay me down to sleep."