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## **The Fountain of Love: How Parents Form Children for Prayerful Participation in the Eucharist**

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To be understood and loved. There is no deeper hunger and thirst in us, no deeper desire in children. What a privilege it is for a catechist to have a role in shaping the young for true love! But this depends above all on parents actively orchestrating a home life with a rhythm set by the “source and summit of the Christian life”—the Eucharist. The catechist should seek out opportunities to assist parents in this. It is our hope that the practical advice presented here will be helpful.

### **The Eucharist Shapes Human Desire Within God's Desire**

Raising children so that they can truly love requires painstaking attention to wean children from an expectation of instant gratification. As parents, we often have to say no, because we are saying yes to their happiness. We want to empower them to rise into the freedom of virtue, which can give itself away without reserve, whether in marriage, priesthood, religious life, or as a celibate gift of self “in the world.” But how can a love capable of sacrifice be cultivated in a

culture of consumerist self-gratification? How can love flourish in the digital age, which trades wisdom for diversion? How can love survive in the hook-up culture?

The Eucharist makes it possible. God gives himself to satisfy our hunger and thirst for love. It is *within* the love of God that all human possibility arises. “In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:9-10).

God the Father's unconquerable love for us moves him, as it were, to sacrifice his everything, his only-begotten Son, Jesus. In the Eucharist, the Son offers himself to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit, while he at the same time offers himself to us. After consecration, there he is on the altar. Under the appearance of bread and wine, there is Jesus, and only Jesus—really and truly present—in the mystery of his suffering, Death, and Resurrection.

Why does Jesus choose to become so helpless, to come in the appearance of bread and wine? Not only because man hungers and thirsts for God. Rather, God desires man first. These two desires—one divine, one human—meet in the Eucharist. In every Missionaries of Charity chapel, the words “I Thirst” are inscribed next to the crucifix. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta said simply, “Jesus is God therefore his love, his thirst is infinite” (cited in Joseph Langford, *Mother Teresa’s Secret Fire* [Huntington, IN: OSV Press, 2008], 301).

But when God loves, he does not help himself. He gives himself. The Cross-Eucharist alone can satisfy the hunger and thirst we have for an intimacy without limits. Only by the power of Christ’s self-gift can we really get inside others through a real union of mind and heart. All of our loves are unrequited until they are found *within* the life of God. How long will his love for us go unrequited?

### **That Christ Should Enter Under Our Roof**

How do we raise our children so that they are made ready to respond to this eternal, eucharistic love? We so often assume that children cannot understand God’s love, so we feed them paltry crumbs of truth, which cannot meet their hunger for the infinite expanse of God. Instead, we should strive to give them food that is both digestible and nourishing.

Children are concrete thinkers. Family life must prepare children for the Eucharist in concrete ways. Christ in the Eucharist loves us by offering himself to the Father. Eucharistic love is sacrificial love. “In this divine sacrifice

which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner” (Council of Trent (1562), DS 1743, cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd. ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1367). We too can offer ourselves in an unbloody way, by lifting up the daily events of our lives as a sacrifice of praise to the Father.

In the new English translation of the *Roman Missal*, the priest says, “Pray, brethren [brothers and sisters], that my sacrifice *and* yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father” (emphasis added). Baptism gives *every* Christian the power to offer up our very selves—including every one of our good actions, no matter how humble, as well all the sufferings, great and small, that beset us in daily life—as an offering of thanksgiving to God *within* the one great offering of Jesus himself to his Father. “Offer it up” is the eucharistic pattern of Christian life. The conditions for living true love in everyday life are the conditions for “full and active participation” in Mass, indeed for authentic prayer.

If we parents keep in mind that our children need our homes to be schools of patience, of stillness, of silence (the essential conditions for a vital interior life), then certain practical steps come immediately to mind. If busyness consumes us as adults, the frenetic pace of the world will invade our children’s spirits. The peace of Christ should be palpable in our homes. This requires that our own prayer lives be vigorous and constant and that we pray together

as families. Grace before meals is crucial (as is eating dinner together). The Church encourages laity to exercise their common priesthood by praying the Liturgy of the Hours, such as can be found in *Shorter Christian Prayer*. (There is also a modified form in the beautiful periodical *Magnificat*.) Night Prayer serves well as a structure for bedtime prayer. Praying the Rosary together suffuses the graceful presence of our Holy Mother Mary. If possible, going together to daily Mass at least a few times during the week will make a decisive difference in the spirit of the home, as will eucharistic adoration.

To establish the necessary rhythm of peace, it is worth prayerfully considering placing significant limits on the amount of television our children watch. Outside of prayer, giving up television is perhaps the most beneficial decision we ourselves have made for our children. As children get older, it is essential that we be vigilant in monitoring how often they are plugged-in (for example, gaming and music) and moderating the degree to which they are enveloped in social networking. Constant noise and trivia destroy the taste for prayer, our ability to see everyday life as something to be offered up to God, and our recognition of the deepest hunger in us for God's true love. Our children naturally aspire to infinite knowledge and love. But marketing and advertising executives want us to scratch our every consumerist itch, and this attitude also reflects the dominant sexual culture. Our homes must provide the elevated tone that allows our children's aspirations for true and infinite love to unfold.

An elevated tone: that is a prime characteristic of the new translation of

the *Roman Missal*. The more we bring that tone into the home, the more our children will thrive. We could, for instance, write out the newly translated Collect or opening prayers for the preceding Sunday and post them on the refrigerator.

Children must have all their senses engaged. Beauty draws us out of the mundane and the self-regarding into the vertical slipstream of transcendence. Filling our homes with statues (the more beautiful the better), reproductions of great art (religious and otherwise), great books, classical music, crucifixes, and maybe even incense during bedtime prayer will have a profound impact on children.

When we as parents pray for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, we are given inspiration to undertake the practical steps necessary to transform our homes into schools of love. Truer than Marlowe's Faustus, we can say, "See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament." Indeed, see, see the unstoppable torrent of Christ's love coursing through the interstices of everyday life, flowing from his pierced Heart on the Cross (Jn 19:34), when we intentionally arrange the life of our homes according to Christ's eucharistic offering.

### **From Witness of Life to the Word of Life**

The daily witness of self-sacrificial love provides children with an indispensable experience of God. But the reality of Jesus Christ is that of the Word made flesh: he is both *flesh*, or tangible experience, and *Word*, the truth of the Father eternally spoken. We must express him both by our lives and by

our words. How we talk about the future, how we make decisions, how we plan our activities: in all of this we want our children to know explicitly that what matters is not what we want, but what God in his loving providence wills for us.

The Eucharist is the Son's hymn of praise to the Father; gratitude is essential to the eucharistic rhythm. Given children's egocentrism, we have to be deliberate in getting them to acknowledge the good things they enjoy, thanking God the Father, especially at bedtime prayer.

Parents help their children recognize that the family's actions are not random but are rather incorporated into an eternal and divine plan to save the world. When the family lives as a domestic church, it intentionally offers up its prayers, works, joys, and sufferings as a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God. (See [www.apostleshipofprayer.org](http://www.apostleshipofprayer.org) for several Morning Offering prayers.) Families find their truth in the original domestic church, the Holy Family, offering "all for the Sacred and Eucharistic Heart of Jesus, all through the sorrowful and Immaculate Heart of Mary, all in union with Saint Joseph" ([www.familyland.org](http://www.familyland.org)).

The prayer of the family is deepened and fed by catechesis within the family. Parents have not only the option but also the right and duty to teach their children the faith. Such catechesis should be woven into everyday life, and domestic events should be interpreted in the light of Christian wisdom.

## Evangelizing and Supporting Parents

Such home-based catechesis is deeply rewarding, but it can also be daunting. Many parents feel unprepared to teach their children, given their own lack of catechetical knowledge. Others, while baptized, have a tenuous relationship to the Church, reflecting a need for a deep encounter with the Person of Christ.

Parishes should actively attempt to evangelize parents, even the baptized, as part of their programs to promote the new evangelization. They should also support parents in their catechetical work. The best preparation for catechesis is twofold: conversion of life and knowledge of the truth. We have observed a profound hunger on the part of laypersons for Catholic truth. When the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is broken open for them, they respond with enthusiasm and gratitude. Parents and parish catechists in our classes report dramatically increased confidence in carrying out their catechetical apostolates after an intensive introduction to the *Catechism*. Even more important, they report a greater intimacy with the one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## A Love Deeper Than Time

When we consume the Eucharist, we are drawn into a love that transcends time. Eternity is that boundless fountain of love, the Father and the Son united and overflowing in their Holy Spirit of love: a love that is ever young, that does not fail, that does not weary, that does not betray, that does not fall prey to death. This is the faithful love that we

hunger and thirst for. This is the love made really present in the Eucharist.

The sacrificial love of Jesus has somehow, mysteriously, always been there. Before ever molecular cloud collapsed into flame in the first stars,

there was Love, open to us without defense, without reserve. True love is the fabric of the universe, our hearts' deepest desire: Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

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