

CREATING A FAITH-CENTERED HOME

A vibrant religious home environment introduces, nurtures and reinforces solid values. It offers a positive outlook on life, centered on faith. The marriage of two Catholics affords them the opportunity to develop such a home setting. So do mixed marriages, even though the challenges to doing so may be greater.

Difficulties exist in every family, even in the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke contain evidence of their difficulties. There were sinners and prostitutes in Jesus' lineage. The Incarnation took place before Mary and Joseph were married. At the Annunciation, the angel's greeting disturbed Mary. She knew that the child in her womb was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not by a man, but certainly it would not be easy to convince her family and friends of that.⁴² When Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, he too was disturbed, but an angel reassured him that this child was of God.⁴³

Jesus was born in an out-of-the-way place among strangers. His family fled for their lives to Egypt, then lived in Nazareth, a town not highly regarded at the time. Jesus upset his parents by staying behind in the Temple at the age of twelve (imagine misplacing a child for three days!) In so doing, he confused and distressed them.

Every family struggles in some way, as Jesus' did. None are perfect. The goal of family life is family health, not perfection, especially during difficult times. This takes a unique focus in interfaith families.

It has been said that there is no way to be a perfect family, but a million ways to be a good one. Creating a faith-centered home is an achievable goal, even for those coming from different faith traditions. In fact, given the importance of faith in developing identity, it is an indispensable goal.

The idea we have of ourselves is closely associated with the context, or environment, where we live and work. This we call "contextual identity." Those residing in the United States live, recreate, worship and work in a society free from oppression. Family, culture and world are the broadest context where we search for our identity.

The identity quest begins in the family. We grow as part of a family. We enter a new context, when we go to school. Each different situation helps us clarify our identity. We refine our sense of personal identity in the church we attend and the activities we pursue, whether these are sports, neighborhood projects or work responsibilities. We identify with school teams and work associates. In life's give and take, we find deep identity in ultimate and intimate relationships involving love, trust and forgiveness. We experience functional identity in our jobs. Identity contexts are limitless, even though some are more important than others. The family is at the top of the list. Here, we begin our search for identity.

Families vary greatly, depending on their location, socio-economic condition, ethnic background and religious orientation. The basic orientation of a farm family differs from one living in a slum. A divorced or blended family has a different context than an intact, nuclear family. Within the same family, the context of parents and their children are not the same. The deep-

est relational patterns of spouses and children occur within the family. What happens here influences everything they do outside of the home. Here, family members develop personality traits, form attitudes, internalize religious rituals, learn basic beliefs and adjust to success and failure. How a family structures its relational context is vitally important to the value formation of the entire household. The family's home environment is the most significant context where human identity develops and growth occurs. Well-balanced families have a healthy family environment.

We engage in all of our activities within the context of space and time. This implies that we do not form personal or relational identity in a vacuum. It develops in real life situations within a definite time and place. Although family life differs from a hundred years ago, core beliefs remain unchanged, even though the way we live them out differs. Since identity is developmental, family identity must be considered within the context of modern life. This means remaining connected to core values, like honesty, kindness and justice, while living in today's world. We learn how to live a value-based life by following the dictates of our faith.

Contextual identity emerges largely by the internalization of preconscious environmental values, attitudes and ways of acting. This internalization process occurs in religious, political, social and economic situations. Although business, neighborhood, church, or family cultures vary greatly, each influences us through the attitudes and values that they convey. These environments tell us whether we are welcome or merely tolerated. Spatial configurations, decorations and personal reactions indicate more than words. Parental actions, sibling response and household settings indicate what values are important. Over time, such contextual influences affect our personal and relational identity.

Deep values and life orientation take shape through repeatable ritual actions. Regular family prayer, Sunday church attendance and blessings before meals impact children's attitudes and

reinforce adult faith. Such repeatable actions are more important than what is taught in words. Hence, ritual patterns, not doctrine, set the foundation for our self-image. If a mother shows favoritism to a daughter over a son, this says more than telling the boy that he is a good person. Family ritual patterns and symbols are building blocks in establishing a healthy family environment.

We develop religious values and attitudes in response to such ritualistic activities. For couples professing different Christian faiths, their mutual prayer, a cross, Bible reading, sacred times like Good Friday, Easter and Christmas, and regular church attendance establish, maintain and develop a family's religious identity. As a child, no one told me to be proud that I was a Catholic, or told Jim, my friend down the street, to be proud that he was a Protestant. Our homes, religious practices and churches shouted this message to us, long before we knew what it meant.

I recall the importance of family rituals in our home, when I observe two statues depicting Jesus and Mary on our dining room mantle. Each is encased in a grotto about six inches high. They seem modern yet come from another era. Nothing similar is made today. The grottoes are made of turquoise stone, resembling the black clinkers that remain in a coal furnace after the ashes burn out. Someone meticulously assembled them and colored the old clinkers. The statues have been in their present location for two years. I found them when cleaning out the attic after Mom died. My parents carefully wrapped them in paper to protect them when we moved from our original home to our present one forty years ago. The statues were misplaced among the other moved items.

When I first saw them, I remembered that they once rested on our living room bookcase. I presumed that someone gave them to my Mom in her childhood. When my eighty-nine-year-old aunt

saw them, she said, “Bob, these statues of Jesus and Mary sat in our home when I was a small child. I never remember a time that they were not on our hall table.” The origin of the statues is unknown, but their significance is clear. Memory of them is imbedded in four generations of faithful Catholics. They symbolize something deeper than words.

That’s what Catholic, Jewish, Protestant and other religious symbols and practices do for their members. Children and adults do not always understand the deep meaning of a symbol or ritual. This is secondary to the impact they have on telling a child what is important. They are part of a home environment, the bedrock of a family’s religious identity.

The home’s religious flavor applies to any faith context. Some parents do not pray or introduce their children into a formal religion. They often claim that they want to give their children the freedom to decide on a religious faith later on. In reality, their approach is not neutral, but speaks volumes to their children. It leaves children ignorant about basic beliefs and core values. When parents encourage children in other aspects of life, but avoid their religious formation, they send their children signals that religion is not important. Parents who do not provide faith formation for their children do them a disservice. Tricia, raised in such a household, learned in college that her friends took their faith seriously. When she experienced their knowledge and religious values, Tricia felt ignorant and hollow. She was very disappointed because of her parent’s negligence, telling her best friend that they deprived her of an important aspect of childhood. She said, “I’ll never make this mistake with my children.”

Creating a religious home environment is a vital dimension of contextual identity. This is not present in many marriages today. Society’s materialism, relativism and time pressures often substitute for a family’s prayer life, religious images in the home, Bible study, teaching children about God and church attendance.

Developing a religious home environment is a special challenge for interfaith couples. They need to establish a household contextual identity that reinforces their personal religious identity and helps children sort through their religious values. In so doing, family members need to respect the different religious perspectives of the interfaith couple.

Before marriage, interfaith spouses need to decide upon their religious home environment. This includes how they plan to share the richness of their religious traditions with children. They can pray with their children, attend Sunday services, teach children values that are common to their differing faith traditions, indicate how their beliefs differ, decide on religious symbols for the home and help children avoid a relativistic attitude toward various faiths. Often, this never happens because parents are too busy, don't bother, do not take their responsibility seriously, don't know how or fail to ask themselves and their children the right questions.

Parental attitudes set the religious tone of a home. Parents are encouraged to buy religious books, pray and celebrate holy occasions with their children. They cannot abrogate this privilege to anyone else.

When searching among miscellaneous items at an auction, I noticed a packet containing ten white envelopes. The envelopes held about a hundred old holy cards of saints and prayers. Some were written in German. Others had paper lace decorations around their sides. There were saints for all occasions—good weather, various sicknesses and multiple blessings. I never heard of many of these saints. There were cards honoring Jesus, Mary, angels, Saint Anthony and others. Several cards contained the names of the priests and nuns that gave them to the recipient. No one else bid on the cards. I bought them.

Why did I buy them? I don't need devotional cards, I have plenty from my childhood. The cards, however, reminded me of a time past, where everything in my childhood was Catholic—our home, school, textbooks, teachers, friends and sporting activities. We hung around with Catholic kids, played in a Catholic schoolyard and rarely ventured up the street to play in the public school ground. For some reason, it seemed like a strange place to play, for it wasn't Catholic. Our external environment or contextual identity was almost totally Catholic. When we ventured beyond our Catholic comfort zone in thought or action, we were lost.

Over the years, I met many Jewish, Protestant, Muslim and Buddhist men and women who told me similar stories of their childhood and upbringing. In each case, religious ritual patterns shaped our actions and modes of thought. Our internal environment, as well as our personal and family identity, affected us. On a level deeper than rational, conscious thought, our religious traditions dictated our way of thinking, judging and acting.

Today, Catholics, Protestants and members of other faith traditions work and play side by side. The world is more fast-paced and complex. Whereas past generations often married within their own religious traditions, mixed marriages are becoming more common. It is now often difficult in such marriages to foster a family environment that helps people internalize religious, personal and family identity.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL HOME ENVIRONMENTS

Two dynamics that influence identity come into play in establishing a religious home environment. These are where and when we live. Human learning happens in a definite place and time, and these play a key role in our thought patterns, attitudes and actions.

We possess innate capabilities, which enable us to know things outside of ourselves. Just as our legs and feet enable us to

walk, certain internal capabilities allow us take in sensory information from outside, process it and draw conclusions. Everything that we know is filtered through our experiences in space and time. Our human faculties cannot know anything without perceiving them in space and time configurations and cannot imagine anything outside of them. We acquire knowledge, develop attitudes and make decisions in space and time.

Family prayers, parental teaching about God, community worship, religious home practices, religious symbols and rituals, and church ministers influence us. They also affect how our parents, relatives and neighbors deal with their children and how we relate to our parents, brothers, sisters and friends.

We internalize our religious environment differently. Religious families develop an inner religious environment—a fundamental religious orientation that directs their attitude toward life itself. It influences their moral decisions, ways of acting on a date, proper business procedures, weekly church attendance and prayer. Our internal religious environment affects also our external home environment. In every family, children reflect similar values learned at home, even though they demonstrate them differently.

A vibrant religious family life creates a healthy environment that introduces, nurtures and reinforces solid values. These give birth to attitudes toward family members, neighbors, strangers, enemies and the larger community. Our churches and religious schools reinforce our values, first learned in the home.

The external environment refers to the place, space and time, where and when a family lives and works. The external environment can include the social conditions, neighborhood, living space, workplace, and the way that such space is arranged and decorated. It also includes how a neighborhood or individual home reflects a religious orientation through its churches, cele-

brations and other symbols of belief and practice. The external environment also includes the time spent in prayer, reflection, spiritual reading, meditation, preparation for religious celebrations, attendance at religious services and Bible study. This environment includes the ways that the space and time, where people live, work, and celebrate, manifest a religious orientation.⁴⁴

In some Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish and interfaith families, the religious external environment is clear. Children and adults learn, work, pray and recreate in a well-determined environment. Family members know what it means to be a member of their respective faiths. In such families, faith is a way of life that extends from home to work, church and the broader society. In other families, the external home environment is not well ordered and the family's religious identity is not clearly established.

Internal environment refers to the conscious or unconscious attitudes or ways of acting that a person or a group internalizes, which influence their beliefs and practices. It includes a person's attitudes, orientation, and ways of thinking, deciding, and acting. This internal environment provides the fundamental orientation that a person or family takes toward many religious issues. This may include the priority given to Sunday church attendance, religious belief about life's sacredness, the importance of spending time at home in family activities and prayer, the need for adult faith formation, the value of a solid Catholic education, and regard for the pope, bishops, and clergy.⁴⁵

Rapid social changes affect many families' external religious environment. When this happens, their internal religious environment may shift focus. Questions like, "What does it mean to be religious in a postmodern world?" and, "What is expected of people of faith?" surface.

In such a world, people may not know how to respond, and family prayer, church attendance and religious formation may become less important in their lives. When this happens, many question their religious identity, as their religious home environment weakens or almost disappears. Children raised in such homes often put little priority on faith, prayer or church attendance.

Today, the need to establish a healthy religious identity intensifies. To identify as religious persons with definite values and convictions means to know who we are, what we believe, what our faith teaches and what is our final destiny. Doing so is a life-long task, one that begins early and solidifies throughout life.

CREATING A RELIGIOUS FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

No blueprint exists for creating a healthy interfaith home environment. It is possible, however, to identify certain perspectives that assist this task. In doing so, it is important to remember that family beliefs and practices shift focus over time, even though unchanging love and trust remain. The ever-flowing pace of culture challenges interfaith couples to incorporate the teachings and practices of their respective churches into family life. In this way they create a faith-filled home.

The following points suggest ways to create a faith-filled home environment:

Families of faith stress life's basic goodness in their attitudes, teaching and orientation. This helps establish a religious family identity. It encourages family members to see life's goodness as the foundation for their personal attitudes toward God, nature, humans and society. God is present in families from their inception. This wonderful belief in a loving God who loves all humans establishes the ground for their hope, which gives a positive orientation to families, thereby helping them develop a solid foundation for life.