

# INTRODUCTION

Are you intrigued by the idea that there can be, as this book's subtitle suggests, a spirituality for the home? Perhaps you tend to connect the word "spirituality" with what you seek when you leave your home life behind: feelings of peace, a sense of connection with the world, an awareness of the holy—you know, the kinds of things that elude you when you're in the midst of making dinner, paying bills, or cleaning up after your children. What this book proposes is a view of spirituality as very much grounded in everyday life. And what lies under this proposal is an even more radical suggestion, namely that everyday life (on the one hand) and those feelings of peace, connection with the world, and awareness of the holy (on the other) are meant to go together. To say it a little more forcefully, we are suggesting that authentic spirituality is not something above or beyond everyday life but embedded right in the messy midst of it.

To illustrate this point, we will be exploring the implications of the way that Jesus invited his listeners to look for what he called the "Kingdom of God" or "Kingdom of Heaven" unfolding right under their noses. What is most significant about his many allusions to the Kingdom is the fact that his descriptions focus on the

“here-and-nowness” of it, in contrast to a mistaken idea that it’s an add-on to ordinary human life to be anticipated after we die. Don’t look for it in any other place but where you are living right in this very moment, he seems to be saying to his followers. As parents, we often find ourselves asking the question, “What might that mean for us?”

We’ve condensed our answers over the years into six rules that can be described as basic statements of how to look at the world the way Jesus did. The inspiration for these rules is a little book penned by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century called *The Spiritual Exercises*. His manual for cultivating Christian prayer has influenced millions of people who have encountered it in retreat houses and schools all over the world. Quite simply, Ignatius wanted to invite people to consider Jesus’ way of looking at things not primarily as a set of doctrines established centuries ago. While doctrines continue to be important to the life of the Church, they are not usually what draw people into imitating Jesus. Instead, Ignatius wanted people to have an experience of knowing God the way Jesus did—to fall in love with God—so that everything else in their lives made sense in light of that love. Once you fall in love, everything changes.

We’ve discovered in our prayer and in our lives as parents that it’s possible to apply this same insight specifically to family life, and so we offer the rules as easy-to-remember takeaways. Why rules? Quite simply, because rules allow everyone to enjoy a game. The same is true of a professional football game, a business transaction, and family life. Rules keep everyone on the same page; rules help us plan for the future and enjoy the present.

Early in the Church’s history, figures such as Saint Benedict developed rules to guide communal life so that everyone might help one another achieve lasting joy in their lives before God. Religious

men and women today still use Benedict's Rule because it has profoundly shaped people's ability to lead a holy life for some fifteen centuries. We are suggesting that our "Rules for Family Spirituality" similarly aim at helping families orient their shared life toward the common good of living in love. Like a monastery, a family is a group of people who live together and share the ups and downs of daily life. Food preparation, sleeping arrangements, recreational time, cleaning up, and helping one another grow are common to both kinds of communities. Further, both kinds of communities are rooted in the way God has created people to enter into relationships rooted in love. The rules we are proposing are intended to help parents name what they hope for in their family life so that the members of the family—the "domestic church"—might help one another grow in love.

Now, full disclosure: our family doesn't perfectly reflect these rules every day—we doubt that anyone's family does or even can. We are not perfectly pious people, living blissfully conflict-free lives according to a preordained divine plan. Any parent understands that raising children is about living within the tension of knowing what is good for them (and ourselves) while at the same time negotiating the basic reality of what is happening right now. Sure, we know our children need balanced meals, but sometimes the chicken nuggets or hot dogs are all we can get them to eat. We know they must learn to behave well toward one another, but some days all we can do is separate them and keep them from hurting one another. Still, the rules (whether for nutrition, good psychological health, or—in this case—a strong faith life) help give us a compass point, both when the skies are clear and when there are storms.

**RULES FOR FAMILY SPIRITUALITY**

1. God brings our family together on pilgrimage.
2. Our love for one another leads to joy.
3. Our family doesn't care about "success."
4. God stretches our family toward his Kingdom.
5. God will help us.
6. We must learn which desires lead us to freedom.

In the following chapters, we'll explore what these rules might mean for living our family lives more authentically, more freely, more lovingly, and more joyfully. Throughout these pages, you'll see numerous callouts that emphasize a point or raise a question for consideration. These might be good topics for you and someone you love to discuss in your reflection on your own parenting. And at the end of the book are a lot of practical suggestions that you might want to consider applying to your family life. So whether you take this book slowly, reading it page by page, or whether you focus on these callouts as catalysts for conversation, our hope is that you may come to see your family life as the place where the Holy Spirit, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, "broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings!"

# PART ONE

## A NEW VISION OF FAMILY LIFE



# CHAPTER ONE

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## CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

If you've picked up this book on family spirituality or if someone in your life has passed this book along, you've likely come to the realization that family life summons from us a real need for God. Chances are you are caught up in the busyness that all the people around you are immersed in as well; you sometimes feel stressed and pulled in different directions; you have hopes and desires, fears and anxieties for yourself and the people you love. You may or may not be religious in the sense of going to church very often, but you have a hunger for meaning, beauty, and hope. You feel yourself reaching out, however uncertainly, for a God who can somehow bring to harmony all these churning, relentless feelings.

What you are likely experiencing in this hunger is an already-real desire for God, however unclear it may seem from day to day. In the Christian tradition, that hunger has a name: faith. Far from a kind of certainty about everything, faith is, at its most basic level, a way of living with hopeful conviction that life is meaningful. Parenting, we have found, necessitates that kind of conviction. Have you ever considered how much you are already living a life of faith?

Think about it: you are always making decisions about things you can have no certainty about. You've pledged to live your life with other people who have the same desire for freedom that you do. All of you have your individual hopes and dreams, and all of you have ideas about what you want to do from day to day, but somehow you manage to press on together. Of course, there are periods when

living together is hard, and those times can make us question whether we know what we're doing as parents. But the very

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**Parenting is sometimes  
like driving in the dark.**

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desire to press on is itself a symptom of the life of faith.

The biblical author of the Letter to the Hebrews put it this way: "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen" (11:1). Starting and living family life is almost never according to plan. The image that comes to mind is driving in the dark: you can only see as far as your headlights allow, but still that's enough to drive across the country.

If you're like us, there have been times in your family life when you happen upon an unexpected joy, an unexpected sense of rightness in the world—a sense of "realization of what is hoped for," even though you may not have had the words to name that hope. Similarly, if you're like us, you have also had days when you had to trudge ahead because work was hard, the school schedule was relentless, you had little time for showing love to your spouse or reaching out to your friends, and you wondered whether your decision to enter into family life was a good one. You felt, on some level, the need for "evidence of things not seen"—that is, a sense that in the end, the daily labor of living as a family culminates in something beautiful.



## A MATTER OF FAITH

“Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

- Do you find it easy to act in faith?
- Do you see your family life as dependent upon faith?
- Do you connect the life of your family with an explicit faith in God?

We often wrestle with questions of how our family can live in faith. Much of what we learned *about* faith came from our parents. Both of us went to Mass and Sunday school as kids; we learned prayers; we celebrated the sacraments. But as we got older—and especially when we went off to college—we began to think of faith less as something to *learn* and more as something to *rely on* in the face of life decisions. Taking faith seriously enough to rely on led to tough questions. We had to ask ourselves if we were willing to shape our entire lives around a faith we had learned as children but were now beginning to own. Were we willing to grow in faith, even at the risk of going to places without a clear map—places that people who did not live a life of faith might think irrelevant or illogical? Would we go deep into our faith, knowing that God would somehow guide our life choices? Would we be willing to share with our children what we learned?

There’s an old song that captures what’s at stake regarding to family life choices. Harry Chapin’s 1974 song “Cat’s in the Cradle” tells the story of a man who is too busy to spend time with his young son. The adoring son vows that he is “gonna be like you, Dad.” His words are proven true but not in the way the father expected. The adult son becomes just as busy as his father had been when he was a boy, leading the father to a somber reflection: “And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me / He’d grown up just like me.” It’s a sad

song perhaps in part because it expresses a reality with which many can identify: the unrequited yearning for time alone with a parent. Let's face it—parenting takes massive amounts of time and energy to just keep a household running, from working to paying bills to shopping to cleaning to helping with homework, and so on. Carving out special time with children can be difficult, particularly in times of financial stress. Aren't there any rules to ensure our choices will actually lead us to what will make us happy?

### **ASSESSING FAMILY PRIORITIES**

Spend time in prayer considering what you value as a parent.

- What will you remember on your deathbed?
- What will you hope you have passed on to your children?
- How do you hope they will remember you?
- Consider keeping a journal to remain mindful of what is most important and what is fleeting.

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God is in charge;  
our lives have meaning;  
and love is a window  
to eternity.

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Take another example, this time from the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*. Set at an elite prep school, it focuses on the tension between parental expectation and youthful idealism. A student named

Leonard, through the influence of an exceptional teacher, discovers a love for poetry and drama. Leonard desperately wants to perform in a play, but because of his father's disapproval, he keeps his participation secret. His performance in a Shakespearean play is a triumph, but it leaves his father furious. Threatened with being pulled out of school, Leonard despairs of his future and kills himself.

By most popular measures, Leonard and his family are winners, with wealth and prestige and a bright future. But what

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Change your perspective.  
The Kingdom of God  
is right in front of you.

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makes Leonard's life so tragic is the feeling of being trapped. It is an unsettling film in the sense that it raises the question of what to live for. If wealth and a career track through the best schools into a high-powered medical career can drive a young person to suicide, then what else is worth striving for?

These two stories point to a challenge that often goes unnamed in a family's life: how to answer the question, "What exactly are we living for?" Most of the time, we operate on autopilot, more or less following the patterns we learned as children in our families of origin. We work; we divide up chores; we send the kids to school; we take family vacations; we celebrate holidays, and so on. The big moments may remind us there's a big picture, but still it's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day work of life.

The idea of family is very much an idea rooted in faith—it is always about looking toward the good of the ones we love in the face of an uncertain future. It is about vulnerability, risk and a willingness to love amidst pain and sometimes crushing disappointment. But to say that family is rooted in faith is not to say that it's completely blind or that it's completely about luck or fate or the unknown. For followers of Jesus, it's about faith that God is in charge, that our lives have meaning, that love is a window to eternity. In the light of Jesus' faith, family is ultimately about a life's purpose. To say it a little differently, nothing of family life is meaningless: God can orchestrate joys and griefs, successes and failures, expressions of love or experiences of pain toward something beautiful. To persuade his followers of this truth, Jesus' preaching

returned again and again to the theme of the Kingdom unfolding right in our midst, under our noses: “change your hearts, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:2, 10:7; Mk 1:15).<sup>1</sup> Family faith is ultimately about seeing our lives not through the limited perspectives of our own desires but rather coming to see them through “Kingdom eyes,” the way Jesus described.

What are Kingdom eyes? They are a way of looking at the world not as a series of disconnected events—some bad, some good—but as an ongoing project in which God is trying to entice people to cooperate with him in freedom to build a world governed by love. We have found that most parents, even if they are not explicitly religious, believe this on some level. They want their children to grow up in a world of love rather than of cutthroat competition and violence.

Think about it for a moment: What persuades you that love is worth practicing? What makes you think that raising a child is worth all the sacrifice and life change it demands? If you love, you already look at the world through Kingdom eyes, however unclear. Perhaps what Jesus wants most is to help you clarify your vision.

What we are proposing is really very simple: a change in perspective. That change is about using Kingdom eyes in a very specific way: to see that everything we do in the course of every day is in cooperation with a God who loves us and who is constantly inviting us to be love in the world, first toward our families and then toward everyone else. That kind of perspective emerges through the regular practice of prayer.

Prayer is the language of friendship with God.<sup>2</sup> And like any good friendship, it will have its moments of joy and heartache, of stress and tenderness, of gratefulness and anger. Sometimes the friendship will be tested by life changes: suffering and death, work stress, difficulties in relationships. Other times it will swell with

the joy of discovery: a new child, a new home, success at work. The good of friendship, Aristotle once observed, is that it is a good in itself as well as a good that moves friends in a common direction. Friendship with God means making an effort to continue the conversation, both in good times and in bad, for the sake of both the friendship itself and the goods that emerge from the common direction we walk with God. We are suggesting that cultivating this friendship at all times will yield goods both for parents and for the children who imitate them.

Do not think of prayer as a chore—as a hard lesson gained by years of study in a remote mountaintop monastery. Rather, imagine your prayer as simply your daily conversation with God, your chance to catch up with the most intimate friend in your life. Greet God when you wake up; talk with God as you shower; chatter with God as you help your children get dressed or get them ready for school; dream with God as you prepare meals; lean on God as you comfort your child who has gotten sick. And teach your children to pray by imitating the ways you pray.

In our experience, learning prayer and coming to see God as a friend was not always easy. Before we explain the rules, we'll first tell you a little about how they came to emerge as clear guidelines for us in our own family life.