

# How Can I Keep My Kids Catholic?

Seven suggestions for making sure you've done all you can

By Woodeene Koenig-Bricker



One of the biggest concerns of Catholic parents is how to insure that their children will continue to practice the faith after they are grown. "How can I keep my kids Catholic?" they ask. The short answer is: You can't. There isn't any magic formula that will guarantee your children will stay in the Church.

That's the bad news. The good news is that there are some things you can do to put the odds in your favor. Here are seven suggestions that can help.

## 1. Know the Faith

If you don't know or understand the Church's teachings, you won't be able to explain them to your children. Get a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church or one of the excellent companion texts such as "Father McBride's Family Catechism" or "The Teaching of Christ" (both from Our Sunday Visitor) and do your homework. Make sure you are ready to discuss such Catholic beliefs as the Eucharist, the male priesthood and the perpetual virginity of Mary, as well as who Jesus was and what salvation means — before your kids get curious. My son was only 5 when he asked me, "If all religions say they are right, how do we know for sure which one is telling the truth?" Needless to say, I hadn't anticipated discussing that topic in the car coming home from kindergarten!

## **2. Allow Questions**

Questions are inevitable. Doubt is an essential part of faith affirmation. Teens especially are going to question certain teachings of the Church and expect you to be able to defend them. No matter how nervous it makes you, let them ask. The truth can always stand up to the most rigorous examination. When older teens ask you about your own beliefs, be honest. Present the Church's teachings fairly and accurately, but if there are areas you have struggled with, be willing to talk about how you have resolved them. And, if there are things you still wrestle with, don't be afraid to say: "This is what the Church teaches. I'm still working on how to understand that in my own life."

## **3. Show Don't Tell**

It's been said time and again, but we still have to admit that actions really do speak louder than words. If you don't attend Mass, go to confession, pray daily and make your faith a visible part of everyday life, all the words in the world aren't going to convince your kids that it's important. Many a saint cites seeing his or her mother or father praying alone at night as a major contributing factor to their own spirituality.

## **4. Don't Make Your Piety Mandatory**

Good intentions have a way of backfiring. Be careful of making your own personal acts of piety mandatory for your children. An acquaintance of mine who insisted that her children attend daily Mass with her all the way through high school was devastated when, as each child went to college, he or she stopped going to Mass at all. She couldn't understand why. One of her sons said that he didn't have any major argument with the Church, he was just sick and tired of going to Mass. Perhaps, if she had required attendance only on Sundays and holy days, he wouldn't have been burned out by age 18. Remember, your faith has had more time to mature than your children's, and affording them the opportunity to find what is most meaningful to them — with your guidance, of course — is the best way to foster their belief.

## **5. Don't Try to Leapfrog to Sainthood**

St. Francis is one of the great saints of the Church. His virtue, holiness, penance and prayer are an example to all of us. But Francis was a rowdy playboy soldier in his youth, and rowdy playboy soldiers in the 12th century

weren't any different than they are today. Expecting our kids to go directly to the level of sanctity of a St. Francis with no growth or development does everyone an injustice. This doesn't mean we should expect our children to be sinners! Rather, we shouldn't be surprised when they don't leapfrog from infancy to sanctity. Being a St. Francis takes a lifetime.

### 6. Learn When to Let Go

At some point, parents need to let go of the desire to control and must remember that it's God who gives the gift of faith. Parents can prepare the ground for the seed to be planted, but it's God who does the actual planting. As difficult as it is, there comes a time when all parents can do is express their wishes and hopes, and then allow their children the freedom to make their own decisions. In fact, undue pressure can have the opposite effect you are driving for. St. Monica notwithstanding, you can't nag your children into heaven.

### 7. Never Give Up Hope

An elderly woman whose children hadn't turned out well was asked how she could be so serene about it all. She answered, "Children are like cookies, and God isn't through baking mine yet." Pray always for your children, and never lose hope that with a little more time in the oven, they will turn out right in the end.

While you can't guarantee that your kids will stay Catholic, you can guarantee that you've done your part in handing on the faith. What they do with it after that is up to them — and God.

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