

Partnering with Parents to Bring Home the Faith

Parents hope that faith will be the cornerstone of their children's lives – this initiative shows the way

Michael Theisen

Strong Catholic Families: Strong Catholic Youth emerged in 2010 as a practical response to patterns of declining Mass attendance and parishioner involvement and sobering research findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The highly regarded research, conducted from 2001 to 2008, yielded grim news about U.S. teens and their faith beliefs, practices and knowledge. Catholic youth, in particular, were singled out as “faring rather badly” (Soul Searching, p. 194) compared to their peers in other Christian denominations. But the research also gave us a glimpse into some solutions to abate this looming crisis of faith transmission. The research squarely named parents as the “single most important

influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents” (Soul Searching, p. 261) and found that highly religious teenagers appeared to do better “on a variety of important life outcomes” (p. 263), concluding that living their faith *between the Sundays* really does make a difference in both individuals and those around them. When this is combined with other recent findings that suggest the Millennial Generation is one of the most family friendly and family connected on record (Pew Research, 2010), we have the basic ingredients for an antidote to the superficial, consumer-driven faith found in many parishes and schools today.

That's exactly what a team of national leaders spent two years developing, resulting in the Strong Catholic Families: Strong Catholic Youth national initiative, which offers parish

and school leaders an effective and dynamic process to partner with parents to bring home the faith. Strong Catholic Families seeks to engage parents more deeply in the life and mission of the church by empowering them to serve as the primary leader of faith in their families. While numerous resources are connected to the process, the Strong Catholic Families initiative is not a curriculum to follow, but a long-term strategic change process that helps parishes and schools actively listen to and assess parents' needs and support them as they commit to growing their family in faith.

What's Your Wish?

While the Strong Catholic Families process has four primary steps and numerous resources connected to it, it



is anchored by a two-hour interactive presentation and dialogue with parents that presents highlights of the research findings along with church teachings that underscore their critical and irreplaceable role in passing the Catholic faith on to their children.

It All Begins with a Wish

At the beginning of the session, parents are asked to write down their wish for the role that faith will play in the lives of their children, when their children are adults. The answers are shared in small groups and a sampling with the large group. The wishes, while varied across the country, contain similar hopes and desires: “that faith serve as their moral compass,” “that faith help them get through the tough times in life,” “that faith be a cornerstone to

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who they are and how they live life,” “that their Catholic identity grows and goes with them throughout life.” These wishes serve as a type of North Star, guiding parents and leaders to work together to grow the faith that will help make these wishes come true for the next generation of disciples. What leaders in attendance learn is that parents’ hopes are no different than the ones church leaders have for the children and youth they help catechize, which allows a critical bridge between the domestic and institutional churches to be built.

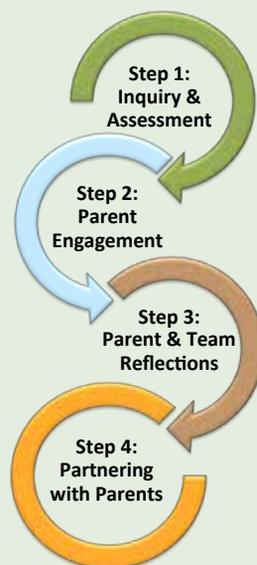
As the session continues, parents are invited to talk with other parents and individually assess the health and well-being of their faith life at home. The assessment, completed in a *Family Faith Resource* booklet each family receives, helps parents find their unique starting point for how they wish to grow in faith as a family. Rather than reverting to the old school dynamic of church leaders telling families what they should do or, as may often be the case, what they are not doing correctly, the assessment allows parents to tell church leaders what they need

The Strong Catholic Families Process

The Strong Catholic Families process has four steps that lead to numerous avenues of faith growth in families and the entire faith community.

In **Step 1**, the process begins with consultations between a diocesan consultant and parish and school leaders. During these meetings, the consultant presents an overview of the Strong Catholic Families dynamic and helps the leaders assess their readiness to begin building strong Catholic families and in thinking through the implications this direction will have on programming and structures. Once the leadership is prepared to make this initial commitment, it begins to assemble a local team of parents and staff to prepare for the next steps.

Step 2 seeks to engage parents through presentations and dialogues with a trained presenter who uses contemporary research combined with engaging visuals and pertinent stories to help parents understand



their critical role in how faith is lived in their home and especially in their children’s lives. Follow-up gatherings help engage parents explore their emerging needs and concerns and learn practi-

cal strategies for growing in faith as a family.

Step 3 involves additional critical reflection and discernment by all involved—staff, leaders, parents and the local Strong Catholic Families team—on the next steps in partnering with one another to empower and support family faith growth.

Step 4 is an ongoing and evolving movement comprised of implementing new strategies, further reflection and evaluation and continued commitment to supporting the growing partnerships between the institutional church and school and the domestic church. This cycle continues in the years ahead as more and more families become empowered to grow in their Catholic faith.

to bring their wish to life in the home. This feedback mechanism, backed up by a Parent Response Form returned to local leaders, is central to the empowering approach that marks the Strong Catholic Families process.

Diane Kledzik, associate director of evangelization and adult faith formation in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, became involved in Strong Catholic Families after receiving an email from the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership. “My heart was burning within me as I read about the process because of the focus on the partnership between leaders and parents and the willingness to try something different.” From her perspective, one of the biggest fruits of the Strong Catholic Families experience is that it gets leaders working together and focusing on a central component of parish life: families.

To help bring this to life, Kledzik often asks colleagues, “What does it mean to partner with parents through your ministry efforts?” She encourages them to consider how a family perspective might transform current programs and perspectives. This question led the diocese’s Youth Ministry office to reexamine a weeklong annual youth service event. In response, leaders decided that it needed to conclude with a parent session that would bridge the faith experiences of the youth during the week with how parents could support and sustain this growth in the home. Kledzik says she is supported by what she has learned through the Strong Catholic Families experience, namely the singular importance of her role in passing on the faith. “When times get rough, it reminds me that I do make a difference in my child’s life, that faith is important and makes a difference,

and this motivates me to be a better Catholic, a better parent.”

Sharing Faith

One of the most common requests from parents during the process is how best to share faith and pray together at home. Ministry leaders often assume that families know how to do this or that it is a regular practice, but count the quizzical looks you get when you ask any gathering of parents how many spend time faith sharing. It’s not that they don’t want to; it’s that most do not know how and, when asked, will readily admit it.

In the initial NSYR research, Smith found that “the NSYR interview seemed to be the first time any adult has asked these young people what they believed and how it mattered in their life” (Soul Searching, p. 267). This is why every Strong Catholic Families parent session begins with an abbreviated *lectio divina* process of faith sharing that models for parents what it looks like and how meaningful and simple it is to do. Kledzik, for one, would love to see every church and school gathering, including meetings, contain some form of faith sharing to make it part of the culture of faith, eschewing the consumer-provider model that has characterized much of our church models and programs over the years.

“We get so caught up in streamlining our meetings and programs that we end up cutting out the critical prayer and faith sharing for the sake of efficiency,” Kledzik says, “and then we wonder why parents are struggling with how to transmit the faith at home.” Kledzik and others have good reason to advocate for this inclusion because the NSYR research lists daily faith

conversations and faith sharing in the home with children as one of the most powerful indicators for a sustained and strong faith in adulthood (Soul Searching).

Varied Results

Strong Catholic Families has been presented in more than 60 dioceses in the United States and Canada since it was introduced three years ago. One of the most common questions leaders ask before hosting it is “what happens after a parish or school implements this process?” The answer is as varied as the number of parishes and schools that have gone through it because each faith community determines, in collaboration with parents and a local leadership team, its unique response on how to best partner to bring home the faith.

For example, following a Strong Catholic Family process at St. Joseph’s Church in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, leaders discerned a five-year family faith plan that was kicked off by a complete restructuring of Mass and faith formation times because the current structures worked against families spending time together, often forcing them to make tough choices on what faith-based activities to participate in. The local Strong Catholic Families team helped restructure what Sunday morning looked like in the faith community, expanding the time between Masses to accommodate a newly developed family-centered faith formation experience that enabled parishioners to learn about a faith theme with their own peer group just before or right after attending Mass as a family. The leaders even reported an increase in Mass attendance as a result.

After hosting a Strong Catholic Families process in St. Bernard Parish in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Nancy Longo responded to parents whose teens were enrolled in Confirmation class by developing multiple parent groups called Parents for Life.

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The groups met during the Confirmation sessions and were led by parents Longo trained. Over a two-year period, parents brought their Bibles and participated in adult-focused formation that included scripture, faith sharing, Catholic identity, vocations, Eucharistic adoration and several intergenerational sessions with the teens. In previous years, Longo said that only five to 10 parents would show up for any type of parent session. After using the Strong Catholic Families process, she had more than 10 groups of parents with upwards of 90 percent attendance at meetings. The difference: parents were empowered and motivated by the interactive Strong Catholic Families session and were personally invited by other parents to join the groups.

Similar outcomes are common among other parishes and schools that commit to the Strong Catholic Families process. From online formation opportunities and increases in stewardship

and service responses to intergenerational events and family-faith programs, the results are both gratifying and hopeful. Because the next steps originate from the parents themselves, the possibilities are endless.

Emphasis on Partnership

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Educational Association. By partnering on the national level, these organizations are able to model the type of collaboration that must occur at the diocesan and local levels for a new paradigm of faith transmission to emerge, one that places families, and particularly parents, squarely in the middle of any faith transmission process.

Another partnership that has emerged during this process is one with Catholic Hispanic leaders. As a result, the Strong Catholic Family resources and process have been adapted for Hispanic families and parishes through Fortaleciendo Familias en la Fe (Strengthening Families in the Faith). While it uses the same four-step process to bring about change in the faith formation system, it speaks to the unique issues and culture that form the Catholic Hispanic faith experience and context. Together, these partnerships, along with those forming at the diocesan and local levels, are helping the church rethink how faith is being passed on to the next generation of disciples. And that is good news for the whole church! To learn more, please visit www.strongcatholicfamilies.org.

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