THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



The Catholic Father

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

INTRODUCTION

The Job You Were Given

You are doing the most consequential work of your life, and almost no one has ever explained to you how.

You are forming the religious imagination of small people who will live for eighty or ninety years and then for eternity. The man they become at thirty-five will be shaped, in ways neither of you can fully see, by what you did with them this week. The faith they hand on to your grandchildren will look, in important respects, like the faith you handed on to them. The chain that runs from you back through your own father, your grandfathers, the men of your line, will run forward through your children, your grandchildren, the great-grandchildren you will never meet.

This is the heaviest task in the Catholic life. It is also the task with the thinnest literature, the worst training, and the most uncertain feedback. Your children will not, in real time, tell you whether you are succeeding. The results of your fatherhood will not be visible for decades. By the time you can see whether the faith took root, the time for forming it will be long past.

And the cultural facts are sobering. Most Catholic children, statistically, walk away from the Church at some point in their twenties. Many never return. The research on what predicts whether a child keeps the faith has converged on one striking finding: the practice of the father matters more than any other single variable. More than the mother's practice. More than the parish. More than the school. The father's lived faith is the single most reliable predictor of his children's.

As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. — Joshua 24:15

This is good news and bad news in one sentence.

The good news is that you have more influence than you realized. If you have been doubting whether your daily practice of the faith matters to your kids, the evidence is overwhelming: it does. More than anything else you do.

The bad news is that you are the variable. You cannot outsource this. The parish school will not save your kids. The CCD program will not save your kids. Your wife's holiness, real and important as it is, cannot do this part by herself. Children of devout mothers and indifferent fathers leave the Church at high rates. Children of devout fathers tend not to.

The Church has not given you a comprehensive playbook for this. There is, frankly, very little. A few classics, scattered modern books, the occasional good homily, the example of fathers in your own parish if you are lucky. Mostly, men are figuring this out as they go, often poorly, often alone, often with the suspicion that they are the only one who feels overwhelmed by it.

This book is an attempt to make the work clearer.

We will start with what Catholic fatherhood actually is and why your witness matters more than your words. Then we will walk through three ages of childhood, the early years, the middle years, and the teenage years, with concrete practices for each. Then we will spend four chapters on the four hardest conversations: confession, sex, suffering, and doubt. Then we will address the two situations every Catholic father quietly fears: when they walk away, and when you have failed. Finally, we will talk about the long game, the years after they have left your home, and the deeper truth underneath all of this, that the children you are raising were never finally yours.

You did not pick this job. It was handed to you when each of your children was born. It is the most important thing you will do. You can learn how.

He is, as always, your Father in this work. He has done it before. He is doing it with you. Let's begin.

C H A P T E R O N E

What Catholic Fatherhood Actually Is

Priest, Prophet, and King of Your Home

The Catholic tradition has a specific theological understanding of fatherhood that most Catholic men have never been clearly taught.

It rests on the doctrine of the *common priesthood of the baptized*. When you were baptized, you were anointed with chrism and configured to Christ as priest, prophet, and king. This is a real reality, not a poetic flourish. It is not the same as the ordained priesthood; you cannot consecrate the Eucharist or absolve sin. But it is a genuine participation in Christ's threefold office, and it shapes your life in concrete ways.

In the context of your family, this means three specific things.

Priest of Your Home

The priest is the one who leads worship and offers prayer.

In your home, this is your job. Not exclusively. Your wife is also a baptized priest in this sense, and she will pray with the children too, often more than you do. But the father's role in leading the worship of the home is irreducibly his. When the family prays grace at meals, you should lead it. When the family prays the Rosary, you should be there, with a Rosary in your hand, not in the other room. When the children are blessed at bedtime, you should be the one blessing them most nights.

This is not about pulling rank. It is about the particular weight your voice carries in the religious imagination of children. When the father prays, the children absorb something about prayer that no one else can teach them in the same way. When the father is absent from prayer, the same lesson is taught, by omission, just as powerfully.

Prophet of Your Home

The prophet is the one who teaches the truth.

In your home, this means you talk about God. Not constantly. Not preachily. But naturally, frequently, with conviction. The Catholic father who never mentions God in ordinary conversation, who never references the Mass at dinner, who never names a saint, who never says "let's thank God for this," is teaching, by silence, that the faith is something for Sundays and is not really relevant to the world the children actually live in.

The prophet teaches by what he says. He also teaches by what he reads aloud, by what he asks at dinner, by the questions he answers honestly. *Why did Grandma die? Why does God let bad things happen? Why do we have to go to Mass? What does it mean that Jesus is in the Eucharist?* The Catholic father has to be willing to engage these questions, even when he does not know the answer perfectly. The willingness matters as much as the precision.

King of Your Home

The king is the one who governs, protects, and provides.

The word *king* makes modern men uncomfortable because they hear it through the filter of bad fatherhood, the domineering man, the petty tyrant. That is not what Catholic kingship means. Christ Himself, the King of Kings, took the form of a servant and washed His disciples' feet. The kingship of the Catholic father is modeled on this. He is the one who takes responsibility. He is the one who serves first. He is the one who, when there is a hard decision, makes it. He is the one who, when there is a sacrifice to make, makes it before anyone else has to.

He provides materially, to the extent he is able. He protects the household from harm, including spiritual harm, including the harm of bad influences on his children. He governs, which in a healthy Catholic home is mostly invisible. The well-governed home does not need many commands. The atmosphere has been set by the slow accumulation of small decisions over years.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. — Ephesians 6:4

St. Joseph as the Model

The Catholic tradition gives us, as the model of Catholic fatherhood, a man about whom the Gospels record not a single spoken word.

Joseph is silent in Scripture. We know that he was a craftsman, that he was just (the Gospel's word for him), that he protected Mary and Jesus by taking them to Egypt, that he raised the Son of God in the trade of his hands. We do not have a single recorded sentence from him.

This is, in itself, the model. Catholic fatherhood is mostly not what you say. It is what you do, day after day, often without explanation. You show up. You work. You protect. You provide. You pray. You take the family to Mass. You bless the children. You love their mother. None of it makes a speech. All of it is the formation of a household that, somehow,

when you look at the saints who came out of such households, produced people who could change the world.

Joseph raised Jesus. He did it largely in silence. He did it by being there, every day, doing his work. You can do that.

The Particular Weight

One last thing about Catholic fatherhood, the thing that the research keeps confirming. The father's voice in matters of faith carries a particular weight that the mother's voice, equally loved and equally essential as it is, does not carry in the same way.

When a child sees the mother praying, the child concludes that women pray. When a child sees the father praying, the child concludes that prayer is for the family, including for him when he grows up. Children intuit, often without anyone telling them, that the father's interests are the family's serious interests. If Dad goes to Mass, Mass matters. If Dad goes to confession, confession matters. If Dad prays, prayer matters.

This is, frankly, unfair to the mother. But it is the situation. The pastoral implication is that you cannot, in good conscience, leave the religious formation of your children to your wife. The whole household structure conspires to make your participation uniquely important. You have to show up.

C H A P T E R T W O

The Witness That Comes Before the Words

You Are the Curriculum

Here is a fact that should bother you in a useful way.

Your children are watching you all the time. They are watching you with a kind of attention they will not give to any teacher, any priest, any author, any podcast, any spiritual influence in their lives. They are watching you the way an apprentice watches a master craftsman: not just for what you say, but for how you stand, how you speak, what you laugh at, what you tolerate, what you refuse.

By the time they are eighteen, they will have absorbed, from your daily life, something deeper than any lesson you formally taught them. They will have absorbed *the kind of man a Catholic man is*, in your particular version of it. That version, transmitted by ten thousand small observations over two decades, will form the floor of their own adult faith.

The implication is uncomfortable. You are the curriculum. The book you are writing is your own life, and they are reading it whether you want them to or not.

Where Your Witness Actually Matters Most

You probably already know, in the abstract, that example matters. You may also have absorbed an evasion: that as long as you take them to Mass and say grace at dinner, the formal religious practices will cover any inconsistencies in the rest of your life.

They will not. Children are exquisitely sensitive to incongruity. They notice, with a perception that ought to terrify any Catholic father, when the practices and the rest of life do not match. Three areas where this matters most:

The way you treat their mother. No amount of religious devotion in the home can compensate for contempt, harshness, or coldness toward your wife. If your children watch you speak to her with kindness, listen to her with attention, defend her in public, and forgive her in private, they will absorb something about love that no homily can teach them. If they watch the opposite, all your prayers will look, to them, like a costume.

The way you handle anger. Children remember the angry moments. They remember the slammed door, the shouted word, the simmering silence. If you are a man who loses his temper regularly, and especially if you do it in the name of righteousness ("I had to set them straight"), you are teaching them that anger is the secret currency of male authority, even Catholic male authority. The opposite teaching, the man who is genuinely slow to anger,

who apologizes when he has lost his temper, who refuses to let resentment build, is one of the most powerful gifts a Catholic father can give.

The way you handle your own sin. If you confess your faults, ask forgiveness, go to Confession regularly, they will learn that being Catholic is not about being perfect; it is about being honest. If you defend yourself constantly, blame others, refuse to apologize, they will learn that the Catholic life is a performance and that real failings are to be hidden.

The Three Places They Are Watching Most

There are three particular contexts where your formation of your children, by witness, happens most intensively. Most fathers do not realize this.

The drive home from Mass. If you arrive at Mass on time, sit attentively, receive Communion reverently, and then in the parking lot snap at your wife or curse the slow driver leaving the lot, you have just taught your children that Mass is a sixty-minute performance after which the real you returns. If you carry the peace of the Mass into the car, into the conversation at brunch, into the rest of the day, you have just taught something they will never forget.

The hard moment at home. When a glass breaks, when the toddler has a meltdown, when the teenager says something cutting, the children are watching. The Catholic father who takes a breath, says a brief silent prayer, and responds with patience has just delivered a sermon. The one who explodes has delivered a different sermon. Both sermons land. Both shape what *Catholic* looks like in the children's minds.

The phone in your hand. They see what holds your attention. If your phone holds it more than they do, more than your wife does, more than your prayer book does, they have noticed. They will be Catholic with the kind of distractedness you model. They will pray with the kind of half-attention you bring to dinner. The phone, the screen, the way you use them, is a daily teaching they cannot avoid.

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise men but as wise. — Ephesians 5:15

The Good News About Your Imperfection

Here is the relief in all of this.

You do not have to be a perfect man for your children to inherit a real Catholic faith. The saints almost all had imperfect fathers. The Catholic men whose children kept the faith

were not, by and large, men without flaws. They were men whose flaws were honest, whose efforts were visible, whose dependence on grace was clear.

What you cannot afford is the *pretense* of holiness, the costume of religion worn over a hidden bitterness or hypocrisy. Children see that immediately, and the recognition is devastating. They will not become the kind of man their father pretended to be. They will become the kind of man their father actually was.

The path forward is not perfection. It is honesty. You confess your failures. You apologize when you have been wrong, even to your six-year-old. You acknowledge, openly, that you go to Confession because you need it, that you pray because you cannot do this alone, that the Catholic life is the slow shaping of a flawed man by grace.

The man who lets his children see *that* has given them the most useful inheritance a Catholic father can give. He has shown them, not a saint, but a man being made into one. That is something they can imitate. That is something they can become.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

The Early Years

Birth Through Seven

The first seven years of a child's life are the years when the religious imagination is being laid down. By age seven, the architecture of the soul has its basic shape, and most of the materials have come from the home.

This is the season when your specific job is to make God *familiar*. Not in any reductive sense. In the original sense: He is the God of the family. He is at the table. He is at bedtime. He is mentioned in ordinary conversation. He is the air the child breathes before the child can name what air is.

You will not be teaching theology yet. Theology comes later. Now is for the formation of love.

The Three Anchors

There are three places in the day where Catholic faith should be anchored in the home of small children. They are simple. They do not require special training or effort. They are also, in most modern homes, missing.

Meals. Grace before meals, every meal, said aloud, including in restaurants. The traditional one is fine: *Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.* The Sign of the Cross at the beginning and end. Do not skip it because you are tired. Do not skip it because guests are present. Do not skip it because the food is in front of the children and they are hungry. Sixty seconds of prayer before food is one of the most consistent religious formations a child can have, and the disappearance of it from most modern Catholic homes is one of the great quiet losses of the last fifty years.

Bedtime. The most important prayer time of the day with small children. Sit on the edge of the bed. Make the Sign of the Cross on their forehead with your thumb. Pray together. The classical bedtime prayers are short and worth memorizing:

Angel of God, my Guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.

Our Father.

Hail Mary.

Then a personal prayer. *Lord, thank You for today. Thank You for Mama and Daddy. Bless [each sibling]. Bless Grandma and Grandpa. Help me to be good tomorrow.* Then the Sign of the Cross again.

This whole sequence takes about three minutes. Done every night, it becomes one of the load-bearing memories of the child's childhood. Twenty years later, the adult child going through a hard time will reach, often unconsciously, for these prayers. They are the floor.

Sunday Mass. Take them. Every Sunday. Without exception. Including when they are difficult. Including when you would rather not. The toddler who wails through Mass is being formed by the experience of going every week, by the music, by the smells, by the watching of his father stand and kneel and process forward to Communion. The Mass is forming him even when he cannot articulate any of it.

The temptation, with disruptive small children, is to leave them home with a babysitter while you take older siblings to Mass. Avoid this except in necessity. The formation comes from the going.

Holy Water and the Sign of the Cross

Put a small holy water font by the front door of your home, if you can. Bless yourself and the children when they leave for school in the morning. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* Touch their forehead briefly. Send them out under His protection.

When they come home, bless them again. This is a small physical act that takes thirty seconds. Done daily for fifteen years, it places the children inside a continuous awareness that they are God's, that their home is His home, that the threshold between inside and outside is a holy threshold.

Let the children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. — Mark 10:14

The Crucifix They Can See

Make sure there is a crucifix in every room of the house where they spend time. Not a small one tucked away. One they can see, every day, in the context of normal life.

This is one of the simplest acts of Catholic formation a father can do. The image of Christ crucified, present in the visual field of a child throughout childhood, becomes one of the deep furnitures of their imagination. They will not articulate this; they will just know, when they are older, that Jesus on the cross is part of the architecture of reality.

Picture Bibles and Saints

Read to them, at bedtime, from a good picture Bible. There are many. Pick one with reverent illustrations and faithful texts. Read it slowly. Stop and answer questions.

Read them lives of the saints, age-appropriate. Saints make Catholicism three-dimensional for children in a way nothing else can. The little girl who loves the story of St. Thérèse will, when she is older, have a relationship with St. Thérèse that no book of catechism can produce. The boy who loves the story of St. Francis taming the wolf, or St. George slaying the dragon, has absorbed something about the moral imagination of Catholicism that no abstract teaching can match.

The Atmospheric Formation

You may notice that none of this is doctrinal. The doctrine will come later. Right now you are doing something that is, in some ways, more important. You are forming the *atmosphere* of the child's life so that, when the doctrine comes, it has a home to land in.

The child who has prayed every night since infancy, who has watched the father bless himself and his siblings every day, who has seen the crucifix in every room of the house, who has gone to Mass every Sunday of his life, is a child whose interior life has already been Catholicized before he can spell the word.

This is your work in the early years. Quiet, patient, atmospheric. Eight years from now, when the second phase begins, you will be grateful that the foundation is there.

C H A P T E R F O U R

The Middle Years

Eight Through Twelve

Something changes around age seven or eight. The child crosses what Catholic tradition has long called the *age of reason*. They become capable of moral choice, of abstract thought, of asking real theological questions. They are also typically preparing for their First Confession and First Communion in this era, which means the Church itself is recognizing the threshold.

This is the season when the work shifts. The atmosphere you built in the early years now needs to be supplemented with explicit teaching. They are going to start asking questions. You have to be ready.

The Catechesis Problem

Before going further, an honest word about parish catechesis.

Many Catholic parishes have inadequate religious education programs. This is not an attack on the dedicated volunteers who run them; it is a sober assessment of the literature on Catholic identity formation. The data is clear: most parish CCD programs do not produce children who can articulate even basic Catholic doctrine. Sunday school once a week, in a program of varying quality, does not get the job done.

If you are sending your children to such a program and assuming that it is forming their faith, you are mistaken. The program is, at best, a supplement. You are the primary catechist.

This means you need to take responsibility for what they actually know. By the end of these middle years, your children should know, at minimum: the four marks of the Church, the seven sacraments, the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, the basic structure of the Mass, the four sets of Rosary mysteries, the meaning of Real Presence, who the Trinity is, and a working answer to the question "why are we Catholic and not something else?"

If you cannot teach all of this yourself, find resources. The Baltimore Catechism, in its question-and-answer form, is still excellent for this age. The *Compendium of the Catechism* is a good adult reference. There are good modern programs (Symbolon for the family, Word on Fire's content for children, Father Mike Schmitz on YouTube for older children). Use them. Watch them with your kids. Discuss.

The Daily Practice in the Middle Years

The early years' practices continue, with additions.

The family Rosary. Most modern Catholic families do not pray the Rosary together. They should. The middle years are when this can finally begin in earnest. Children of this age can hold a Rosary, follow along, and pray a decade with focus.

You do not have to start with a full Rosary. Start with one decade after dinner, three nights a week. Five minutes. Sit together in the living room. Take turns leading. Use the mystery of the day or pick one that fits. Build slowly.

A family that prays a daily Rosary together for ten years is rare. The children of such a family are not.

Spiritual reading at bedtime. Continue reading at bedtime, but now move from picture Bibles to chapter books for children of this age. The Magnificat Year of the Saints, the Mary Fabyan Windeatt biographies, *The Story of Our Lady*, the Vision Books series on the saints, the *Tomie de Paola* illustrated saint books. Read them slowly, a chapter or two at a time. Discuss.

Mass with attention. Begin teaching them what the Mass actually is. Explain the parts. Hand them a missal. Help them follow the prayers. Discuss the readings on the drive home. Ask: what did Father say in the homily? What was the Gospel about? Why did the priest do that thing he did at the altar?

This may seem like overkill. It is not. The Catholic child who has been actively taught how to participate in Mass becomes the Catholic adolescent who can stay engaged at Mass. The child who has been passively sitting through it for ten years becomes the teenager who tunes out.

The Questions Begin

This is also the age when the real questions start.

Why is there evil if God is good?

Why do we have to go to confession to a priest? Can't we just tell God?

Why are we Catholic and my friend is Baptist?

What about people who never hear about Jesus?

Did the things in the Bible really happen?

Why does the Church say no to things that seem okay?

The temptation is to brush these off, or to give the kind of half-answer that protects you from looking like you do not know. Resist both. The child asking these questions is doing exactly what a Catholic child should be doing. The questions are not a threat. They are the beginning of a real faith.

Three rules for handling them:

First, take the question seriously. Stop what you are doing. Sit down. Say, *That's a great question. Let's think about it.* The respect you show the question communicates the respect you show their interior life.

Second, give the best answer you have, then acknowledge what you don't know. The Catholic Church has thoughtful answers to almost every question your child can ask. You may not know them perfectly. That is fine. Give what you have. Then say, *I want to learn more about this. Let me look it up and we'll talk again.* Then actually do it.

Third, point them to resources. Show them that the Catholic intellectual tradition has been doing this work for two thousand years. There are books, podcasts, videos for their level. Bishop Robert Barron's content. Father Mike Schmitz. *Catholic All Year* and other good Catholic family resources. Build them a sense that they belong to a thinking tradition.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. — Deuteronomy 6:4-7

The Sacraments in This Era

Two sacraments are typically received in this era: First Confession (around age seven or eight) and First Communion (often the same year, sometimes a year later).

These are not just events. They are formational moments your child will remember for the rest of his life. Give them weight.

First Confession: take it seriously. In the days before, walk through an examination of conscience with them. Tell them what to expect. Tell them, clearly, that the priest is bound by the seal and that nothing they confess will ever be repeated. Take them. After, go out for ice cream, or do something small that marks the day. They have just received a sacrament. Mark it.

First Communion: bigger still. Help them prepare. Pray with them. On the day, dress up. Take pictures. Make it the kind of day they remember. Some Catholic families have a tradition of letting the child pick anything they want for dinner that night. Some give a special gift, a personal Bible, a Rosary, a saint medal, a missal. The traditions matter. They communicate, *This is one of the most important days of your life.*

You may also begin taking them to monthly Confession from this age onward. Make it normal. Go yourself, in front of them. The Catholic child who grows up watching his father go to Confession will not, as an adult, treat it as exotic or shameful.

C H A P T E R F I V E

The Teenage Years

Thirteen Through Eighteen

The fundamental shift, the one most Catholic fathers miss until it is too late, is this: in the teenage years, your child has to *choose* the faith. They are no longer Catholic because you said so. They are no longer Catholic because they were too young to question it. They have to decide.

Many Catholic fathers, sensing this shift, panic. They double down on rules. They moralize more loudly. They monitor more closely. They argue with rebellion.

This almost always backfires. The teenager whose father responds to questioning with crackdowns concludes that the faith cannot survive scrutiny. The teenager whose father responds to doubt with anger concludes that the faith is fragile. The teenager whose father responds to mistakes with shame concludes that the faith is for the perfect, and he is not perfect, so it is not for him.

The work of this phase is different. Your job, increasingly, is not to enforce the faith. Your job is to *invite them into it as adults*. To keep the door open. To model what an honestly chosen faith looks like. To wait, with hope and prayer, while they make their own way through the questions.

The Posture Shift

In the early years, you were the authority. They believed what you told them because you told them.

In the middle years, you became the teacher. You explained things. You answered questions. You corrected misunderstandings.

In the teenage years, you become something harder. You become a witness. You bear witness to a way of being a man, a Catholic, a believer, that they may or may not choose to imitate. The choice is now, increasingly, theirs.

This does not mean you stop being their father. It does not mean rules disappear. It means that the substance of your influence shifts from formal authority to embodied witness. The man you have been in front of them for fifteen years is now the curriculum. They are deciding whether to inherit the kind of man you are.

Three Hard Rules

Three practical rules for the teenage years that most Catholic fathers do not naturally observe.

First, do not moralize. The teenager is allergic to lectures. The moralizing father, however good his intentions, mostly produces the inverse of what he wants. The teenager learns to tune out, to comply outwardly while disengaging interiorly, or to leave entirely as soon as he can.

This does not mean you never address moral issues. It means you address them rarely, briefly, in the right moment, and with the assumption that the teenager is an adult-in-formation, not a target. One serious conversation about pornography, well done at age thirteen, is worth fifty disapproving comments delivered over the next five years.

Second, do not panic at doubt. Your teenager will doubt. Specific doctrines. The existence of God. The authority of the Church. The reliability of Scripture. The credibility of the priest at the parish. These doubts are not necessarily a crisis. They are, often, the natural emergence of an adult mind starting to take ownership of an inherited faith.

The panicked father, hearing doubt, responds with shock and increased pressure. The wise father responds with curiosity. *Tell me more about that. What's making you question? Have you read anything on this? Let me find some good responses and we can talk about them.* The wise father knows that the Catholic Church has good answers to virtually every doubt and has the patience to walk the teenager through them.

Third, fight for the relationship. The single most important variable in the teenage years is whether your son or daughter still wants to talk to you. If they do, almost everything else can be worked out. If they do not, no amount of theology will land.

This means choosing your battles. Some things are non-negotiable: Sunday Mass, basic respect, the core moral lines. Beyond those, many things are negotiable. The fight over the haircut, the music, the friends-you-don't-quite-trust, the political opinion, often costs more than it gains. Reserve the hard conversations for the things that actually matter. Let the rest be.

The Mass Question

Most Catholic teenagers go through a season of resisting Mass. They will say it is boring. They will say they do not believe it. They will ask why they have to go. They will sleep in. They will sulk.

The classical Catholic answer is firm: as long as they live in your house, they go to Mass. This is the position of most serious Catholic families. The reasoning is that Sunday Mass is

a serious moral obligation, that they are not yet able to take responsibility for their own souls in this matter, and that the practice of going matters even when the disposition is bad.

The classical answer is correct. But it has to be delivered with care.

Avoid the screaming match. Avoid making Mass a weekly battle. Establish, calmly, when they are about thirteen: in our family, we go to Mass on Sundays. This is non-negotiable while you live here. After they understand this, do not re-litigate it weekly. Just go.

Some Catholic fathers have found it useful to let teenagers choose certain things: which Mass time, sitting with friends, occasional attendance at a different parish. The flexibility on the secondary matters protects the firmness on the primary one.

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. — Proverbs 22:6

The Relationship in Person

In the early years, you tucked them in. In the middle years, you taught them. In the teenage years, the great practice is the one-on-one time.

Take your son out for breakfast, regularly. Take your daughter out for coffee. Just you. No siblings. No phones on the table.

Do not, at first, talk about anything spiritual. Talk about their life. Listen. Ask questions about what they are reading, who their friends are, what they are worried about, what they are hoping for. Do this regularly enough that it is normal. Do it long enough that they begin to trust the conversation.

Then, occasionally, the harder topics come up. Sometimes you raise them. More often, they will. *Dad, what do you actually think about this?* When they ask, you answer honestly, briefly, with the assumption that they are capable of receiving a real adult answer.

This is the foundation of teenage faith formation. Not the lectures. The hundreds of small conversations across the years that taught them their father is someone they can actually talk to, who takes them seriously, who has thought about the things they are thinking about, and who is honest about his own faith and doubts.

The next four chapters are about the four specific conversations that almost every Catholic father has to have, and that almost every Catholic father gets wrong if he has not prepared. Confession. Sex. Suffering. Doubt.

We will take them one at a time.

C H A P T E R S I X

Talking About Confession

The Sacrament They Will Avoid Unless You Don't

Confession is the Catholic sacrament most likely to be dropped, by your children, the moment you stop requiring it. They will go through First Confession because you took them. They will go through the school's quarterly Confession because they had to. After they leave home, unless something has shifted in their interior life, they will probably not go for years, sometimes decades.

This is not because Confession is hard, although it is. It is because most Catholic children inherit a defective picture of what Confession actually is. They picture it as embarrassing, humiliating, scary, and pointless. Their image of God in the confessional is the Angry Judge we discussed in *Knowing the Father*. Their image of the priest is a stern man behind a screen who is going to be disappointed in them.

Your job is to give them, before any of these impressions ossify, a true picture of what is actually happening in Confession.

What Confession Actually Is

Be ready to articulate it. Most Catholic men cannot. Here is the substance:

Confession is the place where Jesus Himself, through the priest, forgives your sin. It is not therapy. It is not advice. It is not a moral evaluation. It is a sacrament, which means it is an effective action: when the priest pronounces absolution, the sin is forgiven, by Christ, in fact, not symbolically.

The priest is acting *in persona Christi*. He is, in the moment of absolution, doing what Christ does. The fact that he is a flawed man does not affect the sacrament; the sacrament works because Christ is working through him.

The seal of Confession is absolute. The priest can never, under any circumstance, reveal what is confessed. Priests have died rather than violate it. This is not theoretical; there are canonized saints who chose execution rather than break the seal.

The encounter with Christ in Confession is one of the most intimate available on earth. He is meeting your child, personally, in the moment of his honest acknowledgment of sin, and giving him exactly what he most needs: the assurance that he is forgiven and loved.

That is what Confession is. If your children grow up understanding it this way, they will not avoid it the way most modern Catholics do.

There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. — Luke 15:7

The Witness That Carries Most Weight

The most important thing you can do about Confession, by orders of magnitude, is *go yourself, regularly, and let your children see it.*

If you go to Confession once a year, when forced, your children will conclude Confession is a once-a-year obligation. If you go monthly, calmly, without drama, they will conclude Confession is a normal part of Catholic life.

When you go, take your kids with you sometimes. Not to confess (unless they want to), but to come along. The trip itself, the brief conversation about what you confessed (in general terms only, never specifics), the matter-of-fact way you treat the practice, will form their picture more than any lecture you could give.

When they go, do not interrogate them afterward about what they confessed. The seal applies to them too, in a way. The space they need with their confessor is sacred. Tell them you are proud of them. Take them for ice cream. Move on.

The Specific Conversations

There are three particular conversations to have about Confession across the years.

Before First Confession, around age seven. Walk them through what to expect. Explain the structure: the Sign of the Cross, *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned*, the confession of sins, the act of contrition, the absolution. Practice with them in the car. Reassure them about the seal. Tell them, clearly: *Whatever you say in there, the priest cannot tell anyone, ever. It is just between you and God.*

Around age twelve or thirteen. The conversation about the gravity of mortal sin and the necessity of Confession before Communion if mortal sin has occurred. This is not about scaring them. It is about giving them the framework they will need for their adult Catholic life. Most teenagers, if they understand it, accept this teaching readily.

Around age sixteen or seventeen. The deeper conversation about Confession as the antidote to despair. Tell them: *There is no sin you can commit that cannot be forgiven. Not one. The greatest saint in the Church started over, sometimes many times. If you fall, even hard, the way back is the same: go to Confession, and Christ Himself will meet you*

there. Many young Catholic adults walk away from the Church because they assume their sins disqualify them. Tell your teenagers, before they go to college, that the Catholic Church has always known what to do with sinners.

The Mortal Sin Conversation

This deserves its own paragraph because it is the most commonly mishandled.

Many Catholic fathers either avoid this topic entirely or deliver it in a way that produces scrupulosity. Neither serves the child.

The healthy version is this: tell your teenager that the Church distinguishes between mortal sin (which is grave, freely chosen, with full knowledge) and venial sin (which is less grave or less fully chosen). Mortal sin separates the soul from sanctifying grace; venial sin wounds the relationship but does not sever it. The remedy for mortal sin is Confession before receiving Communion. The remedy for venial sin is contrition, prayer, and the Eucharist itself, with Confession as a regular practice.

Teach this calmly. Tell them: most of their sins will be venial. Mortal sin is real and serious, and they need to know what it is, but they should not assume every fault they commit is mortal. The Catholic moral life is not a constant tightrope walk over hellfire; it is a relationship that includes regular maintenance and the occasional serious repair.

The Saint Stories

Read with them, in the teenage years, the conversion stories of the great Catholic sinners. Augustine. Mary of Egypt. Matt Talbot. The thief on the cross. Each of these is a witness that the Catholic Church has, throughout her history, been the home of bad men who became saints, by way of Confession.

The teenager who has internalized these stories has, in his interior life, a fundamentally different relationship with his own sin than the teenager who has not. He knows that the door is open. He knows that the worst he can do is recoverable. He knows that the priest in the box is waiting, not to condemn him, but to welcome him home.

That is the picture you are giving him. Give it carefully. Give it often enough that it sticks.

C H A P T E R S E V E N

Talking About Sex

The Conversation You Cannot Skip

The culture is going to teach your children about sex. The question is whether you teach them first.

If you wait, they will learn about sex from their friends, from their phones, from the internet, from school health classes, from movies, from the casual lewdness of public life. They will learn that sex is a transaction, a recreation, a means of self-expression, a personal preference disconnected from love or fidelity or meaning. They will learn it well, in the sense that they will be saturated with it. They will not learn it truly.

The Catholic vision of sex is the most beautiful, the most realistic, and the most countercultural teaching the Church has on offer. Your kids deserve to hear it from you, in your voice, before they hear the alternatives in everyone else′s.

What the Catholic Teaching Actually Is

Before you can teach it, you have to understand it. Most Catholic fathers absorbed, in their own youth, a defective version of the Church′s teaching. The defective version says: sex is dirty, but okay within marriage. This is not what the Church teaches and it is not what your kids should grow up believing.

The actual Catholic teaching, articulated most clearly in John Paul II′s Theology of the Body, is this:

The body is good. Sex is good. The sexual difference of male and female is good. Sex was designed by God, in the very first chapter of Genesis, before any Fall, as a participation in His own creative love. It is not a concession to weakness. It is not a problem to be regulated. It is one of the great signs, in the created world, of the love that constitutes the inner life of the Trinity itself.

Sex has a specific meaning. It is the bodily language of total self-gift between a husband and wife. The full speech of that language requires: total (no holding back), faithful (only between this man and this woman), fruitful (open to life), and free (chosen, not coerced). Outside of marriage, the bodily language is being spoken without the things that make it true. The body says one thing; the situation says another. The discrepancy is the lie.

Chastity is not the suppression of sex. Chastity is the proper integration of sex into the larger reality of love. The chaste single man loves his neighbors without using them. The chaste married man loves his wife with his body. Both are speaking the truth.

This is the teaching. It is large. It is beautiful. It takes time to teach.

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own. — 1 Corinthians 6:19

The Specific Conversations

A rough sequence, by age.

Around age six or seven. The first basic conversation about where babies come from, in age-appropriate terms. *Mommy and Daddy love each other, and God uses that love to make a new person. The new person grows in Mommy's tummy. That's how you got here.* Simple. Honest. Free of detail their age does not need.

Around age ten or eleven. The body changes conversation. Before puberty hits, both parents should have had at least one substantial conversation with each child about what is going to happen to their bodies. The father takes the son. The mother takes the daughter. Hike, drive, walk somewhere private. Explain, factually, what puberty is, what it is for, what they should expect. Tie it to the dignity of their body and to the meaning their body has in God's design.

This is also the right age, for boys especially, for the first conversation about pornography. They are going to encounter it, probably accidentally, probably soon. Tell them what it is. Tell them why the Church teaches against it. Tell them, plainly, that if and when they encounter it, you want to know, and you will not be angry, and there is a way through. Give them the gift of an open door before they need it.

Around age thirteen. The fuller conversation about chastity. The Catholic teaching on sex outside of marriage. The connection between sex and total self-gift. The reasons the Church teaches what she teaches. Not as rules. As reasons.

This conversation is harder. It requires you to actually believe and have thought about what you are saying. If you have not, prepare. There are good resources. Christopher West's *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, in a sanitized version for parents to read first, then explained in age-appropriate terms. Jason Evert's resources for teens. *Theology of the Body for Beginners*. Read something. Have a real conversation.

Around age sixteen or seventeen. The dating conversation. Your views on what dating should look like. Your expectations for their relationships. The connection between how they treat their boyfriend or girlfriend and the kind of husband or wife they are practicing to be. The brief, blunt conversation about the long-term consequences of premarital sex, including the kinds of consequences the culture never mentions.

This is also when the conversation about same-sex attraction may need to happen, both about the Church's teaching and about how to love and support friends or family members who experience it. Treat this with the seriousness and charity it deserves. Catholic teaching on this is not what the culture has caricatured; it is, in truth, deeply respectful of the dignity of every person.

Father to Son, Father to Daughter

A word about the difference.

The father-to-son conversations are the ones where you cannot afford to outsource. Your son needs to hear about sex from a man who has wrestled with it, who has lived chastity (in marriage or before), who treats women with reverence, who is honest about how hard the fight can be. He needs to hear, from another man, that this is part of being a man, not a side issue.

The father-to-daughter conversations are, in many ways, even more important and even more under-attended-to in the modern Catholic world. Your daughter's understanding of her own dignity, her own body, her own worth in the eyes of a man, is being formed by how you, her father, treat her. The girl who has been respected, listened to, honored, defended by her father has a different relationship with men, with her own body, with romantic relationships, than the girl who has not. Your love for her, your visible refusal to use any woman as an object, your protection of her without smothering her, is the most consistent shaper of her future romantic life.

Have specific, age-appropriate conversations with her too. Not just about what to avoid. About what she is, what she is worth, what she should expect from a man, and what she should expect from herself.

Your Own Integrity

You cannot teach what you do not live.

If you struggle with pornography, deal with it. *Breaking a Sinful Habit* has the substance of that conversation. Get accountability. Use the tools. Confess regularly. Your kids will

eventually know, in some way, whether you have done the work. The witness is, again, the deepest formation.

If your relationship with your wife is loveless, hostile, or hidden, no amount of theology will repair the lesson your kids are learning every day. Repair the marriage first. The Catholic family is the unit of formation. The marriage is the foundation of the family.

The teaching you give about sex is, in the end, the teaching of the kind of man you have been to your wife and the kind of woman you have made it possible for her to be. Make sure that teaching is the one you want them to inherit.

C H A P T E R E I G H T

Talking About Suffering

When the Hard Things Come

Your children will suffer.

This is not a possibility. It is a certainty. Grandparents will die. A friend will move. The dog will be hit by a car. An illness will hit a sibling. A bullying scene at school will leave a lasting wound. A failure they cared about will arrive. A parent, maybe you, will get sick.

How you respond, in those moments, will form their understanding of God in a way that no formal religious education ever quite reaches. Suffering is the place where the abstract questions about God become unavoidable and urgent. The four-year-old whose grandfather has died is not, in that moment, asking about theological abstractions. He is asking whether reality is finally cruel or finally good.

You are the one he will look to for an answer.

What Not to Say

A few things many well-meaning Catholic fathers say that make things worse.

"It was God's plan." This is, at best, an oversimplification of the doctrine of providence. At worst, it suggests God positively willed the bad thing. The Catholic teaching is more nuanced: God permits evil; He does not author it. He can bring good out of evil, but the evil itself is not His direct will.

The child who is told "God planned for Grandma to die" has been handed a picture of God that he will, eventually and rightly, find monstrous. Avoid the formula.

"Don't be sad." Don't. They are sad. Sadness is the appropriate response to loss. Telling them not to feel what they are feeling teaches them that sadness is shameful, which it is not, and that Catholic faith is the suppression of grief, which it is not.

"He's in a better place." Sometimes. Often, you do not know. The doctrine of judgment is not that everyone goes to heaven. The doctrine is that God is just and merciful and we trust Him with the souls of those we love. The phrase, "he's in a better place," is often a deflection from real grief and a doctrinally imprecise claim. Be more careful.

"It will all make sense someday." Sometimes. Sometimes not. Some suffering, in this life, will not make sense, will not yield a redemptive lesson, will not have a moral. The Catholic faith does not promise that it will. The Catholic faith promises that God is with you in it.

What to Say

The Catholic understanding of suffering is harder than the easy formulas, and more true.

Suffering is real, and your sadness is appropriate. Validate the grief. Sit in it with them. Do not rush to fix the emotion.

God is real, and He has suffered too. This is the heart of Christianity. The Cross is the center of the Catholic response to suffering. Christ did not stay at a distance from human pain. He climbed into it. The God your child is asking about, in his grief, is a God who hung on a cross for six hours and cried *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* That God knows what your child is feeling.

Death is real, and so is the Resurrection. The Catholic answer to death is not denial. It is the empty tomb. We grieve, but not as those who have no hope. The grandfather who has died, if he died in the friendship of God, will rise. He is not gone forever. The child needs to hear this, not as platitude, but as the actual content of the faith they were baptized into.

God can transform suffering, even when He does not remove it. This is the heart of Salvifici Doloris, John Paul II's great encyclical on suffering. Pain offered to God, joined to Christ's, becomes redemptive. It accomplishes something. It does not stay as pure loss. This is the deeper Catholic answer to *what good is this suffering?*

I do not have all the answers, but I have a Person. When you do not know, say so. *I do not know why this happened. I do know who is with us in it.* The honest acknowledgment of mystery is, often, more formative than any tidy answer.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?, Jesus, on the cross (Matthew 27:46)

The Hardest Cases

Some sufferings are harder than others.

The death of a child. You may, God forbid, lose a child of your own. Or a sibling, an aunt, a friend, may. The other children are watching how you grieve. The Catholic response is not to skip grief but to grieve as a man who believes in the Resurrection. You weep, openly. You pray. You hold the family together. You do not pretend the loss is small, and you do not collapse into despair. You walk the long path of redemptive grief with your wife and remaining children. This will be one of the hardest things you ever do. It will also be one of the most important.

Mental illness. If a child of yours suffers from depression, anxiety, an eating disorder, suicidal ideation, the Catholic response is not "pray harder." Mental illness is a real illness,

often requiring real medical and therapeutic care, and the Church has been clear about this for decades. Get them the medical help they need. Pray alongside. Walk with them. Be honest, in age-appropriate ways, about your own struggles. Most adolescents experience some form of psychological suffering in modern life; what they need from you is a father who takes it seriously without panicking.

The suffering of a friend or sibling. When their friend or sibling is the one suffering, your job is to teach them how to be present to suffering without trying to fix it. The instinct of most boys, in particular, is either to flee from the pain or to try to solve it. The deeper Catholic answer is to *sit with* the suffering person, to listen, to bring food, to show up at the funeral, to keep showing up in the weeks after when most people have stopped. Teach your children this. The world is full of suffering people who need someone to stay.

The Long Formation

The way your children handle suffering as adults will be shaped, more than they know, by how you handled it in front of them.

The man who was, in his children's memory, present, honest, faithful in his grief, anchored in prayer, persistent in love, has given them a model for their own future losses. They will draw on it when they need it, often without realizing where they got it.

The man who fell apart, who hid in alcohol or work, who blamed God, who never went back to Mass after the loss, has given them a different model. They will draw on that one too.

You do not get to choose whether suffering comes. You get to choose how you face it. Your kids are watching.

C H A P T E R N I N E

Talking About Doubt

The Questions That Mean They Are Awake

Sometime in middle school or high school, your child will, in some form, ask the questions. *Why do we believe this? Why are we Catholic and not something else? Is any of it actually true? What if God doesn't exist? What if the Church is wrong about X?*

The questions may come in a single dramatic conversation. More often they come in pieces, dropped into the middle of car rides, dinners, late-night talks. Sometimes they come as a sustained season of disengagement that you have to draw out.

Whatever form they take, they are not a problem. They are the natural emergence of a thinking person.

The Catholic Tradition Welcomes Doubt

The Catholic intellectual tradition has never been afraid of doubt. Aquinas devoted his whole *Summa* to taking objections seriously, in detail, before answering them. Newman was, by his own description, brought to the Catholic Church through a long and painful intellectual journey of doubt and conviction. Augustine doubted for years. So did Edith Stein. So did countless saints.

The tradition does not treat doubt as enemy. It treats doubt as occasion. Doubt is what happens when an immature, inherited faith begins to grow up. The faith that is fully chosen, fully owned, fully thought-through, is on the other side of doubt. You have to pass through.

This means your job, when your child voices doubt, is not to silence it. Your job is to honor it, walk into it with them, and trust that the Catholic intellectual tradition has resources adequate to whatever they will throw at it.

Lord, I believe; help my unbelief! — Mark 9:24

The Wrong Responses

A few responses that almost always make doubt worse.

Panic. The father who panics signals, *This is dangerous; the faith cannot survive this question.* The child concludes, often correctly, that he has hit something the faith cannot handle. He then digs further. The panic confirms the doubt.

Shutdown. The father who refuses to engage signals, *We do not talk about this in our family*. The child takes the question elsewhere, often to people whose answers will not serve him.

Lecture. The father who responds to a real question with a five-minute speech, especially one peppered with appeals to obedience or tradition, signals, *I am not actually listening; I am trying to win this.* The child tunes out.

Dishonesty. The father who pretends to have certainties he does not have, or who fakes confidence about questions he has never thought through, will be caught. Children are excellent fraud detectors. The faked answer is worse than no answer.

The Right Response

There is a structure that almost always works.

First, welcome the question. "That's a really good question. I'm glad you're thinking about it." Mean it. The child has done a brave and adult thing by voicing the doubt.

Second, ask them more. "What's making you wonder about that? Where is the question coming from?" The clarification matters. Often the doubt is not what it first sounded like. The teenager who says *I don't believe in God anymore* may, on inquiry, actually be saying *I'm angry at God because my friend died* or *I just heard an atheist YouTuber make an argument I can't answer* or *Everyone at school thinks I'm weird for being Catholic*. Each of these has a different response.

Third, give them what you have. Briefly. Honestly. The best answer you have. The Catholic intellectual tradition is rich; there is almost always something substantive to say. But say it in three or four sentences, not thirty. Leave room for them to push back.

Fourth, acknowledge what you don't know. "That's the best I have on this. There are people smarter than me who have thought about this. Let me find what they've said."

Fifth, give them resources. Bishop Robert Barron is a treasure for this work; his Word on Fire content is precisely calibrated for thoughtful young Catholics. Father Mike Schmitz on YouTube. Trent Horn for apologetics. Peter Kreeft's books on the questions intelligent young people ask. Edward Feser on the philosophical questions. There is a robust Catholic intellectual ecosystem, and your job is to introduce them to it.

Sixth, follow up. In a few days, come back to the question. *I was thinking more about what you asked. I found this. What do you think?* The continuation signals that you took it seriously and that the conversation is open. This is the heart of teenage faith formation.

The Major Categories of Doubt

Most doubts fall into a few categories. Be prepared for each.

Intellectual doubt. "How do we know God exists?" "How do we know Jesus rose from the dead?" "What about evolution?" These are answerable. The Catholic tradition has thought through every one. Direct them to the best resources.

Moral doubt. "Why does the Church say no to X?" "Why is the Church against Y?" The Church's moral teachings are not arbitrary; they are rooted in a coherent vision of the human person. Christopher West, Jason Evert, Janet Smith, Trent Horn, and many others have written accessibly on these questions. Most of these doubts dissolve when the underlying logic is explained.

Institutional doubt. "Look at the priest scandals." "Look at this corrupt bishop." "Look at the history of the Church." These are the hardest because they have substance. The Church has, in fact, sinned. The Catholic answer is that the Church is the Body of Christ, holy in her foundation and her sacraments and her teaching, while being made up of sinners, including some who have done terrible things. The Church is the hospital, not the hotel. The presence of sick people does not invalidate the hospital. But also: do not minimize the wounds. The scandals are real. The grief is appropriate.

Personal doubt. "I don't feel God." "Prayer doesn't do anything." "Mass is boring." These are not really intellectual doubts. They are experiential. The response is different. Pray with them. Walk with them. Tell them about your own dry seasons. Read Mother Teresa's *Come Be My Light* together if they are old enough. Show them that the saints have been here and have come through.

Your Own Story

One of the most powerful things you can give a doubting teenager is the honest story of your own faith.

Tell them about a time you doubted. Tell them what you read, who you talked to, how you came through. Tell them that the faith you have now is not the inherited faith of your childhood; it is the faith you chose, on the other side of real questioning, as an adult.

The teenager who hears this is being given permission, by the most important man in his life, to do the same. He is being told: *Doubt is not a failure. It is part of the road. I walked it. You can too.*

This is, in many cases, the most consequential gift a Catholic father gives. The faith that they can call their own, that they have wrestled with, that they have chosen, is the one they will keep.

CHAPTER TEN

When They Walk Away

The Sorrow and the Hope

Some children, despite everything, leave.

You may have done it nearly right. You may have prayed for them, taken them to Mass, talked to them honestly, modeled the faith you believed. You may have read this book carefully, applied what you could, and tried hard. And one of your children, in college or after, may walk away from the Catholic faith.