

Preface

Congratulations! Chances are, if you're reading this book, you either have a new little one on the way or you have recently given birth to or adopted a new baby. As excited as you are, you probably have a lot of questions and a lot of worries. If so, relax! You're perfectly normal, and it's going to be okay. We address many of your biggest questions and concerns in the course of this book.

When we first started our family twenty years ago, we really didn't have a clue what we were doing—even though, between us, we had degrees in education, counseling, and theology. That was all paper. This was real life.

Our Story

Lisa: When we first got married, we weren't even sure we'd be able to have children. I had a serious illness that medication kept under control but that would be fatal to any baby we conceived. When my condition improved three years later, we were so elated! Sadly, our excitement quickly turned to grief when we lost our first pregnancy.

Greg: We really struggled spiritually through that loss, but through it all, God challenged us to draw closer to each other and, more importantly, he challenged much of what we thought we knew about parenting. Up until that point, we hadn't thought that much about parenting. We assumed it would just come to us. I mean, I'm a family therapist. I had good parents. I studied child development in school. How hard could it be?

But we hadn't spent much time considering what it meant to be a Catholic family. After all, we were Catholic, and we were going to have a family. What more could there be to it? We'd raise our kids the way we were raised, take them to Mass, teach them their Catholic prayers, and that would be that. Right?

Lisa: All that is a fine start, of course, but as we discovered, there is so much more for those who are open to learning what the Church has to teach us about the Catholic vision of family life—not just family prayer life, but family life itself. Through the prayer and discernment that resulted from our grief over losing our first child, God showed us that he wanted to give us much more than we had even thought possible. We learned some very hard and some very beautiful lessons by praying through that time. And what we learned enabled us to be more sensitive, more responsive, and more invested in creating the kind of Catholic family we hadn't even imagined when we were first married. God let us know that he had a plan, not just for how he wanted us to pray together, but for how he wanted us to interact with each other and our kids in all situations.

Greg: When God did bless us with children, he gave us the grace to cultivate the kind of love, joy, and

intimacy that he desires for every family. I can honestly say that God has taken us by the hand and taught us step-by-step how to build a family with the love that comes from his own heart. The practices we share in this book did not come naturally to us, but the wisdom God has taught us over the years led us to create a much more amazing family than we ever could have if we had followed our original plan. As in all things, God knew better, and in his generosity he blessed us with the most precious treasure possible—an unbelievably close, joyful, faithful family life. We are grateful to have the opportunity to share with you what God has taught us.

Lisa: It hasn't always been easy, and sometimes, like all parents, we wondered if we'd have the strength for what God was asking us to do. But as hard as it's been at times, the fruit has always been worth it. We hope that what you read will be a blessing to you and the family you have started together.

Becoming a Catholic Family

We're guessing that either your Catholic faith is already very important to you or at least you think you might like it to be more important than it has been in the past. Congratulations again! The Holy Spirit often moves powerfully when we experience major shifts in life, and if the birth of a child isn't a major shift, we don't know what is! Whatever your relationship with your Catholic faith was before this new addition, you are probably asking some questions about what it means to be Catholic at this stage of both your life and the life of your family.

The challenges we faced in starting our family and in parenting taught us much of what we know about God's unfailing and unconditional love for us. Through that difficult time, God called us to reflect deeply on how our Catholic faith urged us to think differently about family life than others might. Our children led us to experience God in a deeper and more profound way than we ever thought possible, even though, truth be told, we each had a pretty strong, personal relationship with God to start with. We know we're not the only ones whom God has led on a spiritual journey through parenting.

A good friend of ours, who at one time did not believe in God, realized that he would one day need to answer his child's questions about faith. He recognized that although he had strong feelings on the subject, he didn't have really thoughtful answers. The questions he began asking himself about faith while he and his wife awaited the birth of their first baby eventually led him to become a truly prayerful and deeply engaged Christian. This is not as uncommon as you might think. After all, Isaiah 11:6 reminds us that "a little child [shall] guide them." Sometimes we are willing to change for our children in ways that we would find difficult to change only for ourselves. Many parents are brought to a new level of faith because of the questions that come to mind as they contemplate the new responsibilities they are taking on and the kind of parents they would like to be.

Throughout *Then Comes Baby*, we present the most up-to-date available information on child rearing in a way that encourages your Catholic faith to shine in your heart and your home. Part one offers general tips on getting your family off to a good start and laying the foundation for a great Catholic family. Our Church has an amazing vision for family life, and we want to help you learn how to live that Catholic difference in your home while simultaneously being the best mom and dad you can be. Of course, parenting is a tough job, and it's important to understand how God designed your baby's brain and body to work and how to listen to the messages God has hidden in your son or daughter's makeup so that you can cooperate with God's plan for raising the best, healthiest, most faith-filled, and most enjoyable kid you can. To that end, beginning with chapter 4 we walk you through the changes your baby and family will likely experience from birth to three years. We offer specific guidance about caring for your child, yourselves, your marriage, and the spiritual life of the family at each stage.

Getting Started

Four Things Every Catholic Family Needs to Know

Certainly [children] are a gift from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb, a reward.

—PSALM 127:3

The first question many new parents ask is “Can we really do this?!?” That’s normal. When we were having our first child—and actually each child after—we were both excited and terrified. The excitement and terror were of course greatest when we were expecting our first. Greg was just out of graduate school and in his first job, and Lisa was just overcoming some serious health issues that had caused us to delay starting a family longer than we had expected. We were living in a small apartment and didn’t have a lot. Neither of our families was close by. It was as frightening a time as it was wonderful. We asked many of the same questions you are probably asking. How will we manage? How will this change us? Will we like

those changes? How can we be sure we're doing it right? Are we really up to this?

The good news is that God loves families, and he wants to teach you how to form a family after his own heart. It doesn't matter what your background is. It doesn't matter where you come from or how healthy or unhealthy your family of origin was. What matters most is that you and your spouse together ask God to teach you what his will is for your family, and then open your hearts to learning all he wants to show you. If you do, you will be able to create a family life that is a blessing both to you and to the people who are privileged to know you. In fact, why don't we start with a prayer asking God to help you do just that!

Lord, we give you our family. Teach us to love each other as you love us.

Help us to be a family after your own heart. Let us truly enjoy our child as the gift he or she is! Give us the grace to overcome the struggles in our path, the joy to celebrate each little blessing, and the wisdom to live and raise our child(ren) in a manner that gives glory to you. Help us to be inspired by the witness of the Holy Family, and enable us in turn to be witnesses to the holiness you desire for all families. Amen.

Feel free to use this prayer as often as you like, or write a similar one in your own words. Regularly saying a prayer like this together will help you open your hearts to all the wonderful plans God has in store for you and your little miracle.

There are four things we'd like you to keep in mind as you start down the road to becoming a Catholic family:

1. Enjoy your child.
2. God wants to change the world through your family.

3. Marriage and family are the most important activities you can undertake.
4. God wants to show you the way.

Enjoy Your Child

Above all, enjoy your child! Your primary mission as Catholic parents—your most important job—is to discover genuine joy in your life as a family. As Catholics, we know life is a gift. And what do you do when someone gives you a gift? You celebrate—with cake, music, dancing, and laughter! That’s what we want your home to be like. That’s what Catholic family life is meant to be: a party, with the love and joy you experience in your home as the source of all the things that make life worth living.

We realize that parenting is hard work, just like preparing for a party. If you approach it with the right attitude, all the hard work and exhaustion that comes along with preparing for your feast ends up being just a blip on the radar. You barely remember it. Even while you’re working, your focus is almost entirely on how much everyone will enjoy the party and what you can do to make the experience even more wonderful.

We don’t mean to imply that family life is easy or that it doesn’t take a lot of hard work to have a great family. We understand that some days are going to be a drudgery and some days you’re going to be worn out. That’s fine. We just mean that you are missing the point if you focus on all the work of parenthood. Sure, you could approach a party thinking, “Ugh, a party. Boo hiss. Too much work. I’d much rather sit here in the dark by myself.” But what fun would that be? How much better it is to say, “Ah! These appetizers are going to taste great when they’re done! Streamers? Put more over there! Another dessert? Absolutely!”

In our experience, too few parents actually enjoy their kids. They love their kids, but they don’t really enjoy them. The world sometimes seems to want us to act like our children are a

burden and drag. But Catholics are called to be countercultural, to “make a fuss,” as Pope Francis put in his 2013 World Youth Day address, and perhaps the most countercultural thing you can do is parent in a way that enables you to truly know and enjoy your kids.

In all your nervousness, it can be easy to focus on all the work and on “getting it right.” But don’t worry. You’ll be fine. By all means, we hope you will work hard, but we hope you will be able to enjoy every minute of it—or at least most of them. As with the best parties, the more effort you put into your preparations, the more you are able to kick back and enjoy the experience when the guests arrive.

Our children have added so much more joy to our lives than we could ever have imagined or than we could ever say. It’s true that we work hard at parenting. In fact, some people tell us that we’re crazy to work as hard at it as we do. A lot of people accuse us of making parenting harder than it has to be. But these folks don’t understand that the work we do to be present to our children isn’t borne out of duty, or obligation, or a sense of dread that we might screw things up, or a compulsion to make up for something in our past. We work hard at parenting because we love a good party! Because life is too short to waste it living in a home with people who barely know each other and rarely relate to each other. We would rather enjoy our kids than not. We would rather hear laughter in our homes than crying and anger. We would rather our home be a place of joy and respite and fun. When we walk in the front door, we would rather feel that we walked into our *home* and not a war zone. Because of the work we put into parenting, our relationship with each of our children truly is a party. It has been since the day they were born. Each one of them is the source of wonderful pleasure.

To be honest, we don’t see many families who enjoy their kids or whose kids enjoy them as much as the Popcaks do. We’re not bragging. In fact, there is nothing special about us that you can’t also have. Not one thing. Our families of origin

were fine, but they weren't stellar. Neither of us enjoyed our childhood families as much as we enjoy the family we've created together. Neither of us was born to have this kind of family. God has blessed us by showing us the joy that exists at the heart of the Catholic vision of family life. Actualizing that vision does take work, and as with any work, sometimes you will wonder why you're doing it and what you have gotten yourself into. In those moments, we hope that you will be able to look into the face of your child and see the joy radiating out of him or her because of how comfortable and safe and cared for he or she feels in your arms. And we hope that experience will fill your heart with the kind of joy that makes you delight in the incredible things God is doing in your heart and in your family.

All the suggestions, tips, and best practices we recommend in this book are intended to help you do more than just survive the day with your baby. Sure, there will be days when you feel like that was the best you could do. Again, that's fine. But we want to help you create the kind of family life where at least nine days out of ten you feel gratitude spontaneously bubbling up from your toes for the family you have. That's honestly how we feel about our kids and how parents who put their hearts into our recommendations feel about their kids too. You can't help it. It just happens. Everything that follows in this book is intended to help you experience the kind of joy that most families just don't seem to have. God wants more for you. Your Church wants more for you. We want more for you. We hope you will join us in welcoming the incredible gift God has given you by doing the work that makes your home a celebration of everything that family life can be. We pray that you are willing to invest the time and energy in a family life that enables you to truly know, love, and celebrate the gift you have been given in your child or children.

The first and perhaps most important thing to take away from this book is to *relax!* Don't be afraid to enjoy your kids,