

Preface

Writing a book is a daunting task. At many times during this project I was tempted to lay aside my laptop and simply go shopping instead. After all, who am I to be giving you advice on anything, and particularly on a topic as important as motherhood?

Like most of you reading this book, my training has been on the job—a series of dramatic trial and error opportunities, with ten steps back for every one step forward. So let me say up front that I don't come to this work considering myself an expert. In truth, with this project—as with so many others I've undertaken in my life—I have hoped to learn as I go. Learning with you, first crawling, and then with the most unstable of baby steps, I want to continue along my own path of trying my very best to become a better Catholic mom, a healthier woman, and ultimately a better person.

First, let me explain to you that I am not setting out to write a typical parenting book. You will not find here the mysterious key to unlocking the mind of a two-year-old or the heart of a petulant teenager. I don't have solutions for getting a baby to sleep through the night or for dealing with a sarcastic adolescent. Rather, I am writing this book to try to support and encourage *you* in your role as a Catholic mom and to encourage all of us to nurture ourselves as mothers, so that we have the energy, spirit, and peaceful souls to help take care of those who fill our homes and our lives.

When I'm asked in a social setting that ubiquitous question, "What do you do?" I invariably respond with the same reply: "I'm a mom." This, my vocation, began in a dramatic and quite definite way nearly nineteen years ago in partnership with my husband Greg with the arrival of our son Eric. But in a more subtle way, it began long before that blessed event.

I'd fallen in love with Greg at first sight as he strolled across the quad at our *alma mater*, the University of Notre Dame. Mutual friends introduced us, and I still remember the moment a few months later when Greg finally asked me on a date. We entered into the sacrament of matrimony together, in the breathtaking Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Notre Dame, the year after our graduation.

After five years of marriage, three during Greg's medical school and two in his emergency medicine residency, we took the giant leap

of faith into parenthood. I was so career oriented at that time that Eric could likely have been born on my desk at work. My definite plans to return as soon as possible to my career were laid aside the moment I began to explore day care options. For us, the choice was clear—I “retired” and set myself to the full-time task of learning to become a mom. With Adam’s birth three years later, my apprenticeship continued and took on new challenges.

Greg, although incredibly supportive of my faith life and of raising our sons in the faith, had not yet joined the Church himself. I felt a huge responsibility to be the primary faith educator of my sons and realized how short I fell in my own preparation for this role. I was looking for support and companionship from other moms struggling with the same things I was.

Just over ten years ago now, I was learning web design in a volunteer position at my boys’ Catholic school when I came up with the crazy idea to start a little website that would celebrate Catholic motherhood. In creating the site, I hoped to explore and learn about faith and family topics and to build a community of like-minded mothers with whom I could share support and encouragement. And so, CatholicMom.com, was born. In those early days, the site was a tiny endeavor and the “hit counter” marked visits to our little domain in the dozens each day. But from the very beginning, it was apparent to me that there was a tremendous need for this type of place—a safe, loving environment where we women could gather together to learn, to discuss, and, most importantly, to pray for one another in our vocation as mothers.

From those very seminal moments of the site through today, one mainstay in my life has been the daily e-mails I receive from moms around the world who are struggling in their vocation as “Mom.” These e-mails often carry a tone of quiet desperation and pain that tears at my heart. They come from women who feel burned out, overwhelmed, and often very alone in their own little corners of the world. This is an easy thing to have happen when you’re a mom. Overnight, with the incredible miracle of birth, your life is transformed. We go from creatures of independence to women who can’t even find five minutes to use the bathroom alone. Along with the countless blessings of becoming “Mom” are the occasions of sacrificial service we provide on an hourly basis. Many of us are ill-equipped to cope with these transitions, and we run the risk of becoming bitter and resentful in the care of our families.

Blessedly, we belong to a larger family, our Catholic Church. It's my firm belief that within our Catholic traditions we have many of the tools necessary to refresh and renew our souls and spirits. In my writing and in my personal life, I am vitally interested in looking daily at my own private journey toward being a better person. The journey is multifaceted, so it's necessary to work, a bit at a time, on each of those facets. Focusing on any one of them uniquely and ignoring the others throws off the balance necessary to keep life's wheels rolling along smoothly. My own personal experience with non-invasive breast cancer during the writing of this book has left me even more convinced of every mom's need to care for herself in every way possible.

In this book, we'll take a look at four areas of focus, endeavoring to take those first "baby steps" in each, toward the ultimate goal of caring for ourselves better as moms, as women, and as Catholics.

Heart: developing nurturing relationships with our family, our friends, and ourselves

Mind: becoming life-long learners, seeking creative outlets, exploring career and work issues, and employing time management and personal productivity tactics

Body: examining nutrition, fitness, sleep, stress reduction, and preventative care matters

Soul: coming to know and love the many resources, devotions, and concepts in the fullness of the Catholic Church that can help us care for ourselves and for the most important people in our lives

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life issues an annual report in its attempt to promote a "deeper understanding of issues at the intersection of religion and public affairs." In its 2008 report titled "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," Pew looked at the percentage of Americans switching religious affiliations and found that in the United States the Roman Catholic Church "has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation change." About a third of Catholic survey respondents indicated that they no longer identify themselves with the Catholic Church. "This means that roughly 10 percent of all Americans are former Catholics."

In my heart, this sad news was a rallying cry for us Catholic moms and dads, who are truly on the frontlines in the battle for our families' souls. If we, as parents and as individuals, do not truly embrace the many graces and blessings offered to us in the Church, how can we

possibly expect to pass them along to our children? I hope that someday I'll experience the same joy my parents do when they attend the baptism or first communion of one of their grandchildren—the joy in knowing that they have done their most important job of sharing a love of Christ and his Church with their children. If we moms don't embrace and truly love our faith traditions, then we may be adding to the next generations of former Catholics. On the other hand, if our children look to us and find happy, productive, and selfless models of Christ's love incarnate, as I did in my own mom, their desire to be a loving part of the Body of Christ will be all the greater.

In his April 2008 apostolic journey to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI stressed the theme "Christ Our Hope." Everywhere he turned, the Holy Father was embraced and greeted with infectious enthusiasm. Speaking to a huge youth rally at St. Joseph Seminary in Yonkers, New York, Benedict XVI said,

Let us pray for mothers and fathers throughout the world, particularly those who may be struggling in any way—socially, materially, spiritually. Let us honor the vocation of matrimony and the dignity of family life. Let us always appreciate that it is in families that vocations are given life.

Acknowledging those struggles that each of us face every day and buoyed by our prayers for one another, I invite you, my fellow Catholic moms, to join me on a journey of love—loving and caring for ourselves more so that we can better love and care for our families, our neighbors, our Church, and the world it is sent to serve.