

## **How Can We Be Good Parents to Our Teens?**

### **Ignatian Insight**

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An important practice in Ignatian spirituality is using our imagination in prayer, applying our five senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling) to a story from scripture in order to bring the story to life. This way of praying helps us treat the story not as information for our intellects to consider but as a living account told by a friend. It helps us to really feel the story and thereby to understand its meaning for our lives.

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Consider the following story as a clue to the challenges of our teens' discerning age.

The caravan rolled along across the dusty highway, heat rising up as the sun went down. The tired mother had spent much of the trip chatting with members of the extended family she rarely got to see; they were all enjoying the long trip home to the small town from

which they had set out days ago. The trip from the capital took many hours, so they had decided to make a virtue of necessity and spend the time catching up.

They had come to a rest stop, though, and so she took some time to reconnect with her husband and son, who were traveling just a few minutes ahead with some neighbors. As she approached her husband, she looked around, and asked where their son was. "What do you mean?" he asked, surprised. "I thought he was with you!"

"Jesus!" she screamed, more at the air than at him. "We have to go back!"

This story is a slightly embellished telling of Luke's gospel story about Jesus when he was a tween (twelve years old). It's a story of miscommunication between an adolescent and his parents. Yet it's also a story of how this miscommunication, this rushing back to locate a lost son, is about that young son's new relationship with God the Father, and his new role in the community of faith. Here is the way that Luke, a Greek physician who learned about Jesus by following the apostle Paul, described the scene that followed:

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety."

And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. (Lk 2:46-50)

## **Prayer and Parenting**

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Can you feel Mary and Joseph's anxiety when you pray with this story? Have you ever had an experience with your teen that helps you to understand what they were feeling?

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*They did not understand what he said to them.* How many times have you felt this when talking with your teen? Imagine the scene for a moment: You've just traveled for four days without having seen your son, and you're terrified that something terrible has happened to him. You're frantic, running around the city like you're mad, asking anyone and everyone where your son might be. Someone generously suggests "I think I might have seen him at the Temple, but I can't be sure," and you run there, hoping against hope that he's still okay.

Out of breath, you see him from a distance and nearly start crying with relief. Still shaken, you approach and yell to him. He acknowledges you, leaves the group of older men with whom he's been conversing, and says hello. Flabbergasted, your teary response is "Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you!" He, though, is barely perturbed and wonders why you're making a big deal out of it.

Lest this telling of the story come across as too casual or (even worse) a little bit blasphemous, we point to a long tradition of imaginative prayer, which invites those reading scripture to imagine themselves as part of the story. Here we are inviting you to put yourself in the place of Mary or Joseph and see what happens when you imagine the scenes above.

## **Perspective Possibilities**

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Another way to imagine this story is to put yourself in the place of Jesus. What do you imagine was so compelling about staying in the Temple? What are you learning there? What makes you so focused on the conversation about God's Word that you forget about where your parents are?

Does seeing this story through the eyes of the teen Jesus suggest anything to you about your teen's perspective?

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### Pause and Consider

1. Can you identify with Mary and Joseph's frantic search, their perplexity, their concern?
2. Have you had experiences in which your growing child's behavior mystifies you, or even angers you?
3. What does it suggest to you to consider that Mary and Joseph, parents of God-in-human-flesh, felt these feelings?

## **Falling into God's Rhythm**

This book is an invitation to discernment, the practice of carefully sifting through our feelings and our hopes, our fears and our plans, good cultural messages and not-so-good ones, all of which are involved in the ways that we live out our vocation as parents to teens. Think of it as a retreat in daily life, an attempt to hear God's music as you wrestle with how to be a good parent to your teen. Our focus will be on developing a keen spirituality, well attuned to the way that God is present in our decision-making.

We come to the question of discernment very selfishly: we too are trying to practice it in the midst of raising three teens: two girls and a boy. We have spent much effort in our professional lives—Sue as a counselor and religious educator, Tim as a theologian, professor, and spiritual director—working with teens and their parents in high school and college. But it is a different matter to take the best professional conversations and distill them in ways appropriate for our own children. To use an analogy, good doctors may know everything about cutting-edge prevention and treatment, but that doesn't mean they can keep members of their own families from getting the flu or breaking a leg. So this book is our effort to think through and pray about what we've learned in order to share some ideas about how to parent our teens with faith. In preparation for this book, we took informal surveys of parents and teens who shared with us what they have learned about faith over the years. We'll share what we've learned, both from parents and teens as well as from our professional work.

In our previous book, *Six Sacred Rules for Families*, we described parenting and family life as a shared pilgrimage: a sacred journey that families walk together, toward God. That same image is helpful here, and much of what we wrote there applies to parenting teens. But a key difference is that teens, as they grow older, become aware of different directions they want their pilgrimages to take. Notice that Luke's story of Jesus as a tween was an example of that: he was developing a new sense of self, and his choice to remain in the Temple, while rooted in a good intention, left his parents wondering where he was. Parents understand teens' need to distance themselves from their parents and

to develop unique personalities, and so the work of sharing the pilgrimage becomes more and more difficult. The task of parenting becomes a task of careful, shared discernment. Practicing what we preach means constantly remembering that a life of sharing faith with teens means reciprocity: challenging the ways our teens live, as well as allowing our teens to challenge the ways we live. Saint Benedict's famous Rule includes the reminder that "it is often to the younger that the Lord reveals what is better."

How are we to navigate this new period of our children's lives? When our oldest daughter began high school, we were both struck at how sudden was the change in our relationship with her, simply because of how much time she spent away from home. On the one hand, we were happy that she found engaging things to be involved in at school. She had a lot of work to do, and practices and games kept her there late. But on the other hand, it began to feel almost as though she had already left for college. We missed her. And with two other children vying for our attention, it would have been pretty easy to leave her to her own devices (figuratively speaking, but also literally, since she is never without her phone). At a certain point, prompted in part by some concerns that she was becoming withdrawn from our family dynamics, we picked her up after school and—in spite of her protests—took her out for pizza. The result was like unclogging a drain: we had a long conversation about many things, and we all left feeling renewed and hopeful. Simply making time to be alone with our daughter sent the very clear signal that we wanted to be present to her even as she was growing more independent.

Teaching discernment means practicing discernment. This book is an invitation to becoming more discerning people so that we can model for our teens what it means to be discerning. On a very basic level, that means becoming practiced in the art of mindfulness: awareness of who we are and what kinds of people we choose to become, especially amid a world of bombarding information. On a deeper level, that means becoming practiced in the art of prayer—the daily conversation with a God whose invitation to the fullness of life is offered through a deepening friendship with Jesus. In Catholic tradition, discernment is rooted in daily practices of faith. Allow us to share one illustration.

Leah Libresco is a twentysomething Catholic writer, and one interesting part of her story is that before she entered the Church, she blogged prominently as an atheist. Her very public conversion story led her to write a book about her experience called *Arriving at Amen*, in which she recounts her wonder at discovering what prayer was all about. Having been raised without any religion, everything about prayer was new to her, and she wrote of her particular difficulty grasping a traditional prayer like the Rosary. In an interview with *America* magazine, she described the process this way.

When I started learning to waltz, I spent a lot of time just practicing the basic waltz step—the same kind of endless repetition as the Hail Marys of the Rosary. The reason I was supposed to keep practicing was so that my feet could keep the rhythm, no matter what.

Since I'm a follow when I dance, I don't need to have learned every step to be able to dance it—usually, if I have a good enough connection with my partner and a reasonable grasp of the basic, I can follow my

lead through more complicated steps than I could execute alone, since their motion leads me into the next place I should be.

I wound up thinking of the rosary as my chance to follow a “basic step” for prayer. My goal wasn’t to produce epiphanies about the lives of Christ and Mary, but to fall into God’s rhythm and to be ready to move if he led me.<sup>1</sup>

That’s a great image: “falling into God’s rhythm.” It recalls the earlier “acoustics of the heart” that we pointed to. Both of these images suggest a good way to approach prayer, both in our own lives and in what we hope to convey to our teens: namely, that it is about playing along with a God who is near if we but ask him to be.

The key to discernment, then, is the desire to do it. Ours is a world of a lot of noise, and so it is easy for us—and even easier for our teens—to become distracted. God’s voice is often the “light silent sound” rather than the wind, earthquake, or fire.

There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD—but the LORD was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the LORD was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the LORD was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. (1 Kgs 19:11–13)

## **Your Spiritual Self**

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Can you identify with Elijah in this story? Have you experienced God as a “light silent sound” in the midst of a busy life?

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Let's face it: in a world where wind, earthquakes, and fire draw crowds, sell tickets, drive market share, invite page views, garner "likes," and have sex appeal, the light silent sound of God often pales in comparison. (Cue the slow motion eye-rolls as you imagine this advice to your teen: "Hey, get off your screen for a few minutes and let's listen to God together!") So we will try to be practical. While there are some young people whom God seems to touch in unique ways, drawing them into lives of deep prayer and service, many are more likely to follow the crowd. And much of the crowd, at least in the teens and twenties, tends to move away from organized religion. So we have two tasks as parents:

1. Interrupt the natural tendencies of teens to go along with the crowd.
2. Provide opportunities where there might be a fruitful place in their hearts for God.

The first task applies to all parents aiding in the normal personality development of adolescents. The second is the one that we'll develop in greater detail in the course of this book.

One recent story from our own experience as parents sheds light on these two tasks. A couple of years ago, we started participating in a parish effort called the Boston Sock Exchange, which was founded by a priest some years ago. Several local parishes agree to take one Saturday each month to head down to the Boston Common to distribute food, clothing, and other items to homeless men and women. We wanted to establish a practice of direct engagement with people in situations of need and so told Kris that he and his mom would be going. Not surprisingly, he

refused. He had plans to meet friends that day. He objected that there would be no one else his age there. It would be boring. We insisted, though, and after much wrangling—including an 8:00 wake-up call on a Saturday—we managed to get him out the door.

The three-hour commitment included a good deal of busy work, moving items to cars, driving downtown, and setting up, followed by an hour and a half of engaging directly with the population everyone was there to serve. Happily, there were other teens there to help, so Kris did not feel quite so alone in the effort. The time passed quickly, and everyone headed home. To his great credit, while on the way home he remarked, “I actually kind of liked that.” He had been nudged out of his comfort zone and discovered something new there.

We’ve taken a couple of important lessons from that experience. The first is that there is no substitute for actual, concrete experience. No amount of talking about the poor could have substituted for real experience with real human beings who experience poverty. We won’t bore you with theories of developmental psychology about why this is the case; suffice it to say that at their stage of becoming adults, lived experience is critical. To put it slightly differently, what we are doing with our teens can be summed up in a pithy truism that applies as much to parenting as it does to public speaking or writing, or any other attempt at persuasion: *Show, don’t tell*. Show your teen what your faith is; don’t just talk about it. If you have faith that serving others is important, give them experiences in which you share service. If you have faith that generosity is better than selfishness, give them experiences in which to be generous with their time, effort, or money. If you have

faith that God is good and that worship is the appropriate response, go to church with them. And so on. What are the bedrock truths by which you have come to build your life? How can you give your teen experiences that help them to own those bedrock truths?

## **Take Away**

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Consider writing down what you consider bedrock truths. What are the most important lessons you want your teen to learn? And what are the concrete experiences that will help them learn those lessons?

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The second lesson is that sharing faith with a teen will almost certainly involve pushback. From their perspective, to quote a bumper sticker, “If it’s not fun, why do it?” Our consumerist culture wants to persuade adults to be more like teens rather than vice versa, because those motivated by fun are easier to sell things to. The cultural message is that adulthood is boring; you should put yourself first; entertainment is fun; and so on. As teens naturally distance themselves from their parents for the sake of self-understanding, they will gravitate toward the things their friends embrace, especially entertainment. In such a context, to them, any substantial lessons about life are likely to appear dreary and pointless. Aristotle observed over two millennia ago that the young are likely to find happiness in pleasure, in part because they have not yet had the training in habits of life that afford more lasting happiness. Pleasure is to happiness what simple sugars are to a diet: they offer a temporary high, followed by a crash, unless they are accompanied by something more complex.

Sharing your faith with your teen is similar to what you taught them about eating when they were toddlers. Then, you expected pushback when you insisted that vegetables are better than candy. Now, you must expect pushback when you suggest that it is important to practice generosity or to pray. Be persistent.

We must practice what we preach. We must be willing to be part of our teens' lives, walking with them, in order to share our faith, our way of living. Our great hope is that by sharing a pilgrimage with our teens, we will help them to discern a living God who is walking with them, whose Holy Spirit guides them to make choices rooted in generous love. We hope that they will come to know Jesus as the one who came to show the way to the Father, by demonstrating the way of love. We hope that they will come to see the Church as the body of believers dedicated to living out the example of Jesus and being the ongoing presence of Jesus in the world, sanctifying the world in a manner analogous to the presence of yeast in bread. We hope to enliven their imaginations in ways that excite them to discern who God has made them to be, with a growing mindfulness of their giftedness. Finally, we hope that they will share these same gifts with the Church, drawing hope from the people gathered there, all of whom are blessed and broken in the sharing of the Eucharist to be a gift to the world.

### For Reflection and Conversation

1. Have you been surprised by your teen's desire for independence? What are some ways you might creatively reconnect with your teen?

2. Can you talk with your teen about God? If this is not easy, can you talk about what he or she hopes for in life or about what is most meaningful?
3. What elements of your teen's world might you use to start a conversation—music, TV, movies, sports, or something else? How might you show interest in entering your teen's world and learning his/her perspective on it?

## **Our Teens' Happiness**

What we are sharing in these pages are the ways that we are trying to be faithful to God's call to us to be parents. We are very much in the midst of that vocation; we cannot claim the wisdom of hindsight. We rely on others who have written and researched about family life, as well as others who are masters of the spiritual life or have insights about living as faithful followers of Jesus. What is important in learning discernment, and what we have come to understand in our own lives, is that it is impossible to have absolute certainty about the way that our decisions—or decisions made for our children—will turn out. Practicing discernment does not guarantee happiness, nor does it guarantee that our children will get into the best universities or make lots of money. Nor does it guarantee that our children will always choose to practice their faith. Practicing discernment means meditating on the presence of God in our lives, sustaining us both in our times of joy and in our times of challenge or sorrow. To paraphrase the spiritual writer William Barry, S.J., discernment is not a guarantee of avoiding anything that we fear, but knowing that even if what we fear happens, God is with us in the midst of it.