

## Schedule God into Busy Summer Family Plans

by Kelly Bothum

My family missed Mass a few weeks ago. It doesn't happen often, so my youngest looked genuinely confused when I told him we weren't going.

"Like at all?" he asked.

If there was ever a time when guilt felt good, this might have been it.

I told him we ran out of time in the day, but the truth is, we didn't make the time. We were out of town playing tourists and savoring a rare morning to sleep in followed by brunch. God gave us 24 hours and we used them all on ourselves.

Of course, the following Sunday, we squeezed into the church pew to restart our family streak. And I'll admit that I whisper-yelled at my kids during the homily and shot them a stern look during the Eucharistic prayer. But at least we were there. Present. Together.

There's never an easy time to raise Catholic kids. During the school year, you're competing with after-school activities and homework and playdates and snow days.

In the summer, you're wrestling with a different kind of busy—the kind where camps and vacations and fun days at the pool with friends can make it hard to keep a routine. If anything, summer is where not being in a routine is actually the routine.

Summer is what I think of when I read the chapter about raising children in Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*). The

pontiff notes that raising kids means parents have a duty to pass on their faith to them.

But even he sees that job is "made difficult by current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today's world, where many people keep up a frenetic pace just to survive."

Holy Father, you have just described my summer.

It's true that our lives are busy and full of the unexpected—I often get tired just looking at my to-do list. But it's precisely in this chaos that we must find Christ. He is in the middle of our tornado of life, the one spinning with barbecues and camping trips and late summer nights. We have to see him in every one of these experiences.

To do that may require some rejiggering of how we share our life with God. If our Muslim brothers and sisters can take time to pray five times a day, we Catholics can certainly find a few opportunities in our busy summer schedules.

After all, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that our prayer matters not just to us, but to God as well: "Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him" (no. 2560). That connection, like a garden, requires tending and cultivating.

One quick way to check in on your family's faith is to take its spiritual pulse. This can be any time, but for families it often works best around bedtime—kids tend to be more contemplative then, anyway.

Ask them about what went right that day and also what went wrong. Did they attempt an act of kindness? Did they see someone hurting? How did they help?

These kinds of questions help open children's eyes. It allows them to see their friends, family and even that mean lifeguard through the lens of Jesus.

If we want them to think, "What would Jesus do?" then we need to help them see him in the world around them. Plus, kids are usually looking to draw out bedtime as long as possible, so why not add God into those extra minutes? It's here that we can water the mustard seeds of faith we've planted as parents.

While the calendar may say summer, it's ordinary time in the Church. But for most of us, there's nothing ordinary about family life. There's always something happening. The same should be true of our faith.



Girls organize art supplies on the first day of the annual Bishop Gerald J. Ryan summer camp at Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal Church in Wyandanch, NY.

As a parent, I've learned that you can make anything a teachable moment, whether it's a beautiful sunset, a ripe blueberry or the first firefly of the season. How we perceive God in our world can influence how our children see him as well. When we make prayer a priority, we increase the chances they will, too.

That's part of why saying grace before dinner or praying before bed matters. More than once, I've had my children stop me on the way out their bedroom to remind me I forgot to pray with them. It's a habit that means something, and for that I'm grateful.

Again, Pope Francis nails it in *Amoris Laetitia*: "Hence moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon."

Summer is about freedom and fun. We don't always see God in there, especially when we have to figure out when to go to Mass while on vacation in a new place. But God's love gives us the freedom of salvation.

Our lives may have more twists and turns than a waterslide, but it leads us to the same place—into his loving arms.

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