



Why Children Need Ignatian Spirituality

Tim and Sue Muldoon

To the extent that we offer our children ways of imagining God always present among us in our families, we help them to understand that everyday life is shot through with grace.

What do you want to be when you grow up?” That’s the question that many adults ask children to get a sense of how they see themselves. Will she be a doctor? Is he interested in sports? Does she like to build things? Does he like math? Perhaps lurking behind the question is a more practical interest: will this child be motivated to do schoolwork? In any case, what is happening is as natural as telling stories to children: we are asking them to take a look around their imagination.

This natural-as-can-be technique is at the heart of a spiritual practice that developed in different ways in the Christian tradition, but achieved clarity in the writings and legacy of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. His basic insight was to recognize that God worked on his own imagination before he even realized it, and that his own religious conversion was the recognition that he found greater peace, more profound love, and a sense of meaning and purpose when he embraced where God had been moving in his imagination. To put it most briefly, he discovered—only after an injury gave him a period of convalescence that forced him to be silent for a while—that God incited him to imagine service of others rather than ego-building, and that he would gain great joy from living out what he had imagined.

Children can learn much from being invited into the kind of spiritual practices that had such an influence on Ignatius. When parents or other adults invite children to use their imagination, they are not only stimulating their cognitive capacities; they are also giving their children a way of contrasting various possibilities for their lives. What desires, hopes, or fears emerge in their imagination? How do they relate to other children, adults, or fantasy figures, and how do those relationships impact the way they interact with real people?

Tim and Sue Muldoon are the authors of *Six Sacred Rules for Families* (Ave Maria Press, 2013). Tim is a theologian and author of several books who teaches at Boston College and writes frequently for Patheos. Sue is a therapist and religious educator.

This article appeared as part of the “Passing on the Faith: Teaching the Next Generation” Symposium on Patheos.com: www.patheos.com/Topics/Passing-on-the-Faith.html. Read all of the articles online.

When adults encourage children to use their imagination in prayer, they help their children understand the way God is already active in their lives. “How did Jesus treat his friends when he was a child?” “How do you think God feels when we do that?” “What would Jesus do?” Parents can do what Jesus himself did. It is telling that Jesus himself invited his listeners to imagine the kingdom of God using stories and images: a mustard seed; a pearl of great price; a runaway son; a woman looking for a coin; and many others. Imagination is a way that a person young or old can explore possibilities beyond the ordinary, and begin to see the world through God’s eyes.

In our book *Six Sacred Rules for Families*, we explore the way that the insights of Ignatius might be applied to raising children. Most important is the practice of offering children the idea that “the kingdom of God is among you”—that is, unfolding every day at home. To the extent that we offer our children ways of imagining God always present among us in our families, we help them to understand that everyday life is shot through with grace, and that all the ups and downs of family life are part of a shared pilgrimage. Giving our children a sense of the direction in their lives will, we hope, give them a sense that every experience, good or bad, can be part of moving them toward joy.

Most important is to model unreserved love, for our example becomes the bedrock upon which they can imagine a loving God. Showing affection, spending time together in games or tasks, or staying with our children when they experience fear or heartache—these are some of the ways that we point them toward God’s unconditional love for them. To use a gospel metaphor, providing such examples is like cultivating the soil of their lives so that the seed of God’s word might more easily take root.

With Ignatius, we believe that God deals directly with each creature. We cannot make them followers of Christ; only the Holy Spirit can. But we can help remove the obstacles to their faith by helping them understand love,

and by helping them to imagine the way God is laboring in the world—in our family, and in their own hearts—to build his kingdom of mercy, love, and justice. Our hope is that in cultivating an imagination of God as the direction of everything loving, everything good, and everything hopeful, we will encourage them, when they are ready, to listen to his voice, summoning them to the goodness for which he has created them.

Part Two

Children need Ignatian spirituality because it can help them learn the value of slowing down to take stock of what their lives mean.

“What did you do at school today?” This and similar questions we ask our children in order to learn about their experiences points to a second technique that is at the heart of the Ignatian spiritual tradition. In Part 1 of this series, we focused on using imagination as a springboard for cultivating our children’s spiritual lives. Here, we’ll focus on reviewing the average day as another technique for filling out our children’s spiritual vocabulary.

Why is it that dinner conversations frequently involve talking to our loved ones about what happened during the day? What is it about talking about past experiences that helps us form bonds of relationships? On some level all of us intuit a basic point: there is something about memory that is distinctive about the way we make sense of the world.

As parents, we have the power to help our children use memory to consider the meaning of their experiences, both good and bad. Consider the following questions, which you might use over dinner or (as we sometimes do) before bedtime.

- ◆ *What was something that made you happy today?*
- ◆ *What was something that made you feel sad?*
- ◆ *What are you looking forward to tomorrow?*

These three simple questions can be a springboard for follow-up conversation: “Let’s thank God for what made us happy; ask God to help us with what made us sad; and ask him to be with us tomorrow.” And so on.

Saint Ignatius understood that memory serves to orient ourselves to the world, and that a true conversion also involves a transformation of the ways we remember our lives. He hinted at the vital role of memory in his *Suscipe*:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, All I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.

Of course there are different age-appropriate ways to encourage the practice of using memory in prayer. We’ve illustrated above a way that is appropriate for young children, but for older kids and teens one might instead converse naturally, asking (for example) where they found God over the course of the day. The *Picturing God* blog offers a number of examples, and many of the contributors point to an Ignatian practice of the Examen as helpful.

The *Examen* is the daily practice of prayerfully using memory. It helps a person become adept at finding God in all things, and bears fruit in finding God both in the past and in the present moment. It involves speaking to God as one friend speaks to another, then walking with God through the experiences of the past day—rummaging, to use a phrase from Dennis Hamm, SJ—to find what God wants to show us about our lives, our desires, and our decisions.

Children need Ignatian spirituality because it can help them learn the value of slowing down to take stock of what their lives mean. Many children today lead heavily programmed lives, limiting the time to develop creativity and independent thinking. It is good to teach them our language about God using traditional language-based methods (reading

the Bible, learning our customs and beliefs, and so on)—but we suggest that it is also important to supplement those methods with encouraging exploration, reflection, and prayer. Every child learns differently and resonates with different ways of exploring the world. Encouraging your children to explore spirituality in this way may resonate with some children who less likely to sit down and read a Bible story. To the extent that we can encourage children to connect the word “God” with their very own concrete life experiences, we offer them an entry point into an expansive shared pilgrimage of faith.

Cultivating our children’s memory also sets the stage for what is central—though often implicit—in Christian spirituality: namely, the shared memory of Jesus. Christian faith is rooted in memory, not philosophical abstraction: Jesus was a person who did and said specific things. If children become fluent in the language of memory, then they are likely to understand the significance of written memory in the scriptures. “Luke remembered Jesus this way.” “John remembered Jesus this way.” What emerges is a collection of memories that help shape the ways that we remember Jesus in practices such as the Eucharist.

In Part Three, we’ll return to this theme of memory by focusing on the stories that we tell children about Jesus: not only what they say, but how we might share them and invite children to be part of them.

Part Three

We need to help children encounter Jesus by using their senses in hearing stories about him.

Some of our favorite memories of childhood, and of times with our own children, have been during the Christmas season. If your families are anything like ours, you understand how all our senses light up: the smell of baking cookies and of pine from the Christmas tree; the sights of snowfall, Christmas lights, and wrapped gifts; the sounds of carols and the

laughter of cousins playing together; the taste of Christmas dinner with family, of cookies and pies and a hundred other handmade treats; the warmth of a fire, the hugs of far-flung relatives, even the flannel of pajamas on Christmas morning. Our senses make our memories.

So too in prayer. Saint Ignatius intuited this important point in his counsel to **apply all our senses in prayer**: to see, hear, smell, feel, and touch what is going on around us when we enter into the rich stories about Jesus' life and teachings. In Part Three we'll focus on helping children encounter Jesus by using their senses in hearing stories about him.

Christmas is the obvious example, because it is the most sensory season. It was **Saint Francis of Assisi** who originated the idea of the crèche, in order that people might more easily come to understand the story of God becoming one of us in the baby Jesus. (Francis was Ignatius' prime example of how to live a Christian life, **much like the present pope**.)

But what is true of Christmas is no less true of the rest of the Church year, or of Christian faith in general: children learn it by sensing it. From the early centuries when Christians could crawl out of the catacombs to celebrate the sacred liturgy, Christian worship has been sensual. Consider hymns, incense, chant, and the **development of Western music**. Think of European art, so wedded to biblical stories, the saints, and liturgy. Meditate on the way that college campuses even today draw from the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages, drawing the heart heavenward by pointing the eye skyward, and by telling stories by painting them in sunlight-drenched stained glass. Think of bread and wine, water and oil in the sacramental celebrations.

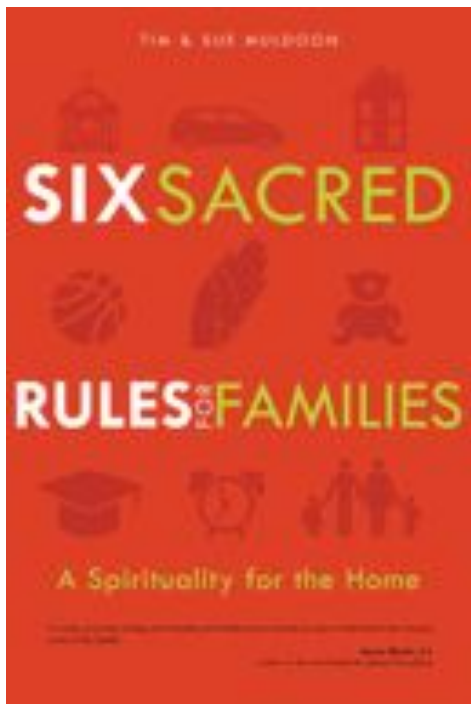
Sharing faith with children means sharing with them this kind of sensual world: that is, telling stories not only with grown-up sounding words like "commandment" or "sacrament," but also with very kid-friendly practices that involve senses. Don't just read Matthew or Luke's infancy narratives to them! Put together a crèche at home; visit beautiful churches and tell stories from the stained

glass; deliver beautifully wrapped gifts to shelters; bake cookies and share with family and friends. Tell the stories of faith behind the lines of familiar Christmas carols. The meaning of the Christmas season comes alive when stories about Jesus are wedded to actions imitating Jesus.

Similar ideas apply the rest of the year. Don't just teach forgiveness; tell the story of **the Lost Son** and then practice forgiveness—really practice it—at home. Take time when they are calm, teach the meaning of saying "I forgive you" (instead of the more bland "it's okay"), and then walk them through the action of forgiving someone. Find ways to celebrate forgiveness in your family. The father of the lost son threw a party. Your family might celebrate by making a special dessert when you have been able to show forgiveness after a difficult conflict.

Use the opportunity when a celebrity is on TV or in a crowd to tell the **funny story of Zacchaeus**, who wanted to see Jesus so badly that he climbed a tree. Or when your family is at a party, tell the story of Jesus' first miracle at a **wedding in Cana**, when he turned water into wine just so the guests could continue being happy together. Do some service work together, and use the opportunity to introduce your children to your nameless friend the **good Samaritan**. In every case, the objective is to show that your own way of living is an imitation of a story in Jesus' life, and to help them grasp the meaning of that story by connecting it to some kind of sensory experience that will stick with them.

Prayer is an extension of the conversations that you have together in your family. You bring God into the joys and concerns of your family life. Make prayer simple and relatable. **Recall the day**; pray for loved ones; pray for what your children hope for or are afraid of. Teach them that experience is the holy ground where Christ walks with them. They will, over time, hopefully, want to know more about Him.



Six Sacred Rules for Families

Tim and Sue Muldoon (Ave Maria Press, 2013)

Tim and Sue Muldoon bring a wealth of experience as parents, spiritual guides, and religious educators to a practical book for parents that offers six sacred rules for integrating faith formation into everyday family life. This basic guide to family spirituality not only provides parents with the practical tools they need but also offers the refreshing perspective that faith is not about adding to our to-do lists. Rather, it means doing what we already do with a new attentiveness. Drawing from the treasury of Ignatian spirituality and the breadth of Catholic tradition, the Muldoons present six sacred rules that encourage, stretch, and revitalize family faith—helping parents give their children basic lessons in learning to pray, deepening love, widening faith, and cultivating a spiritual vision of life.

“Parenting is already an act of faith. You don’t know what kind of person your kid will grow up to be. Everything you do is guesswork on some level. Every decision as a parent is predicated on faith,” says Tim Muldoon.

Sprinkled with stories from the Bible and references to American films, *Six Sacred Rules* is an accessible guide that can help parents find authentic spirituality “embedded right in the messy midst of [everyday life].” The aim of the book is to help parents equip their children with a religious vocabulary and faith practices that give them the tools with which to make more reflective judgments when they are older.

“A lot of parents are overwhelmed and are content to outsource their children’s religious development,” says Muldoon. “We teach our children manners, language, even things about sports we like, but we don’t want to teach them religion? Ours is a culture of pluralism and so we have to be more deliberate about what it is we want to pass on.”

The Muldoons’ Rules for Family Spirituality are:

1. God Brings Our Family Together on Pilgrimage
2. Our Love of One Another Leads to Joy
3. Our Family Doesn’t Care about “Success”
4. God Stretches Our Family toward His Kingdom
5. God Will Help Us
6. We Must Learn Which Desires Lead Us to Freedom

The Muldoons’ accumulated wisdom as both parents and educators converge in *Six Sacred Rules*. “This is not just theory. This has been road-tested,” chuckled Muldoon, whose children are 13, 11, and nine. The book shows parents how to invite their children into rich, spiritual traditions as a way of helping them develop the habits of being more reflective, thoughtful and loving. The hope is, he said, that these practices will provide a launching point for children so that as they get older they make the connection between these practices and God and Jesus.

“Authentic spirituality begins with practices that bring us to things that are good. The key word is practice,” said Muldoon. *Six Sacred Rules* highlights practices families can incorporate into their home life, such as grace before meals, Nativity scenes and Advent calendars, blessings before big events, and service projects, among others.