



Catholic Parenting 101

Tips for Building Strong Catholic Families

By **TIM HOGAN, PsyD, LP, CIRT**

Bridging the Gap of Spiritual Separation

While every marriage endures the occasional power struggle and conflict, perhaps the spiritual separation experienced between spouses is the most difficult to overcome. How can a husband and wife connect with one another if they are spiritually at odds? How might a married couple deal with a spouse who rejects the primary importance of the Catholic faith formation of their children? The lone spouse who advocates for the Catholic religious education of the children suffers with a unique and lonely predicament of spiritual separation.

There are at least three challenges that must be identified so that their corresponding strategies can be directly embraced. When these strategies are implemented, the married couple, as parents, can demonstrate to their children the importance of faith formation. More importantly, spouses can begin to bridge the spiritual separation. (Note: The following challenges and strategies are addressed to the spouse advocating for the Catholic religion education of the children.)

Give Yourself Space

Your *first* and biggest challenge is the profound personal loneliness that results from the spiritual separation you experience with your spouse. You need to be gracious with yourself. Give yourself space to feel the painful loneliness that comes from your inexpressible desire to connect with your spouse at a deeper, spiritual level. Be on the lookout for old regrets, especially in regards to your spouse's choices. Be also aware of any remorse that you may feel about interests or activities that you once shared as a couple and are now a source of shame. Your first strategy is to allow yourself to pray with this loneliness. Surrender the pain regularly to God. If you embrace God's mercy, you can let go of self-criticism, and resentment toward your spouse.

Be Gracious With Your Spouse

The second challenge of spiritual separation is that your spouse might feel increasingly lonely and judged as you become more committed and excited about your faith. You need to be gracious with your spouse, and aware of how this separation can be a source of pain. It can be painful for one spouse to watch another having their emotional and spiritual needs fulfilled by someone

else, even when that someone is God! Spouses in this situation often feel left out of your new and exciting world. Until they experience their own conversion, your new religious attachments will feel like competition to them.

Another strategy is to carefully listen to your spouse. When your spouse shares their frustration or anger about your faith, ask God to help you hear their underlying hurt, rejection, or fear. Your spouse might feel like they are no longer good enough for you. After all, when compared with God and God's family, who could possibly measure up? Affirm that your Catholic faith enables you to love both God and your spouse.

Constructively Address the Conflict

The third challenge in overcoming spiritual separation is that raising your children Catholic takes a lot of work. While this conflict is unique, all marriages must constructively address such conflict. Remember that even married couples that publicly appear to be "fine" often privately struggle with serious marital challenges. Despite these challenges, you need to continue to exercise your responsibility to raise your children in the best way possible. You do not need to apologize for the priority you put on faith formation. Your spouse also has the right, and can be encouraged, to take the opportunity to teach your children in areas they feel strongly about. Your challenge is to proceed with the quiet confidence and charity that aligns with your conscience and beliefs.

You will be at your best when you do all you can to protect and invest in your marriage. With God's grace, you can pursue your spouse with a positive outlook and gracious love. When you struggle with this, pray that God will show you how to look at and love your spouse as he does. As part of their faith formation, always invite your children to pray for your marriage—this should be normal practice. Also encourage them to show God's love to you and your spouse, without putting them in the middle or using them in a manipulative way.

Following the advice of Saint Peter, pray that the graciousness and purity of your own life will draw your spouse to faith, without ever having to speak a word (1 Peter 3: 1-2).

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