

Raising Saints



A Resource for Catholic Parents



Ablaze
MINISTRIES

Introduction

After all of my years in ministry, the most lasting and fundamental change that I have ever seen in a youth's life has come about through their parents. If you want to know what a kid's faith will look like when they grow up, look at their parents. The purpose of this book is to equip and inspire parents to grow in their own faith and then lead their children closer to the Lord.

This ebook is organized into five different sections. The first section is written towards fathers, to inspire them and give them tips to be stronger spiritual leaders of their families. The second section is written to mothers, speaking to the ways that they are spiritual anchors and strongholds for their families. The third section seeks to disclose the things that young people typically don't actually ask for, but that they truly need from their parents in regards to their faith and to their lives. The fourth section is written specifically for mothers who are leading alone when it comes to the faith, and who are looking for guidance and support. The last section is for fathers that want to reclaim their role as the spiritual leader of the family, but are not sure where to begin.

We hope that Raising Saints is a down-to-earth, practical application that can be read and used by any and every parent who is looking to lead their children closer to Christ.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matt Rice', with a stylized, flowing script.

Matt Rice, President of Ablaze Ministries

Dad, The Spiritual Head

Written by Matt Rice

Hey Dads, so this part of the book is for you. Well...us. Sometimes I find that I have to keep telling myself the same stuff that will be written here, just to remind me of how important my role is as a father. I'm not going to dive into statistics here because all of us men know inherently how important our role is, and how influential we are in the spiritual lives of our families. We know that we are the first glimpse of God the Father that our children will see. The problem is that most of the time we don't know where to start or what do, and we don't like to do anything that we aren't sure we'll be good at, so we do what we're comfortable with. We dive into hobbies, sports and the like, and leave the spiritual stuff to our wives or to the "churchy" people. When we do this we leave our families at a huge disadvantage in their faith walk. God has called us to lead our families to Him; we cannot abandon our role as father in faith to someone, or something else.

Let me set your mind at ease, at least partially. God has set you up to succeed. He's in your corner. God has not only wired you to lead, but He has wired your family to follow you. And it doesn't matter if you're starting from square one in your own faith or if you have a deep relationship with Christ and love His church. As long as you are honest with where you are and where you want to be, your family is wired to respond to this and grow with you. The scary side of this is that if you ignore your call to lead your family to Christ, they'll follow you away from God too. They're wired to follow you, not their peers but their dad. The quickest and easiest path for them to get to heaven is to follow you there.

Dad As The Line Leader

The title of this section should give you some indication as to the ages of my kids. My wife and I have 6 kids, with 3 of them below the age of 5, so the idea of line-leader is fresh in my mind. As I said before, we as fathers set the destination for our wives and children. We decide if we lead our family toward Christ or away from Him. Don't fool yourself into believing that there is some middle ground – there isn't. We either lead others toward Christ or away, period.

Once we set the destination, we've got to walk the path. And we won't be perfect, so let go of that prideful pitfall right now. However, we do need to pursue that destination honestly if we expect others to come with us. This is where our courage and strength come in. Your faith journey is going to be an adventure. You might have to stride ahead, just you and God at first. It might be that there are few men in your family or in your life who have chosen to dedicate their lives to Christ in all that they do. But, even if you feel like you're charging ahead alone, your family needs you to be courageous and put yourself out there in a genuine effort to grow closer to Christ. They need you to move towards God and take them with you. Again, you might be the first man you know, other than your priest, to really put himself out there as a spiritual leader. But be not afraid! This is where God is calling you. He has been calling you since you were young and you know it. He's got you and will help you become the man He has created you to be.

Dads Must Challenge Their Families

Not only do we set the destination, but we push, encourage and guide our families toward this destination. When setting a goal, I don't know one dad who is happy with miniscule steps towards that goal, especially when they know their team, (in this case, their family) is capable of more. As men, when we see the potential in people we naturally call that out. We push each other and our children to be their best and strive for the goal at the pace they are capable of. Don't be afraid or too timid to expect a lot out of your family. But when you do so, be sure to help them out along their journey of growth. Encourage them when you see them reaching towards their potential. When you're proud of your kids, tell them you are!

Like God Our Father, Fathers Are Merciful

As I said earlier, dads get to be the first glimpse of God the Father to our kids. Our God is endlessly merciful and we need to be earthly examples of this. This means that we need to be forgiving and teach our kids how to request, receive and give forgiveness.

As dads, we can be hard on our kids. Typically we are the enforcers, the strong ones who discipline our kids. This gives us a great opportunity to show God's mercy. Every time that we need to discipline our kids we can show them how to ask for forgiveness, and, the biggest part of this, we can offer them forgiveness. They get to hear us say "I forgive you", much like they will hear in the confessional when they are seeking forgiveness from God. How cool is that!

My wife and I have almost trained our kids to ask their brothers and sisters to forgive them by simply saying, "Will you forgive me?" Their sibling then replies, albeit sometimes begrudgingly, "I forgive you." In doing this, our kids not only get to ask for forgiveness but they too are trained to forgive. Displaying forgiveness to our families and teaching our children how to enter into the practice of forgiving is our duty and privilege as fathers.

Practical Steps: The Part Most Dads Will Skip To

I like practical steps. Tell me what I can do to be the father that God has called me to be and I'm on board for giving that a go. If I had to give some practical steps of how to become the type of father God envisions all men to become, here's what I would say, in order of importance:

Commit, or recommit, to Christ in a real concrete way.

Say something like this in your own words: "God I'm sorry for how I've separated myself from you, I love you and I want to know you. I accept Jesus Christ as my lord and savior."

Pray daily.

Start with 5 minutes and work up to at least 15 minutes.

Bless your kids every morning.

A simple “I bless you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” is a powerful blessing that a Father can give to his children.

Read the Bible with your kids at night.

Start with the book of Mark or Acts of the Apostles. Read a small section nightly.

Take your family to Mass and Confession.

These steps are enough to get you off to a good start. I know that if I was given more than five things to do, there is little chance I'd even do the first one. If you're starting from scratch (which is completely okay) don't try all five at once. Steps 1 and 2 will be a great starting place, until daily prayer becomes natural. Then move on to the next step.

You Can Do This

Following this path is you and your families' surest way to heaven. Not only can you do this, but God has called you to this. Sometimes we as men need to hear those particular words. First, that we have been called to something important, something that no other man can do. Second, that you can do this. Not on your own, but with God you can do this.

The world is hurting, and it needs men like you to step up and be the dads and husbands that God has called you to be.

Mom, The Spiritual Heart

Written by Wesley Rice

“Thank you, women who are mothers! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God’s own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child’s first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life.”

John Paul II from his Letter to Women

These words from Saint John Paul II sum up motherhood in just a few sentences. We as mothers are to be living examples of God’s love to our families. Our love and care for our children at all stages of their lives is intended to be a reflection of God’s love for His children, and it is the first love that most people fully experience, the love of our mother.

I particularly like the way JPII says that we are to be “God’s own smile” upon our children. My experience with our children has been if the kids want to have fun - Dad is the go to guy, but if they need something that they feel is really important or if they are in trouble or hurt they invariably call for mom. We are their comfort, their safe place, their trusted healer, their secure arms to run to. It is in these experiences that they get to see firsthand what the unconditional love of our God is like, and it is this feeling they will come back to throughout their lives when they need to feel that love again. What a profound privilege and what a great responsibility we are entrusted with, to model the love of God to our children.

We Guide Their First Steps

Our role as mothers is to guide not only our children's first physical steps but their spiritual "first steps" as well. We are their first, most present, and most consistent teachers throughout their lives. We teach them how to walk, how to talk, how to interact with their brothers, sisters, and friends, how to share, how to be kind, how to succeed in school and work, but above all of those things we introduce them to Christ and teach them that Jesus loves them above all. If we do our jobs well, we foster their love for Christ in return and we lead them to His Church. We introduce them to Jesus and we encourage their spiritual development from the beginning of their lives and extending into adulthood. It starts with "Jesus loves me" and should only grow from there.

If we do not introduce them to Jesus, how can we expect that they will meet Him at all? In order to introduce them to Jesus, though, we must first know him personally ourselves. We should re-introduce ourselves to Jesus and build our relationship with Him on a daily basis. We must pray. If we do not know him well, how can we bring him to our kids?

We Help Them Grow

As they grow physically, we are cheering them on. From t-ball, to soccer, to gymnastics, to piano, to academics, to high school and college sports, moms can be found consistently behind the scenes as their children's most ardent fan. We love to see them succeed, in fact, we thrive on their success. We push them to work hard, to be dedicated, to be determined. We take joy in their successes and we feel deep sorrow when they falter. How much more should we cheer on their spiritual lives! They should be able to look at our example of prayer, faithfulness, and commitment to the church and her teachings, and be able to model their own spiritual lives after what they see us do.

Furthermore, we should hold them to a higher standard in their faith than in any other aspect of their lives. Speaking from my own experience, it is often easier to cheer them on in sports or school than in prayer and virtue. Somehow, those things seem more tangible and easier to teach but they are far less important than virtue, truth, and above all Christ's love. As the wife of a youth minister for 15

years, I have seen parents surrender their children's spiritual life to the youth program. They drop them off every week and that is where it ends. Nothing is reinforced at home. Nothing is taught in the moments of everyday life where we need Christ. We cannot do that if we want our children to know and love Jesus!

Just like every other area where we want them to succeed, we need to model a strong spiritual foundation. We must let them see our relationship with Jesus and our dependence on Him so they can learn to rely on Him in their lives as well.

We Are Their Anchor In The Journey Of Life

What an amazing honor! Whether we like it or not, God has appointed us the anchor of our children's lives. They will come back to us over and over again, and our influence will steady them in the storms of life. I look at my own mother; when I was younger I did not like being told that I was like her.

Looking back, I am so grateful for what she did for me. She introduced me to Christ, she helped me develop a relationship with Jesus, she encouraged development of my conscience and virtue. She taught me scripture and prayer and trust in God when things felt out of my control. Those are all things that I have further developed in my adult life, but they are also the things I come back to in times of trouble. She was and still is my anchor. I hope that I am doing the same for my children. I hope that I am helping them know God's love by knowing my love. I hope that I am teaching them to trust in Jesus when they cannot do it alone. I hope they will know the truth of the Bible and the Church. I hope they will steady their hearts on the knowledge and love of God, with whom they can weather any storm.

So How Do We Fulfill All Of These Grand Goals?

Pray – Pray all of the time, every day, in every situation. Let your children see you pray. Pray for your kids. Pray over your kids. Teach your children to pray. If it is second nature for prayer to be a part of your life, it will be their fall back as well.

Trust – Let your children see you trusting God. It is okay for them to know that there are stressful things in our lives and that in those situations your response is not to worry but to trust in the providence of God. It is good for our children to see their parents dealing with the stresses of life not with worry but with unshakable trust and peace. Let our homes be a den of peace for our children.

Honor the family – Make time for each other. Listen to your children. Put the screens away. Put the phones away. Have dinner together. Encourage one another. Respect one another. Tackle problems as a family. Pray together as a family.

Honor your husband – Scripture teaches us that the man is intended to be the spiritual head of the family. Respect him in that role. Honor his decisions and his opinion, especially in front of the kids. If you disagree, try to resolve those disagreements with love and respect. You and your husband model Christian marriage for your kids. They will learn how to be husbands and wives by the way they see you treat each other. In the vocation of marriage, it is the role of the wife to get her husband to Heaven. Work every day toward that goal of his salvation, and by doing that we take steps toward holiness.

Love unconditionally – Love your children. Love your husband. Demonstrate love to them every day, even when you are tired, even when they are overwhelming, even when they disobey, especially when they fail. As we said earlier, we as moms are meant to demonstrate what the love of God is like and His love never fails. No matter how many times we fail, God's love never falters. Our children learn that from the way we love them. Hug them, let them sit in your lap, praise them, tell them out loud you love them.

Rely on the Church – We have a wealth of wisdom at our disposal from thousands of years of church teaching. There is no question our kids can ask that has not been asked before. Consult the Catechism and our priests, deacons and youth ministers when you are unsure. As parents, we will all be faced with things we don't know the answer to, but we can turn to the Church for the answer. We can trust that answer to lead them closer to God and to strengthen their virtue rather than lead them astray. In today's society where morals have become so subjective, it is critical that we have a trusted resource for answers.

Rely on other holy men and women – Go to church. Meet other parents. Form a group of married couples or a parent bible study. My husband and I lead a study on prayer for a group of 18 parents last spring. It was amazing to hear the stories

of other parents and how they handled various situations. We lead the study but we learned so much from the other parents. We need to help each other, to support each other, to learn from each other, so that we can all grow in faith and lead our families closer to God.

Rely on Mary – She is the perfect example of Christian motherhood. We can learn from her, we can ask for her intercession. If we get to know Mary, she will always lead us to her son, Jesus. Pray the rosary. Ask for her guidance and intercession.

Surround your family and your kids with virtuous influences – Teach them about the saints but even more importantly, help them to make friends with good virtues. Send them to Catholic school if you are able. Homeschool if that is what you feel called to. Make arrangements for them to get to know kids whose parents you know are strong Christians. Get to know the parents of their friends and then help them to make good choices about who they spend time with. This is easier when they are younger but can still be done with older kids by helping them to evaluate their friends based on their virtues. Are they kind, selfless, patient? Have them put their friend's (or boyfriend or girlfriend) name into I Corinthians 13:4-7. For example: my oldest son is named Levi so "Levi is patient, Levi is kind. Levi does not envy, does not boast, is not proud"...and it goes on. If those statements are not true, then maybe they are not a worthy friend.

Pray – We come back to number one. Pray. All day. Every day.

Blessed Mother Teresa said "The woman is the heart of the home. Let us pray that we women realize the reason for our existence: to love and be loved, and through this love become instruments of peace in the world."

Peace in the world begins with peace in the home. Peace in our homes begins with peace in our hearts. Peace in our hearts begins with a relationship with Jesus. Let us all get to know Him and introduce our families to Jesus so that we all may have peace.

What Kids Need And Want, But Won't Say

Written by Alyssa Trutter

Being a parent is one of the most thank-less jobs in the universe. I'm not a parent, but I am a daughter, and I think back to my childhood and see just how little I actually thanked my parents. The handful of times I do remember expressing any gratitude were the times that I wanted something. I'm sure that's a shocker to all of you.

Most of the time, I don't think this thank-less-ness is because teenagers are choosing to be ungrateful, I think it's because they don't actually realize the gifts their parents are trying to give them. I'm talking about the gifts that can't be bought, like patience, or faith in suffering, or even simply how to love. These are things that have to be forged, and that takes time and sacrifice – no wonder youth aren't lining up and demanding more.

But these are the things that are truly important. These are the things that young people genuinely need. And what's interesting, is deep down they know they need these things. Looking back now, I see how much I needed my mom to enforce rules or how much I needed her to share deeper details of her life with me, even if I, at the time, didn't want anything to with it. Because, let's acknowledge a truth here, teens don't often want to admit that mom and dad might be doing something right. Or, teens might know they need things like good values and discipline, but are not likely to ever flat out articulate that.

Passing on the faith often falls into that same category. Children and young people desperately need their parents to model the faith to them, to show them what it means to love as God calls us to love. But, I'd hedge my bets that your kids aren't ever actually going to just come right out and tell you that. Don't worry though, I'm here to help translate and decode for you. Here are 7 things your youth need from you, but won't ever ask you for.

“Be Present And Care.”

When growing in their faith, young people need to have their parents walk with and model the faith to them. This is not passive. It doesn't mean, “Well, I'll just let you embrace whatever ideology you like.” But, the other extreme is not good either, where the action is, “this is what we've always believed so your experience needs to match that and support that, otherwise, we'll have issues.” Neither extreme is good. What is needed is a constant, loving presence that children know will be there, no matter what. With this, young people can grow and explore the faith, while being shown that truth and goodness are present.

I picture this like the bumpers on bowling lanes. They're simply there to steer the ball in the right direction, but in doing so, they don't dictate every move of the ball as it goes down the lane. That's what youth need from their parents as they grow in their Catholic faith. They need a loving support, a caring presence. They need someone to journey alongside them as they grow closer to Jesus, not to journey for them, or to leave them to journey all on their own.

“Show Me What's Important.”

Growing up, we never missed Sunday mass. I don't say that to brag; I say that to tell you that it was a priority in our family. It wasn't an option not to be at church on Sunday. Because of the reverence and devotion our parents displayed towards church, we never fought them about it. Not once. My sister and I knew, because of the way our parents approached Mass, that this was an important time of prayer and that we weren't ever going to miss it.

So what happened after I moved out and went to college? What happens now in my adult life? I never miss Mass. It's not even an option. Why? Because my parents let me know how important it was. They never set me down and told me. I received no lecture. They showed me by their actions and their priorities.

How do you approach Mass, the sacraments, and prayer? It is with a spirit of dread or annoyance? It is with a spirit of indifference? Is it with a spirit of joy and gratitude? What are you telling your kids by your actions and your attitude? Your children need you to show them how to prioritize. Because, if faith is not a priority to you, it's very unlikely to be a priority to your kids.

“Be Real With Me. Be Vulnerable With Me.”

I remember a conversation we had as a family at the dinner table when I was a little girl. We were talking about divorce and getting re-married. There was a moment where I turned to my mom and said, “you were never married before though, right Mom?” Come to find out, she actually had been. Her first husband had been unfaithful, so their marriage was annulled. My dad was her second husband. My mom later told me, that she had been fearful for years of having to tell my sister and I that she had been married before. It caused her anxiety all throughout my childhood.

But you know what? After I knew that fact about her past, I loved her more. I didn't judge her. She went from being someone who takes care of me, to being a person with a real story. She shared a broken part of that story with me. I had more respect and love for her because she had been honest with me.

We live in this idea that if our kids see us mess up, they'll never listen to us again. That's not true. If there's a part of the faith you know you need to grow in, don't try and hide that from your children. Share your commitment to grow with them. If there's a mistake in your past, consider sharing the things you learned from that with your teens. The wisdom you have to share could make a huge difference in their lives. Don't be afraid to be real with your children. They want and need the authentic you, flaws and all. You can model for them how to get back up and run into the arms of our Heavenly Father.

“Illuminate Truth For Me.”

In our Catholic Church, we are blessed to be entrusted with the fullness of truth, given to us in Christ Jesus. But, you and I both know that we live in a society where that truth is under constant attack. From challenges waged at our sacraments or liturgy, to our moral teachings that are in stark contrast to popular trends, parts of our faith are in continuous need of protecting and witnessing. As parents, you are the first line of proclaiming these truths to your children and defending them from the assaults of the world.

I believe that one of the most beautiful characteristics of the Church is the way that she is constantly pointing back to the love of God. Much like Mary, the Church is always saying, “Look here for answers. Look here for truth.” You don’t have to have all the answers, but you get to be a beacon of truth, pointing back to the teachings of the Church, the truths that God has entrusted to us.

“Show Me The Sorrows And The Joy.”

None of us will ever forget where we were on 9/11. I was in middle school at the time, and I remember the look on my teacher’s face, and looking at maps, and learning what the word terrorist meant. I knew what happened was bad, but I didn’t know it was a tragedy until my dad picked me up from school that day. I got into the car, and devastation was written all over his face. I knew instantly that this was a much bigger deal than I had previously thought. He didn’t hide his concern from me. He didn’t hide his sorrow from me. Instead, he ushered me into the period of mourning all of America was entering into.

When tragedy strikes in your own lives, don’t hide your sadness from your children. They need to see that it’s ok to be affected. But, in the midst of that sorrow, proclaim the truth that God holds all things together. Witness to the Cross, the greatest tragedy the world will ever see, and the way in which God brought the greatest good the world will ever see out of that suffering. If our Father can do that, He can work all things for good for those who love Him, no matter what the circumstance. Show your children who to run to and who to hope in.

On the other side of this, in moments of great rejoicing, give God the glory. When there is victory, point to God’s victory on the Cross. When prayers are answered or things perfectly fall into place, praise Jesus for His providence. Let your children see the joy that comes with walking with the Lord. Let each moment, each season, whether joyful or sorrowful, witness to the glory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

“Don’t Let Me Have My Own Way. I Don’t Know What I’m Doing.”

A few years ago, I attended a conference in San Diego and went to a session on parenting. It didn’t disappoint, but what really stuck with me about that talk was the conversation it inspired with my mother afterwards.

I called her on the phone and said, “Mom, thank you for not backing down and for not letting me win arguments we had when I was a teenager. I needed you to put me in my place, otherwise, who knows where I’d be now.” I needed her to win. This humbled me and made it clear to me that I am, in fact, not the center of the universe.

Because she didn’t back down, she taught me how to yield. She taught me how to receive. In doing that, she primed me for yielding to God. She humbled me. In a world that is so self-absorbed, children need to know that placing themselves at the center of their world is not a decision that leads to fulfillment. It will only leave them dissatisfied.

Only with the Lord as our center and cornerstone will we be filled with true joy and happiness. By being mothers and fathers and holding to your authority, you point back to the authority of God. With love, hold your ground for the Lord.

“Show Me What Real Love Looks Like.”

Young people are desperate to be loved. Taking a quick look around at the world we live in, it’s no wonder as to why. Shows and movies are filled with fleeting, surface level relationships, lacking authentic love. I cringe at many of the friendships I see in ministry and in the classroom. “Friends” pick on one another or ice out one another like there’s nothing wrong with that sort of behavior. They’re starving for kindness. They’re starving for a picture of what real love looks like.

The way that you love speaks volumes. Not just the way that you give of yourselves to your children, but the way that you treat others with respect and honor,

the way that you make time for those who are often forgotten, the way that you sacrifice for your spouse – all of these things display true love to them. These acts of love display the Love that is God.

How do we witness our faith, our God to our children? Through the love that we live. But, we cannot live out the love of God if we are not first filled with the love of God. We have to open ourselves up to know God, to let Him love us and to entrust ourselves to Him. This is a lifelong commitment that we renew each day of our lives. Every day, we are called to renew our relationship with the Lord. With that love poured into you, you are equipped to let that love overflow into the lives of your kids.

Allow God to share Himself with you, and then share yourselves with your children. Allow God to love you and then let that love spill over to your children. Pursue their good, pursue God in their lives, above all else. This is what they need, what your children are desperate for. Love them deeper into the heart of God.

The Sustainer: For Moms Who Lead Alone

Written by Kendra Bartlett

As we hold our brand-new, greatly anticipated child in our arms for the first time, our eyes meet theirs, and love for them spills out of us from a place we didn't know we had. We gaze into their eyes – and then the reality hits. We are fully responsible for the livelihood of another human being (without an instruction manual, mind you)! Not only are we supposed to keep them fed, dressed, educated, loved, and a million other things, our main job as parents is to get our children to heaven. Talk about pressure!

If you are a mother striving to raise your children in the faith but yet your spouse either does not practice the same faith or maybe no faith at all, what are you to do? How can you follow the spiritual leadership of one who has no spirituality or no desire to lead in that way? Raising a child is difficult. Getting a child to heaven is even harder. Not being on the same spiritual page as your spouse as you strive to guide your children to heaven, there are no words. Sister, I desire a moment to speak to your heart about that very thing. You are not alone in this journey.

Look Within!

It is easy to get caught up in the “should do’s” such as getting your kids to mass, enrolling them in religious education, praying at bed-time, being mindful about what they consume regarding media, etc. While these are all vital steps in leading your children closer to our Lord, your kids are watching you more than anything. They are seeing how the light of Christ shines through you, how you live out your relationship with God on a day to day basis. Are you authentic about your faith or are you going through the motions?

Jesus Christ loves you dearly, you are His beloved! Allow Jesus to be your spiritual leader, the One you so deeply desire. Become His by dying to yourself, taking up this great cross, and walking with Him. I encourage you to frequent the sacraments such as reconciliation and the Eucharist, take time out of your day to sit with Him in Adoration, talk to Him in prayer. Take your children to these precious moments with our Lord as well, for they will most certainly bear great fruit.

Storm Heaven With Prayer. Be An Intercessor.

While you are there in Adoration, bathe your husband in prayer. Marriages have been transformed, saints have been made, and lives have been radically changed all through the prayers of another. Offer up rosaries for him. Unite your day to day sufferings to the Holy Cross by simply saying “Jesus, I offer up this diaper change for the conversion of my husband”. Our Lady Undoer of Knots is one of Pope Francis’ deepest devotions, and she was made known by undoing the “knots” within a marriage that was on the verge of disaster. Seek her help to undo the knots in his life and in your marriage.

I recently was introduced to “praying the scriptures” for someone. Here are an example: Let’s look at Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope.” Your prayer can look something like this: “Dear Jesus, thank you for my husband. Thank you that you have a divine plan for him. I pray that his heart be softened to it, and may he desire to follow you. May he cling to the hope in which you alone give.”

Prayer is the most powerful thing you can be doing not only for your husband, but for yourself in striving to raise your children in the faith.

Love Him Right Where He Is At

As you are praying for your husband, if you do not see the changes you desire in the timeframe you desire, do not lose hope. Your role is to support him and love him right where he is at in life. This is incredibly hard, I know. I learned this one the hard way. But as soon as I was able to surrender to the fact that my husband is on his own journey and he needs me by his side in the valleys as well as on the mountain tops, I was able to let go and place him in the hands of our Lord, who I know is way more powerful than I can ever be. Does this mean you must then condone behavior that may be morally wrong or that could lead you to sin? No. But you must love him through it.

Always Keep The Door Open

At the start of my husband's sophomore year of college, his friend would come knock on his door at 6:15am asking him if he wanted to go to daily mass with him. He would usually shout no and roll over and go back to sleep, sometimes there would be a shoe thrown at the door. But every single morning was an opportunity given. By the second semester, my husband was regularly attending daily mass. Jesus transforms, Jesus is fully present at mass. You can do the math. Be the one in your husband's life that always lovingly keeps an open invitation for him to join you and the kids for mass, for the fish fry, whatever it may be.

Don't Go It Alone - Have Support

Make sure you have at least one person in your life that will be like my husband's college buddy, who will consistently knock on your door. With as much as you are pouring into your children, pouring into your husband (even if it's just quietly in your heart through prayer), it can be exhausting. You must be getting poured into in order to pour out into others. Surround yourself with faithful friends that will challenge you, encourage you, and grow the desire to live your faith more authen-

tically every day. The beautiful thing about our Catholic faith is that we are all part of the body of Christ. Don't just get your children plugged in at your parish so they can form relationships with like-minded friends from Christ centered families, but you yourself get plugged into the community as well.

Draw Strength From The Eucharist

Go to mass at least every weekend, and if more awesome. Even if you have to camp out in the cry room and don't remember a thing from the homily when you leave, our Lord's love and mercy goes beyond that. Jesus is the only one who can sustain you. Remember, your children are watching you and what your priorities are. If you want our Lord to be a priority in their life, He must be in yours. Mass isn't up for discussion, make it happen. You will be transformed and renewed, and your precious children will know the love of their heavenly Father.

I'll leave you with this:

Philippians 4:6 says, "Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God."

Dear Jesus, cover this dear woman with the peace that only you can give. As she strives to draw closer to you and be a living witness of your love in the lives of her husband and children, may she be strengthened by You through the sacraments and through faith that you hear and know the deepest desires of her heart.

I will be praying for you, sister.

The Gatekeeper: For Dads Who Don't Know Where To Start

Written by Chris Bartlett

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

Ephesians 5:23

“There's a storm coming, Mr. Wayne. You and your friends better batten down the hatches, because when it hits, you're all gonna wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us.”

Selina Kyle, The Dark Knight Rises

Gentlemen, you are Batman. There is a storm coming and, for too long, most of us have been numb to the effects of the restless assault on the family, on *our* families. We are the first and last soldier and are called to lay it all down to protect that which has been entrusted to us.

Our task for our spouse and children is to be Christ. We are the sacrifice to bring redemption to our families.

The Hard Truth

Men are failing. Only 30 percent of Americans who were raised Catholic are still practicing. 79 percent of those who have dropped the name “Catholic” and claim no religious affiliation of any kind, have done so by age 23.

There is a retention problem in the Catholic Church, especially with our youth. There is no mass exodus or major scandal that is driving them away.

It is the mediocre way the faith is lived out by the Catholics closest to our youth that is causing this epidemic. Apathy is a bigger threat to the Church today than Heresy. Streaming movies, internet pornography, the naval gazing caused by social media share part of the blame, but I am certain that men are the solution.

A study recently confirmed that the most critical factor for a child participating regularly in religious activities as an adult is the faith of the father. If the mother was practicing and the father non practicing, participation in regular religious activities was a mere 2%, compared to 44% if it was the father who was practicing and the mother not. Dads, we are the gatekeepers. We are the models, teachers, witnesses. We are Christ to our family.

As a child I used to love those “Choose Your Own Adventure” books. You’d get to the end of one chapter and it’d give you two or three options on the next page to turn to, depending on which choice you’d like the character to make. The rest of this chapter follows this structure. Please review the next few headings and choose the section or sections that apply to you.

“I Am Not The Spiritual Leader Of My Family Because I Do Not Know Jesus Or Anything About The Church.”

Spiritual leadership is not about having been to the destination and then leading others toward it, but rather seeking the destination with passion and inviting others to the journey. I do not know Christ, but I know I ought to, and I desire to, and so I seek. Here are some tips:

Be Open – Open to change. If you keep doing what you're doing, you'll keep getting what you're getting. If that is not what you desire for yourself or your family, then change needs to occur.

Be Honest – Share with your spouse about where you are at and where you would like to be. Ask for her support, even if you're not sure what that looks like. Ask your spouse to lead family prayer, but be the one who gathers everyone or sets it on the schedule. Asking her where her heart is at with the Lord is a great way to start your journey if she is currently more connected to Christ than you. Also, flowers and an invitation to inviting her into the messy journey of you taking on the role of spiritual leader would be a nice touch.

Be Bold – Find a mentor. Go to church during a daily Mass and look for someone there, pull them aside after Mass and ask them if they would be open to you treating them to lunch and asking them a few questions about the faith. If the lunch goes well, ask to meet with them monthly in person and weekly over the phone.

Be Awkward – Pray, 5 minutes a day, it will be awkward. Begin by acknowledging God, then thank God for who he is and what he has done. Next, lift up the desires of your heart and pray for those people and things dear to you. Finally, take time to listen, open scripture or sit in silence.

“I’ve Dropped The Ball, How Do I Reclaim The Role As Spiritual Leader?”

Life moves at an unforgiving pace and priorities can get skewed. The best intentions (like providing for our family) can lead to the worst habits (like 70 hour work weeks) and not having anything left to give.

First, take time to ask God what he is asking from you as the spiritual leader. “Where am I to lead those you’ve entrusted to me?” Make a date and share with your spouse your desires to be the spiritual leader. Apologize for those times where you’ve failed to be.

Call together the entire family, with your spouse sitting next to you, and explain what changes will be taking place in order to put Christ back at the center of your family. This may simply be you stating that it is no longer mom, but mom and dad who will be making sure the family’s spiritual practices occur. Or you could share

that the family routine is changing and now the family:

- Will be praying together every night
- Will not use the television or tablets on Fridays during Lent
- Will be ready for mass 30 minutes prior to Mass time so that everyone can participate in silent prayer before Mass

Finally, fortify these decisions and start small. You can always add to them, but if you start with too much and then scale back, your authority as spiritual leader will be called into question.

Spiritual leaders pour out from a reservoir. They must be first filled before they can pour into others. So the first step to reclaiming your role as spiritual leader is to develop spiritually. Daily prayer is a must for any spiritual leader.

“I Am The Spiritual Leader, How Can I Fortify My Family?”

Awesome. Spiritual leaders find themselves in this position either due to dynamic leadership, or by default. If you are the spiritual leader and you feel you are leading alone, the suggestions below are the same.

Pray – Pray for your spouse and children. Offer sacrifices, fast, and let them know when you are going to pray and why.

Trust – Trust in the Lord and know that the salvation of those in your family depends upon Jesus Christ, not on you. Give all that you can, but entrust the heaviest lifting to the Lord. Often times I see my role as a cheerleader for my children to encourage the good choices they make.

Setting – Set the stage, atmosphere and context for your family to grow together. Family prayer is hard and it often feels like it is not working. Stick with it. The few times our family prayer has really connected everyone to God was worth every frustrating time of prayer many times over.

Protect – Guard against what comes into your home and your children’s lives. Media consumption, activities that divide the family, over-scheduling and negative friendships all should be regulated with rules that are proactively set.

Community – Find other faithful families and make it a priority to forge friendships with these people. We were not made to be alone and the community that exists at our parish on Sunday is meant to penetrate the rest of the week. Often this means inviting and hosting to start forging this type of community.

You Can Do This. You Must Do This.

Wherever you find yourself, know that your family will be inspired by your spiritual leadership (over time). Our God will be glorified by your spiritual leadership. Your soul will be edified by your spiritual leadership.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

“Prayer is the raising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God.” But when we pray, do we speak from the height of our pride and will, or “out of the depths” of a humble and contrite heart? He who humbles himself will be exalted; humility is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that “we do not know how to pray as we ought,” are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer. “Man is a beggar before God.” (CCC 2559)

Move into action, in all humility and uncertainty *pray*, lead your family, and enjoy the amazing journey God has for you, your family, and your community. No one can write a better story than God. Our job is to live it.

About the Authors

Matt Rice is the founder and president of Ablaze Ministries. He has a Masters in Divinity and has been passionately serving in youth ministry since the summer of 2001. He enjoys video games, geeking out over Jim Beckman, and taming his wild beard.

Weslei Rice is a physician (Dr. Weslei Rice M.D.) and being married to a youth minister means she has pretty much worked in youth ministry as long as Matt has, however since the birth of their 3rd child she has dialed back her time in ministry. This past year she joined Matt working in parent ministry and loves being back in ministry with her husband.

Matt and Weslei Rice were married in the June of 2001 and have 6 children.

Alyssa Trutter has been passionately involved in youth ministry since 2006. She is a native of the Fort Worth area, but now lives in Waco, TX where she mentors youth ministers and directs youth and campus ministry. Alyssa is a graduate of the Augustine Institute, where she obtained her Masters in Theology. She is a co-host of the podcast *Everyday Catholics*, is an avid coffee drinker, and loves to find joy in all the little things of life.

Kendra Bartlett is a member of the Fightin' Texas Aggie Class of '05 and a former Aggie Volleyball player. She has a passion for sharing God's love with others, has a background in teaching, and has engaged audiences of youth for the last 15 years with her talks. Kendra is currently a stay-at-home mom of her 6 children.

Chris Bartlett has a Master's in Theology from St. Mary's University in San Antonio. He serves as the Director of Youth Ministry at a large church just north of Austin and serves as the Director of Next Level Ministry. Family and faith are the two most important pieces of his life. They are the source of his laughter, joy, mission, and purpose.

Chris and Kendra Bartlett were married in 2006 and have 6 children.

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Ablaze Families creates resources and community for parents who want to give their kids a love for Jesus while growing in the faith themselves. We weren't meant to do this on our own; God meant for us to be in community and to find support and encouragement through one another!

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Ablaze Families is part of Ablaze Ministries, an organization dedicated to forming the young church. We offer a 360 approach to youth ministry, building disciples by serving youth, ministers, and parents. Ablaze Ministries is based in Bryan, TX and works within Catholic parishes and schools to bring the young church closer to God. Learn more online at **ablaze.us**