

Home is a holy place

Question: What is the central ritual by which Jews celebrate the most significant moment in their religious history? Answer: The Passover seder in the home. The seder is a ritual at the family meal table, involving symbolic foods, actions and prayers by which the Jewish people remember and re-tell the Exodus story: the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. Yes, there is synagogue worship too; but the seder is central. What does this communicate? That the home, the dwelling place of this family community, is central to Jewish life. Not an 'add on'. Not a decorative frill. The home is central.

As Catholics we can learn much from this aspect of Jewish witness, this appreciation of the domestic sphere as a place of living faith and worship. Indeed, the weekly practice of celebrating the Sabbath in the home has been a key factor in the survival of Judaism against all odds, through a torturous history of persecution. At a time when the vitality of Catholic faith communities in Australia is threatened by forces of secular materialism and indifference, the robustness of our domestic practices requires special attention.

For generations of Catholics, 'going to Mass' each Sunday has been the traditional mainstay of religious identification. There was a time in recent history when

in-home pieties were also part of our tribal religiosity: family rosary, grace before meals, no meat on Fridays, pictures of the Sacred Heart. Today most Catholics homes are stripped of all religious evidence, and this is reason for grave concern. No matter how prayerfully satisfying our Sunday Masses, eucharistic faith must find its way into the heartland of the home if it is to be authentic eucharistic faith at all. And while few Catholics would disagree with that statement, it strikes me that, much of the time, the home is not as central a focus as it could be in the Church's liturgical, catechetical and evangelizing strategies. To recommend family meals as a practice of eucharistic faith in the home is seen as a nice thing to do, but come on, let's get serious... it's all about the Mass! We exhort families to be peacemakers, but come Lent we don't teach in-home forgiveness rituals, we give them parish reconciliation times. We expend a lot of energy trying to interest people in the bible, in the liturgy, in doctrinal teachings, in parish or diocesan activities. Wonderful! But we leave it to them to make the explicit connections with their domestic lifestyle. In fact, they don't. The average Catholic family needs much more detailed and concrete leadership in this sphere. What does it mean to 'pray more' or 'love more' at home? Most people's relational and spiritual repertoires are limited. They need to be shown, repeatedly, and to have specific

aids placed before them.

There are, of course, encouraging examples of family homes alive with faith expressions as well as pastoral strategies devoted to fostering them. The Bishops Conference of England and Wales has set itself admirably to the task (www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk). My own 12 year ministry of The Story Source was largely devoted to such strategies, and a number of these resources can be accessed at the website of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference (www.acbc.catholic.org.au/councils/fwg) and at www.cathfamily.com.au. I was delighted this year to see Brisbane Archdiocese offer a new Lenten program designed to assist parents to pray with their children. The beautifully practical Cornerstone publication of Centacare Family Services, Melbourne Archdiocese, is one of my personal favourites.

These kinds of initiatives have quiet power. They can help to move us from principle to prescription, and to proclaim the Gospel where it really counts: close to home. •

