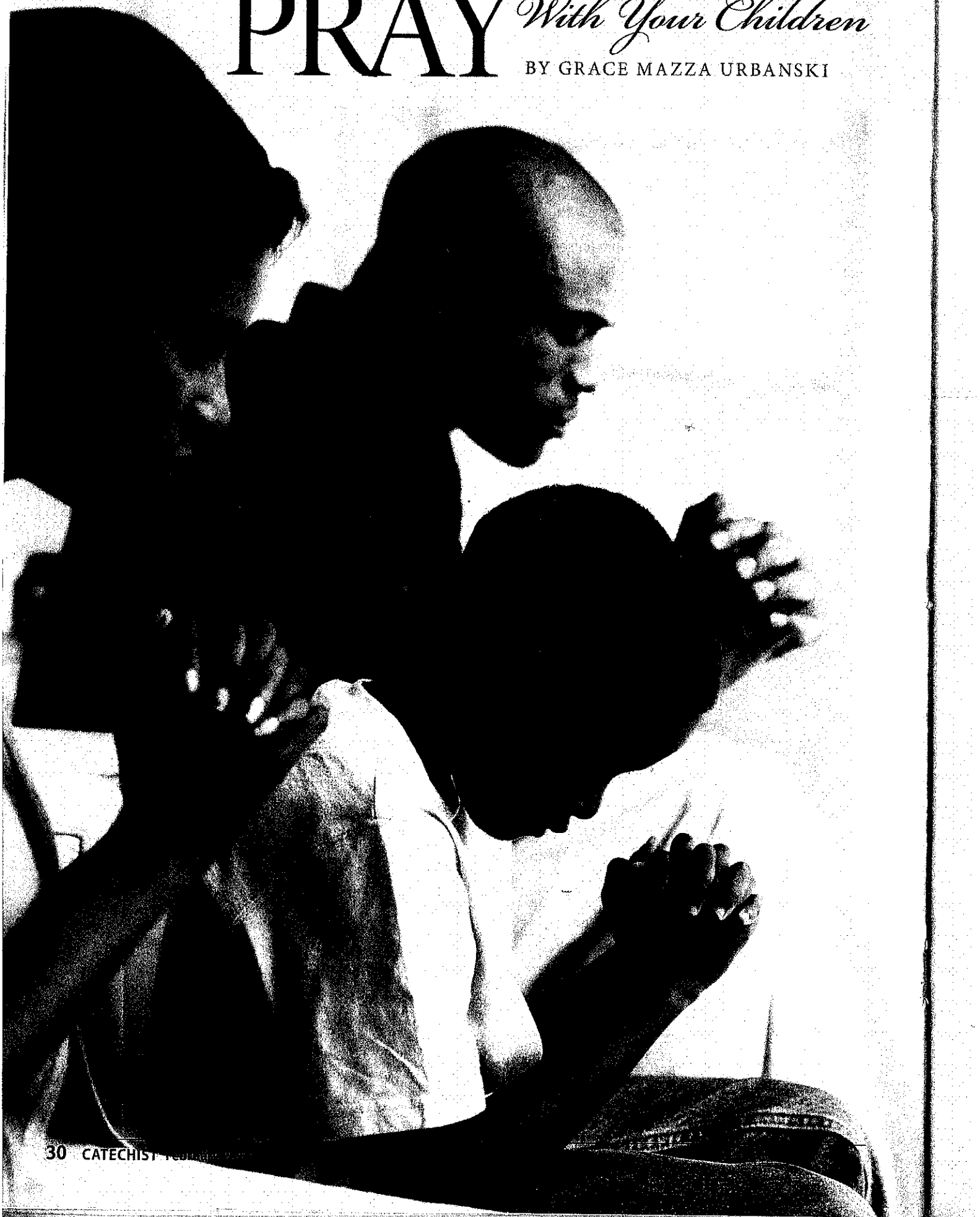


PRAY *With Your Children*

BY GRACE MAZZA URBANSKI



“Oh, oh, OH! Ohmygosh Mom! MOM! Look what I did!”

I was changing the baby’s diaper when my toddler started shouting, sending me into a panic.

“What is it, honey? What’s wrong?”

As it turned out, nothing was wrong. My toddler had just had her very first potty-training success and was bursting with excitement.

“The baby’s on the changing table, honey! I’ll come in a minute! I can’t leave him now or he’ll fall off. Please stay there! I’ll be there just as soon as I can!”

Her triumph, however, could not be compromised by delay. She picked up the potty and ran as fast as she possibly could, waving it recklessly above her head.

What could I do? She had done something truly remarkable for a toddler. She had done her best! Here she was, presenting (slopily) the fruits of her labor to me. I thanked her for her “offering” and set about cleaning it up.

Later that night, as I prayed my Examen, I recalled that episode. My day had been miserable. Circumstances, and my own reactions to those circumstances, stank. We’ve probably all had days like this. I had hollered at children who honestly deserved milder reprimands; I had avoided important work; and I had welcomed my husband home with neither a smile nor expressions of interest in his day, but with an icy declaration that it was his turn to be the parent.

Not so pretty.

I realized that my own offering that day smelled a lot like my daughter’s. I probably hadn’t done my best, but I often did everything I possibly could. In that quiet moment of prayer at the end of the day, I smiled as I imagined what my heavenly Father has to do to clean up after my offerings some days. If even I can smile and accept the dubious oblation of my toddler, focusing on what she did

well, then how much more lovingly does our merciful God look on our imperfect offerings?

God helped me to ask for forgiveness that evening. You can bet I also asked for the strength to make a better offering the next day.

Adults need powerful and practical prayer tools such as St. Ignatius’ indispensable daily prayer, the Examen, to build confident lives of prayer with the children in their lives. Parents, teachers, grandparents, and godparents might be especially receptive to prayer during this Year of Mercy.

Pope Francis spoke passionately about making time for prayer



PHOTO: (LEFT) CHRISTINLOLA/THINKSTOCK, (RIGHT) SBYTOVAMIN



in the family: “There are children who have not learned to make the Sign of the Cross! But you, mother, father, teach your child to pray, to make the Sign of the Cross: this is a lovely task for mothers and fathers.”

It’s true that many children do not know how to pray, not even a prayer as simple as the Sign of the Cross. Sadly, most Catholic families do not pray together, as a recent survey points out.

Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate and Holy Cross Family Ministries are gradually releasing a four-part study on young Catholic families. More than 1,000 adults aged 25-45 responded to the survey, providing insights into faith and family that might surprise us.

Catholic families are not likely to pray together as a family, not even before meals or at bedtime.

While 71 percent of Catholic parents agree that prayer is critical to faith life, only about 36 percent pray at least once a day.

Among those parents who pray, more than three out of four

prefer to pray privately, not with their children.

These survey findings sound bleak, but we live in hope: Led by the Holy Spirit, the Church is focused on the family these days. The Church is seeking effective and loving ways to accompany families and to help them fall in love with Jesus Christ.

Falling in love, as Father Pedro Arrupe’s famous prayer reminds us, is completely practical and determines how we spend our time. Prayer is the way we discover and nurture that love. Family prayer entrusts our hearts to one another and to God.

Many parents want to respond to Pope Francis’ call to pray with their children, but simply don’t know where to start. In my work, I meet a wide variety of adults who

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care for children. Almost all of them admit to a vague desire to pray more, and to pray with the children in their lives. Some resist, however, because they feel awkward, inadequate, or hypocritical. Others prefer to pray alone and see no obvious connection between their own private prayer life and the prayer lives of family members.

One respondent in the CARA survey explained the preference for keeping prayer private from the children: "Because I like to do it alone. It makes me feel like I can be more open and honest and closer to God."

Perhaps the lack of family prayer is a symptom of a larger problem: a lack of trust.

Prayer requires dependence. Prayer is the reason Jesus presented a little child as our spiritual role model. "Amen, I say to you,

whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it" (Mark 10:15).

Children depend on others for absolutely everything, and they accept that state of affairs gracefully. Have we ever seen a nursing baby squirm with embarrassment that he can't feed himself? Do we hear him decline his mother's breast out of a prideful desire to appear self-sufficient in front of the other babies?

Trust terrifies most of us. We find it difficult to ask for help, to rely radically on God's providence. Prayer helps. Prayer connects us with God and invites us to pay attention to the ways God labors for us in the world. And when we trust God, we begin to trust our family members and neighbors too.

St. Paul says, "We know that all things work for good for those who

love God" (Romans 8:28). Prayer cultivates trust in our hearts so we really can know this. Families who pray together grow more comfortable with the idea that everything coming our way—the blessings as well as the obstacles—can help us live in God's grace.

The most courageous act parents perform is entrusting their children to others. The more intimately we know God, the more glorious it is to help our children learn to pray, freeing them to live as beloved children of God.

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PHOTO: (LEFT) CHRISTINLOLA/THINKSTOCK, (RIGHT) SBYTOVAMIN

The Corporal Works of Mercy

Lord Jesus, you ask us to feed the hungry. We can

- Eat meals together as a family as often as possible
- Share meals with others, either in our own home or through donated meals
- Support local farmers' markets and food pantries

Lord Jesus, you ask us to give drink to the thirsty. We can

- Conserve water by taking shorter showers, turning off the tap when brushing teeth, and running full loads in dishwashers and washing machines
- Dispose of medicines properly to avoid contaminating the water supply
- Support clean water projects and water-smart landscaping

Lord Jesus, you ask us to shelter the homeless. We can

- Be a safe, trustworthy friend for people who are vulnerable
- Serve and include others who are often neglected
- Consider adoption or foster care of infants and children at risk

Lord Jesus, you ask us to clothe the naked. We can

- Affirm the God-given dignity of all people, even those who make us uncomfortable
- Clean out closets to share clothes with other families or organizations
- Participate in clothing drives and donate school supplies or toiletries to those in need

Lord Jesus, you ask us to visit the sick and imprisoned. We can

- Spend time generously with people we find awkward, difficult, or distressing
- Write letters to prisoners through a prison ministry program
- Bring Communion to homebound parishioners

Lord Jesus, you ask us to bury the dead. We can

- Listen to and pass on old family stories
- Visit a cemetery with relatives and remember anniversaries of the dead
- Support friends in grief by keeping in touch, sending cards, or sharing meals

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

God of mercy, show us how to instruct and advise others. Help us

- Be patient with those who misbehave or struggle to understand
- Set a good example, so others would describe us as loving people
- Seek wisdom before speaking

God of mercy, show us how to console the doubtful. Help us

- Accompany the people you put in our path and listen carefully to their stories
- Avoid judging others
- Rejoice in even small movements toward beauty, goodness, and truth

God of mercy, show us how to comfort the sorrowful. Help us

- Pay attention to the many needs of those who are lonely, neglected, or grieving
- Ask prayerfully for the faithfulness and kindness you pour out in mercy
- Remember with tenderness your own passion and death

God of mercy, show us how to bear wrongs patiently. Help us

- Resist the temptation to get even or to seek preferential treatment
- Trust that in you, all things work together for good
- Keep heaven in our hearts—our most precious goal is to live forever with you

God of mercy, show us how to forgive all injuries. Help us

- Forgive others, even those who do not know or admit they are doing wrong
- Pray for more love to chase away the bitterness of being hurt
- Seek the help we need to keep our hearts open to others

God of mercy, show us how to pray for the living and the dead. Help us

- Trust that you always, always hear and honor our prayers
- Start each day by offering to you all our thoughts, words, and deeds of the day ahead
- Understand that you transform our prayers into grace for others