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Making the Connection between Prayer, Faith, and Forgiveness in Roman Catholic Families

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Abstract

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Keywords

Religion, Catholic, Prayer, Faith, Forgiveness, and Family

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Making the Connection between Prayer, Faith, and Forgiveness in Roman Catholic Families

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This study examines meanings and processes associated with religious practices of prayer, building faith, and forgiving through in-depth, qualitative interviews with six highly religious Roman Catholic families with children. Families were interviewed using a narrative approach that asked participants to share experiences and challenges related to faith and family life. Three primary themes in the interviews included: (a) prayer helps piece the puzzle together, (b) faith builds a foundation, and (c) forgiveness allows unity to flourish. Key Words: Religion, Catholic, Prayer, Faith, Forgiveness, and Family

The role of religion in American society and family life has become an area of significant interest for researchers (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). In America, 95% of all parents and married couples report an affiliation with a religious organization (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001), 90% want their children exposed to religious training (Gallup & Castelli, 1989), and a reported 60% of people surveyed expressed the importance of religion in their lives (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000). Further, a significant minority of Americans report that, for them, religion is life's most important influence (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). For faith-centered individuals and families such as these, including devout Catholic families, we cannot satisfactorily understand their lives without understanding their faith.

Catholicism in Context

In their efforts to understand the relationship between faith and families, social science researchers have focused attention on examining various world religions (i.e., Agius & Chircop, 1998; Marks, 2004). Of the world religions, Christianity is the most widespread, being professed by roughly 1.5 billion people across the three major traditions of Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy (Smith, 1994). Christianity is a "historical religion" focused primarily on the life and times of a Jewish carpenter named Jesus Christ. The life of Jesus is captured through the various gospels contained within the New Testament of the Bible, which provide a guide to the ideals and principles that form the core of Christianity's teachings. These teachings center on the belief that God chose to send his only begotten son Jesus to save humankind (John 3:16).

Through this belief, Christianity seeks to provide and promote forgiveness, love, and hope in this world and—ultimately—in a better world to come (Palmer & Keller, 1993).

The Roman Catholic Church, which is a division of Christianity, has its primary influence in Rome and in areas of Europe, and Central and South America. As suggested by Smith (1994), the Roman Catholic Church is formed on two important concepts including the authority of the church teachings and the “sacramental agents.” In dealing with the church as a teacher, the Pope is seen as the high priest with power invested in him through God. The Roman Catholic Church asserts the idea that Christ established the church on Earth to have final authority in matters of religious and moral doctrine. Indeed, the idea of “papal infallibility” is grounded in the church’s teaching that God has given the Pope special gifts in which God protects him against any error in making decisions that will influence and shape the church as a whole (Smith). The past half century, however, has produced a greater tension between the Vatican and the American Catholic Church (Steinfels, 2005), as well as Catholic universities, and for an increasing number of lay Catholics (Fields, 2001).

In connection with our familial focus in this paper, a Catholic sacrament, which plays a vital role in the church and forms the foundation of families, is holy matrimony or marriage. According to Pilla (1999), the church teaches that the family originates in marriage. In addition, Roman Catholics hold the belief that the sacrament of marriage is “a living and effective sign of God’s love in the world;” a belief that was reaffirmed by a message released by Catholic bishops entitled, *Follow the Way of Love* (Pilla). This message presents four virtues, which provide a strong foundation for family relationships and faith. Among the four virtues, one should be specifically mentioned in regard to gaining perspective on devout Roman Catholic families. This virtue is the vital importance of relationship development between husband and wife. Namely, time should be dedicated to furthering the marital relationship and the other relationships within the family. This message signifies the importance of creating a strong family structure within the bonds of marriage, and may provide insight into those highly practicing Roman Catholic families who use their faith as a basis for creating unity and building relationships.

Does Catholicism Really Matter?

There are currently 67 million people who have identified themselves as Roman Catholic, but many invest relatively little in their faith. Some, however, are deeply committed and move far beyond what has been referred to as “pew warming” (Marks, 2005). In connection with this group of Catholics who *do* invest significant time, energy, and money in their religion, we seek to apply a variation of what is arguably the central question in the sociology of religion: Why are highly religious persons willing to “sacrifice” for their religion (Stark & Finke, 2000). More specifically, what personal and familial benefits or “blessings” make religious costs of time and money worthwhile? In addressing these questions, this research can benefit clergy, counselors, family life professionals, and other social science researchers who are trying to understand families who are deeply connected to the Catholic faith. On a broader level, given the findings that: (a) religion is single most important influence in life for a significant minority of Americans (Miler & Thoresen, 2003) and (b) that highly religious persons from varying

faiths tend to share some core similarities (Marks, 2005), it is probable that the answers we report will shed some light on those who are deeply connected with other faiths as well.

Research Question

Extant research tells us much about religion and families generally (Chatters & Taylor, 2005; Dollahite et al., 2004; Marks, 2006), and some addresses Catholic families specifically (D'Antonio, 1988; Pilla, 1999). Even so, we know little regarding the deeper “whys,” “hows,” and processes involved in the religion and family interface, partly because in-depth qualitative research in this area is scarce (Dollahite & Marks, 2005). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide deeper insight regarding how and why Roman Catholicism impacts the marriages and families of those who are highly committed to living this faith. This will be done through in-depth interviews as discussed next.

Methods

In order to address the interface between faith and families, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers from six Roman Catholic families. Handel (1996) has indicated that most family research is based on a single informant discussing her view of one relationship in the family. Handel contends that such studies are not “family research” in the truest sense because, “No [one] member of any family is a sufficient source of information for that family” (p. 346). Consistent with this point, six mothers, six fathers, and three adolescent children from six families were interviewed. This allowed us to gather two to three perspectives on a variety of family relationships including marital, mother-child, father-child, in-law, and other extended family relationships, making the project as a whole more like the family research Handel advocates. The families were from states (California, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Maryland) in four different regions of the country (Pacific Coast, Deep South, Northeast, and Mid-Atlantic regions, respectively). In terms of race, one family was Latino, one family was African American, and the remaining four families in the sample were White.

Most research on families and religion has been conducted from a quantitative research vantage and a related knowledge base has been established, but most of this research has been correlational and has often utilized only one or two religious measure items, offering little *depth* of knowledge in connection with families (Dollahite et al., 2004; Mahoney et al., 2001). However, taking a qualitative approach may “give us windows” into understanding the processes and meanings that are difficult to find through quantitative analyses, particularly correlations based on one or two “token” items. In the present study we used a qualitative, narrative-based approach (e.g., Josselson & Lieblich, 1993) to interviewing that urged the participants to respond to questions by telling stories about their lived experiences. For example, if a mother mentioned that prayer had been meaningful during challenging times we would ask her to relate an incident that illustrated how she experienced prayer in her life.

In overview, our interview questions sought to address “what,” “why,” and “how” religion mattered by asking participants to: (a) explain *what* aspects of their religious life were meaningful and influential to them and their families; (b) explain *why* these aspects of faith were meaningful; and (c) share, where possible, narrative accounts of experiences that captured or illustrated *how* aspects of their faith influenced their lives.

Like Lambert and Dollahite (2006), we interviewed married couples *together* in their homes because we believed that approach provided a rich context for learning about marriage, marital interaction, and marital processes. A joint-interview approach also provided the researcher with a front-row seat, as couples co-created meaning through narratives (cf. Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004). In support of joint interviews, Babbie (2004) has reported that interviewing people together often helps elicit “aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals” (p. 303). Our experience supported this view.

We are aware, however, that many scholars conversely advocate for individual interviews, even when studying marriage. Two central supports for this position include: (a) the notion that individual interviews promote more candid, accurate, and honest responses and (b) that a couple interview ignores or minimizes issues of gender and power (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley, 1995). We see both of these concerns as valid and addressed them in the following ways: (a) In the effort to promote candid, accurate, and honest responses, the interviewer encouraged wives and husbands to each respond to every question and to comment on or add to the other’s response; further, the opportunity to respond first alternated with each question. Interviews included frequent addition, deletion, and correction by spouses as narratives were co-constructed. As with Holmberg et al.’s (2004) narrative study with married couples, wives were more likely than husbands to “edit” their spouses’ comments. (b) In connection with concerns regarding gender and power, a female interviewer conducted the interviews whenever possible (four of the six couples), but this imperfect solution is a limitation of this study.

Procedure

After obtaining Internal Review Board approval (by Louisiana State University and Brigham Young University) and informed consent from the participants, the authors and/or research colleagues interviewed the families using a semi-structured questionnaire composed of questions regarding faith and family life (see Appendix A) that were grounded in extant research and previous experience in interviewing families regarding faith (e.g., Marks, 2004; Marks & Dollahite, 2001). As explained previously, in addition to asking what mattered, the qualitative questions we asked were designed to encourage participants to explain why and how these dimensions of faith mattered in their personal and familial lives.

Interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes and lasted an average of 2 hours. The mothers and fathers were interviewed together, and both participants had the opportunity to respond to each question. However, the opportunity to respond first alternated with each question. While the approach of interviewing spouses together arguably has its costs, the benefits included spouses encouraging, reminding, and prompting each other to offer additional narratives, meanings, and explanations that yielded richer data. In three of the families that included adolescent children (16 years or

more) approved by the Brigham Young University (BYU) Institutional Review Board, these children were also interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

Following transcription, interviews were open coded separately for important and recurring concepts (i.e., “prayer” and “life challenges”) within each family’s interview (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Following the open coding of each interview separately, across interview comparisons and content analyses were done. A list of several recurring themes was identified. From that list of recurring themes, the primary themes were selected based on two factors: (a) content analyses, both within and across interviews and (b) salience. More specifically, each of the themes were coded in most or all of the interviews (often several times per interview); and the participants themselves (both directly and through narratives that described their related experience) attributed importance to the “themes.” In the spirit of a data audit, the interviews were revisited to make certain that sufficient data were available to support each theme (Trochim, 1999). Following this extensive data audit and revisitation of the interviews, it was apparent that a few of the previously identified themes had relatively weak support, while others had substantial support both within and across interviews (cf. Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). The weaker themes were carefully considered to determine whether they should be receive minimal attention, or whether they should be combined to form a stronger, more substantial theme. Following careful consideration, several relatively minor themes were minimized, while, in the case of theme 1, different expressions of prayer were combined as sub-headings (“individual-level,” “marital-level,” and “familial”) under the larger thematic heading of “prayer helps piece the puzzle together.”

In the final analysis, the three themes presented in this paper are the result of rigorous coding, content analysis, and data auditing. Each of the themes is supported by several pages of qualitative data, only a fraction of which will be presented due to spatial constraints. Returning, however, to our core question of how and why religion matters to these families, the three themes that are provided next are “answers” that we present with considerable confidence.

Trustworthiness

Before proceeding to the findings, the issues of adequate rigor, validity, and reliability in qualitative research call for brief discussion of the qualitative issues of credibility, dependability, confirmability (Denzin, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and reflexivity in relation to this study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the fit between the participant’s intended meaning and the researcher’s interpretation of participant statements. Gilgun has summarized this concern in the question, “Am I communicating what my informants are telling me” (1992, pp. 28-29). One practice used in this study to increase credibility was “persistent observation”

(Dienhart, 1998) that was maintained through the authors' first-hand involvement and participation in the interview process; the interviewing work was not "delegated."

Dependability

The qualitative concept of dependability is concerned with the consistency, stability, and accuracy of an instrument over time. A fundamental issue is that changes in instrument design have a readable, coherent trail. For this study, a 22-question instrument was carefully developed over a 1-year period by the second author and a leading religion and family scholar (David Dollahite of BYU). The questionnaire was based on careful reviews of the religion and family knowledge base (Dollahite et al., 2004), and also incorporated feedback and adjustments from pilot interviews. Although the interviewers were in no way constrained to the questions on the interview schedule, the schedule served as a stable structure from which to work, and no significant design changes were made to the schedule throughout the interview process.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a key part of qualitative methods' parallel to quantitative methods' demand that the researcher maintain "objectivity." Many who embrace qualitative methodology disagree with the ontological and epistemological bases of the objectivist ideal and argue for an acknowledgement of researcher reflexivity instead (Farnsworth, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 1993). The authors are sympathetic to this latter stance and address it in the next paragraph. However, regardless of a researcher's stance, all data should be traceable or confirmable to the original source. In compliance with this standard, all data reported in this paper are available in their original form on cassette or digital audio, diskette, and verbatim hard copy transcripts. Additionally, a data trail composed of hard copies containing analyses of the interviews is available from the first author.

Reflexivity

Because of the subjective and interpretive position of the researchers, often preferred in qualitative methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 1993), a critical issue is "reflexivity," or the influence of the researchers' biases in interpreting data and reporting the results. Such information is especially vital when the researchers are "insiders" or members of the group they are studying (Daly, 1992; Farnsworth, 1996). With this in mind, we report that the first author is a devout Roman Catholic. The second author, while not Roman Catholic, is a highly involved member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Given the family-related focus of the piece, it is also relevant to note that the first author is a single, unmarried female, while the second author is a married father of four. Our personal experiences of religion as a largely positive influence on personal and family life predispose us to focus on beneficial influences of faith. To counterbalance this tendency, structured questions regarding challenging and harmful aspects of religion were also asked of the participants. Overall, we believe the "insider" status of the first author (who was also the primary interviewer) was an asset that helped

to establish rapport and trust with participants, thereby enhancing the quality and depth of the interview data.

Findings

An analysis of the 6 families interviewed, provided insight regarding how devout Catholic families experience and communicate about their faith. The focus of this paper will be on themes that were central in illuminating the relationship between faith and families.

There were several key ideas that emerged from the initial coding. After a closer examination as described in the methods section, the concepts of prayer, faith, and forgiveness surfaced as the most prominent themes. According to Constas (1992), the development of categories through a two-dimensional process in qualitative work is essential in grounding empirical evidence and providing understanding into the emergent themes described by the researcher. The themes were developed using the key words followed by descriptors which connected all the ideas within each theme. The three central themes are: (a) prayer helps piece the puzzle together, (b) faith builds a foundation, and (c) forgiveness allows unity to flourish. In order to provide an overall understanding of how each theme connected with the other, the analogy of a puzzle was used to illustrate the point. This was an idea that was gathered through a close examination of the responses in the prayer theme where D.J.¹, an attorney and busy father of five children, used the analogy of a puzzle to describe the challenges inherent in faith, life, and family. D.J.'s analogy seemed to resonate with and reflect the complexities of life experienced by all of the interviewed families, and it has been subsequently adapted into the title of our first theme, as discussed next.

Theme 1: Prayer Helps Piece the Puzzle Together

The family structure can be compared to a puzzle with many pieces or parts that are connected through prayer. In using the puzzle analogy to explore the relationship between family and prayer, each individual family member could be represented by a piece of the puzzle, while other pieces within the puzzle could represent aspects of life encountered daily. The various pieces of the puzzle are unified through the use of prayer in solving conflicts, managing stress, celebrating joy, and experiencing and coping with sadness. Therefore, this symbolic representation with the support of examples from the interviews will help to demonstrate the role of prayer in these families.

In conducting this research, we were curious as to how and why prayer is used in Catholic families. There were several examples from the interview data that support the idea that a prayerful approach to a conflict can lead to resolution and continued unity within the family. The unity within families that is experienced through prayer will be examined at three levels: (a) individual, (b) marital, and (c) family. These three levels are captured by the idea that prayer creates a unit, which is analogous to how many pieces make up a puzzle picture. We will examine how the family operates as a support system in times of joy and sorrow.

¹ All names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Prayer at an individual level

A father named Todd explained how prayer is central in dealing with stressful and challenging times. In addition, he explained two other coping mechanisms that have provided support. He acknowledged the control that God has over every piece of the puzzle, and also found diverse outlets or hobbies in which to relieve the stress.

Prayer certainly is helpful. I think of trying to find some outlet, not only a spiritual outlet in terms of trying to realize our way and control over it, and ...let Him [God] work those things out and let me realize I'm just a piece in the puzzle. And, then also trying to find some outlet other than what my routine is, whether it's some hobby or something to get me away from the stressful situation.

At the individual level, Todd reported that prayer has not only helped him spiritually, but has influenced him to explore other outlets in which to invest time and reduce stress.

A mother named Angela similarly reported using the same tool of prayer on an individual level to calm anger and to reduce conflict. She explained,

Sometimes...when we're in a moment of conflict, but it might not even be a major conflict. It might just be... the whining or something of the younger children or the demands. That's when I feel like I sometimes pray the most... when I'm feeling really angry... I need something to grab onto.

For Angela, prayer seemed to be an effective anger management tool that provided her with "something to grab onto," both as an individual and in the context of family.

A Latin father named Carlos similarly indicated that prayer is a source of both individual and family "guidance" and growth. He reflected,

I pray at night for [spiritual] guidance on how to resolve other problems. I pray for patience. I pray...to see how better to avoid...problems [and]... losing my patience. And [it provides] good guidance on how to help my children be better [people].

The concept of prayer as a parenting tool resurfaced throughout the interview with Carlos' family. Carlos and his wife Alisia reported that they used prayer for guidance in providing direction and fostering the religious development of their children. This was illustrated in comments by Jacob, the teenage son of Carlos and Alisia, who indicated how prayer was a tool he used in coping with the 9/11 attacks. He explained,

I know that after September 11th happened, that I began to pray more to God, [be]cause I felt unsafe...I felt like nothing would ever happen in this country...I had a sense of security. But then [on] Sept. 11th, I began to... question that... I began to pray a lot to ask God to help me feel safe again.

After the attacks, Jacob indicated that he lost his sense of security in the country.

Through prayer on an individual level, Jacob reportedly found a source of comfort and safety. Throughout the above interviews, it appears that prayer at an individual level provided the participants with a mechanism for coping during times of stress, conflict, direction, and security. Prayer was not solely individual, however, as discussed next.

Prayer at a marital level

The influence of prayer in families was further illustrated by narratives that discussed prayer at the marital level; often as a tool that fostered conflict resolution. A wife named Angela described how she and her husband Brian use prayer in the mist of conflict. She related,

In times when we have conflict about anything...we both are always open to either one of us saying, let's just pray about this. Stop, stop. We're not going to hit our heads against the wall or each other's heads. Let's just stop and just that ability to come together in prayer and ask for each other's forgiveness or God's forgiveness, and discernment and direction is something that...[is vital to us]. I don't know how people can get through without having [prayer].

Angela described how by uniting in prayer with Brian they found a peaceful solution to the problem. In addition, it appears that there is a relationship that exists between prayer and forgiveness. Through prayer the couple is able to recognize their faults on two levels. First, they ask each other for forgiveness and then they seek out God for forgiveness and further guidance in the situation. It appears that the couple was drawn closer together through this act of forgiveness achieved through the unity they found in prayer.

Another mother named Karen, likewise, reported how prayer has helped her marriage by providing insight and support. She explained the marital experience that she and her husband Mike have had with prayer in this way,

We have had a way of surrendering to [God] and letting Him take care of things. That has been a real freeing experience for me. Just looking back at our life together and my life before we were married there were situation[s] that were difficult but things always worked out for the best... Our lives are tied into God and into our faith. We [Mike and I] pray at this point in our lives that He will support us...to have that sense of humor and to be able to say, "God does such a better job than I do."

Through letting go, Karen explained how she experienced freedom, which allowed her to examine her past and made her realize how God provided for her in times of need. In the same way that Todd used prayer on an individual level to conceptualize how he was only a piece of the puzzle, both Mike and Karen believed that God was supporting them and their marriage and helping "things to work out for the best."

Alisia, the mother of two children, described her experience with prayer at both a marital level and a family level, finally drawing both levels together into one. She said, “We bless our meals everyday. We pray at night, every night. When the kids were younger, we did it together ... then we’d [my husband and I] pray together, so praying is one.” Alisia explained how prayer was shared as a couple, but this marital practice also extended to family meals and evening prayers. In this sense, prayer literally helps bring the family together (cf. Marks, 2004). Indeed, in this family and others, there was an emergent idea that praying together helped create a unity and oneness. Therefore, as important as marital prayer may be in resolving conflict and in finding a shared assurance of divine support, marital prayer may also provide a foundation for family prayer.

Prayer at the family level

For most of our participants, prayer reportedly helped with conflict and stress at a family level; in addition to whatever the practice offered at individual and marital levels. A daily routine of prayer each night seemed to allow interaction between the parents and their children, while providing a time to discuss or “lift up” any conflicts that the children and family may have been facing. Tammy, a mother of five, explained,

[During our] prayers that are said [with the children] every night, every one of them has the opportunity to pour out those things from the day. Inevitably, somebody’s feelings got hurt, and we talk. Every moment is a life teaching lesson, and it becomes that at night....They learn to pray for that person [who hurt their feelings]. They learn to lift up those things that are [bothering them]... They believe that that [prayer to God] is where we derive...our help.

Although prayer was a source of “help,” it was also an opportunity for celebration and unification. Brian, a father of five children, describes one such prayer and how it affected him.

[We have a tradition in our family that on] Christmas morning, [when] the Christmas gifts are all [under the] Christmas tree...[when] the kids come down, before they rip open the presents, [we all] kneel down and say prayer and thank... Jesus [for] being born [into the world] and saving us. We’ll pray. [O]ne [Christmas] morning I was...grumbling about [the kids] getting up early...[but] the kids were just waiting; they were all kneeling down and waiting right under the tree [to pray]...[T]hey did it...on their own.

This example of his children internalizing prayer as an opportunity for sacred celebration, (that was important enough to delay opening presents) deeply affected Brian. For families we interviewed, prayer served to unify the family in the joyous times, but it was also a source of comfort during times of sadness and death. The following example, again from Brian, shows the interconnection between family members and how that connection was

shared with other families of faith. Brian's sister had passed away almost exactly one year before we interviewed his family. He explained,

She struggled for a long time...getting weaker and sicker. And it was hard, because I remember one of the things that came out most spontaneously in terms of our prayer life, was our boys praying for their cousins, Brandon, Leah, and Michael—[the] three kids of Cindy—and praying for Cindy. It was very real in their lives; and they felt it very deeply. They were concerned...and I think that fact that they could sit and kneel down, around our bed and pray, helped give them a sense of purpose and comfort. [Now we] know, Cindy is in heaven...watching over all of us [but] that [experience of praying to God together] was [very] real.

Even though Brian's sister Cindy passed away, by coming together in prayer this family reportedly experienced unity and found "a sense of purpose and comfort." Therefore, it seems that for this family a prayer-based support system was created within the family structure. Some of the participants mentioned being involved with, and benefiting from, support systems such as bi-weekly prayer groups. Karen, a mother of four, described this,

With faith I have a greater sense of a relationship with God. Through the Bible study and through the women's group that I meet with on a bi-weekly basis...[it] helps me in my own personal belief and that grows into the family and in reassuring our children if they're stressed at school... We'll do this thing sometimes before they leave for school, I'll bless them and they'll bless me and they'll say a little prayer. Our little daughter Jenny will put her arms around me and say, "Bless Mommy that she will have a very nice day." So our kids are getting that foundation and our family can feel that unity that's based on that foundation [of faith].

This example demonstrates how prayer and the influence of a strong support system can aid a parent in developing a faith-based foundation in which to guide and parent children. As Karen indicates, this foundation is built on the ideals of faith and prayer. When applied at the family level, these ideals seem to foster a unity and closeness within the family.

Theme 2: Faith Builds a Foundation

Thus far, it appears that prayer provides the means of bonding and sharing within the family and that this practice, whether individual, marital, or familial, is built on a foundation of faith. A connection between a foundation of faith and family life is illustrated by Angela's interview when she described a family tradition that takes place during the season of Advent.

We do [an] Advent...prayer before each meal. A couple years ago, I started to take the Advent prayer and fold it up and put [it] under somebody's plate, [a] different [family member] all the time. And it was

one of those traditions I didn't remember the next year, but the kids [did]. And now, even our youngest...around Thanksgiving time, she starts looking under plates before supper. [S]ometimes I forget how those very simple, but important things...connect... faith and family.

Angela mentioned that the family traditions may be "simple," but are significant in shaping and connecting "faith and family" and creating unity. It is interesting to note that the children in this particular family help to perpetuate tradition, thereby making a contribution that (in turn) affected the parents. Previous research on faith and families has typically focused on parent-to-child "transmission" and influence, but examples like this indicate that parent-child religious influence can be reciprocal and transactional (cf. Palkovitz, 2002).

In a less direct illustration of this principle, Brian discussed how becoming a father, and the desire of wanting to be a good one, have motivated him to ground his fathering on the "firm foundation" of his faith. He summarized,

You also have all sorts of conflicting advice about how to raise your children. And a lot of it is garbage [which].... I think having God's guidance and having a faith gives us [a] firm foundation, and a set of ideas that tells us how to do [parenting well]. We may not do it perfectly, but...[our faith] gives us a clear idea...[of] what we need to do.

Later in his interview, Brian placed further emphasis on the impact of faith on him.

[I have] faith in God, the trust that all things work out to His glory.... Many people have education, are decent people, have their health, have enough money to protect themselves from...life's ups and downs, [but they] are [still] miserable. They're not guided by a set of principles that gives them meaning, that gives them a reason to do what they do...it's not just about being married and raising kids. It's about glorifying God. There's a reason why we live and that's, if you have that [meaning], that helps sustain you through all the other things.

Brian's comment here regarding the need for a sense of "meaning" in life seems to echo Nietzsche's statement that, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*" (as cited in Frankl, 1984, p. 97, emphasis in original).

A mother named Natasha explained that in addition to providing a sense of meaning, her faith in the Lord has provided her with a sense of comfort and peace.

[M]y...belief is that as long as I have faith, the Lord is go[ing] [to] definitely see us through, because...I have put [my children] in the hands of the Lord when...I am not there. I know that the Lord [or]... somebody is there to watch them...I believe that.

In addition to the sense of meaning mentioned by Brian and the comfort mentioned by Natasha, other effects of faith were mentioned by participants as well. A father named Todd described how the teachings and practices of his faith provide a developmental push and motivation to be better, “sanctified,” and “holy.”

I’ve already mentioned the sacramental life in the church, which is very important to me. There are practices, but there are teachings too, and those beliefs I think are important because it gives us a... perceptible presence of God on earth. It actually brings faith into reality. To me, it’s something you can tangibly see, taste, feel....One of the beauties of our faith is that it really pushes you to strive to sanctify yourself. It’s not just something to do to get into heaven. [W]e want to be as pure and as holy as we can... becoming the best that you can be right now.

Todd’s discussion captured his desire to become more “sanctif[ied],” but it also offered insight regarding his motive; his faith. Psychologist Robert Emmons (2003) has referred to faith-motivated efforts like Todd’s as “spiritual strivings.” Fowler (1981) has noted that for faith-centered people,

Faith...is not a separate dimension of life, a compartmentalized specialty. *Faith is an orientation of the total person, [that gives] purpose...to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions...as such, faith is an integral part of one’s character or personality* (pp. 14, 92, emphasis added).

Fowler’s statement seems to capture and reflect the essence of what the families we interviewed were about; faith was, for them, an “orientation,” one that offered purpose. This was reflected by a father named Carlos, who described how faith has become reality in the daily life of his son, Jacob. Carlos related,

[By] following the guidance of our religion, our faith is [then seen through] a person like my son [Jacob]...Every day I’m in awe...[by] the way he is [living his life]. I understand that he’s a human being and he makes mistakes also, but I think that the type of human being that he is... has ...a lot to do with our religion and our faith and how he [lives] those things. I hope he continues to help [other people], the way that [he] has [already done].

Carlos’ fulfillment in seeing his teenage son Jacob internalize and live the same faith that Carlos embraces is evident. This is a fusion of faith and family to which most highly religious parents aspire; the joy of seeing one’s child actively building on the same foundation of faith as his parents (cf. Marks, 2004). Having addressed the themes of prayer (theme 1) and “faith builds a foundation” (theme 2), we now turn to the final theme.

Theme 3: Forgiveness Allows Unity to Flourish

The third primary theme that emerged from our qualitative data analysis was that of forgiveness. As with the previous themes, the related data were both rich and diverse and may be best approached by employing sub-topics. For our purposes here, our discussion of forgiveness will include three related but distinct concepts: (a) healing through reconciliation, (b) acceptance through forgiveness, and (c) resolution through forgiveness, respectively.

Healing through Reconciliation

In the Roman Catholic Church, forgiveness is rooted in the sacrament of Reconciliation. Through this sacrament, Roman Catholics disclose and repent for their sins in the presence of a priest who then is endowed with the power of granting them absolution. A mother named Tammy explained the sacrament and the significance and power of confessing her sins to a priest in this way.

Within the Catholic Church, that was my biggest complaint, why do [you] have to go and confess that to a priest? ...[But] I went back and read Mark [in the Bible], where it says, if you confess your sins to one another you shall be healed....We confess our sins to God and we're forgiven. We confess our sins to one another, and we're healed.... Within the church, that practice of Reconciliation has transformed my life.

Tammy reportedly found a greater healing and transformation through the sacrament of Reconciliation, as compared with her previous method of solely asking for forgiveness directly from God. Tammy's husband, Todd, also expressed his feelings concerning Reconciliation.

When I fall, our church offers the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where you ask forgiveness from God, and through Jesus [He] grants absolution through the ministry of the church. It's like a personal healing, and personal strengthening. [I feel] a personal relationship with Jesus, not only in my heart and in my mind, but also in every sense of my being.....[I]n [times of] personal stress...[during] the most challenging times, I'll go before God...and just pour my heart out, and the answers flow back. So, yes, that's where I turn...[when I need help].

According to Todd, Reconciliation met his personal needs and provided an outlet for relieving stress and receiving direction during his struggles. In Todd and Tammy's family, Reconciliation appears to be a meaningful source of forgiveness on a personal level.

Acceptance through forgiveness

At the marital and family level, forgiveness appears to facilitate acceptance between family members. For example, Carlos described the role that forgiveness and acceptance plays in his marriage.

The forgiving and giving, which...come[s], from our religious views and belief[s] [is important]... [Our shared faith] has affected [the ability to] accept and [love] the person by your side. [You] try to do the best you can...because [we believe] God has put [your spouse] in your life. So for me, that's how religion affects our marriage.

Carlos' faith reportedly helped to shape his ideas of love, forgiveness, and acceptance that now affect his marriage. Carlos acknowledges that God has placed his wife in his life for what appears to be a purpose, and that he should forgive and accept her willingly. A mother named Karen described how her faith affected her ideas regarding acceptance on individual and parental levels as well.

Our faith teaches us that no matter how good or bad we are, God loves us unconditionally....[We are also taught] that every time we say we're sorry, He'll forgive us. [Instead of beating myself up, I keep] reminding myself that it's okay if I'm not a great Mom today, not to use that as an excuse, but [as a reminder] that God still loves and accepts me for who I am right now, today.

Karen described how she realized that God, in His unconditional love, is ready to forgive. In forgiving, it seems that Karen founded a deepened meaning of love and a forgiveness that helped her cope with her shortcomings as a mother. For Karen, and others, it seemed that there was a relationship between forgiveness and love, including a love of self that positively influenced and encouraged our participants and their families.

Resolution through forgiveness

As with the practice of praying individually and together, forgiveness provided an opportunity and process for resolving conflict that helped to create, maintain, and restore unity within the family. This resolution of closeness and unity is illustrated through Brian's description of forgiveness.

[T]he whole idea of forgiveness, there's so much in my human nature, or sinful nature that wants to either be in control or be dominant or "get my way." And if you hurt me, I'll get you back...[but] that [way of thinking] is so wrong. Christ was never about that [approach]. [T]he whole role of forgiveness and allowing things to [be forgiven was instituted by] God the father [who] allowed His Son to be put to death [for our sins]....I have to allow, or I need to learn to allow [and forgive], some problems and some disobedience [and] some disrespect because...I disobey and disrespect

God and God forgives me. [I]t's forgiveness that [provides]...the best [resolution for]...conflicts.

Brian explained that the idea that forgiveness originated in God sending down his only son Jesus to die for the salvation of humanity. Through this reflection, it appears that Brian has gained a greater understanding of the love of God and at the same time the importance of forgiving those who offend him. This is significant in understanding how forgiveness operates within the family structure.

Further evidence that Brian's understanding and love of forgiveness has impacted his family was offered by Brian's teenage sons, Tyler and Jack. Tyler reflected,

If we weren't religious...the little things that get us mad would really echo, or become blown out of proportion a lot more.... [Instead] we...argue sometimes and then the next morning we'll just kind of...forget about it and know [that] we both...love each other. And we just have kind of an understanding, [that] we will forgive each other no matter what.

In terms of faith and family, Tyler's brother Jack commented,

I really haven't thought too much about how God has...influenced me...[but] I understand all the things that [my parents have] taught me, and how *that* influences me.... I think it does help us...get along better. And ...how we're so forgiving and ...that we should all be forgiving.

The above responses from Tyler and Jack take us full circle in our exploration of the connection(s) between faith and family. In the first two themes relating to prayer and faith, we heard from Brian (the father of these teenage boys), and from other parents, that when they became parents, their approach to family life was largely influenced by their religious faith; so much that they actively integrated faith-based practices, including and especially prayer, into their family lives. A primary hope and goal driving this integration of faith into family life was to instill a similar "foundation" of faith in the rising generation, as several of the parents in our study mentioned. Jack reflected above that he is not sure what influence God has had on him, but he knows how his parents have influenced him. This statement seems to reveal that although faith reportedly served as the foundation for Jack's dad's efforts to build a family, it appears that the family is Jack's foundation for his budding faith. Whether Jack's faith will develop to a point where, like his father Brian, it will serve as the foundation in a future family of his own is the unwritten ending to the unfolding narrative that our participants, mothers, fathers, and teenage children, have shared with us.

With all this said, we wish to emphasize that in spite of the idyllic tone in many of the narratives, faith did not preclude significant challenges for these families. Indeed, as one closely examines the narratives, faith seems to often be a quality of response to problems and challenges. Prayer helped to piece the confusing pieces of life and family together. Faith and prayer were frequently invoked during personal, marital, and family conflicts. The third theme of forgiveness, by definition, involves overcoming harm and

wrongdoing to ourselves and others. These were not conflict-free, challenge-free families. They were persons who tried to establish a foundation of faith strong enough to buttress them when, inevitably, those conflicts and challenges come along.

A closing (and somewhat ironic) note is that faith itself was the source of some of these challenges and conflicts. Tammy, for example, joined the Catholic Church post-marriage and after significant struggle. For some, intergenerational differences in either denomination or devotion were a source of strain (cf. Marks, 2004, 2005). Finally, devotion to the Catholic faith was sometimes both a personal and interpersonal challenge. Perhaps no participant captured this in a richer way than Angela who explained,

[Sometimes] people point to [you] and [say], “You believe this because you’re Catholic.... [P]eople often will make assumptions like, you’re pro-life and you’re this and [you’re] that, because you’re just [blindly] obedient to the Pope [and to] the Church.... We’re critical, thinking [people]. [W]e consider ourselves Roman Catholics, but we have [our own] understanding of life and God’s creation.... I always get very angry when people say, “Well, you just think that because you’re Catholic.” [T]hat’s not true...I disagree with many teachings of the church...And for most Catholics that I know, it’s not like that either. Especially in...our generation...and in America.

Angela’s experience reveals that while centering one’s life on faith may often facilitate conflict resolution and aid in overcoming challenges in the family, the effort to be highly religious also introduces additional ambiguities, conflicts, and contradictions. In the final analysis, our participants’ “puzzle” of life, family, and faith is hope-filled and optimistic, but it is also complex, contrast-filled, and challenging.

Limitations

Our efforts to provide an “insider” presentation involve potential weaknesses in the tendency to overlook, or fail to explain, obvious issues that might be relevant or even critical to an outsider. It is also possible that the participants felt the need to present their experiences in ways that emphasized healthy connections between their religion and family life, or that they might have been less anxious to address the challenges of their religion. Thus, in spite of efforts to help the participants feel comfortable discussing all aspects of their religion and family experience (including specific questions inviting discussion of negatives), it is possible that the data may overemphasize the positive value of religion for these mothers and fathers.

Another inherent limitation of this study is that in order to achieve the hallmark of rich, descriptive data one must usually focus narrowly. In light of this fact, two of the most apparent limitations of the study itself will be that it includes only “highly religiously active” persons and only married couples with children. Additionally, it is unfortunate that we had to rely on single interview, as opposed to conducting several interviews over an extended period of time. Even with these and other apparent limitations in mind, we are confident that the questions, sample, design, and

methodological approach have coalesced to offer a modest, but rich portrait of how and why the Roman Catholic faith matters to some highly involved families.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that prayer, faith, and forgiveness all help to illuminate the meaning and connection between the Roman Catholic faith and family life. All three themes reportedly promote unity and connection in the family on three different levels, including individual, marital, and familial. It appears that these three levels provide a basis for examining many aspects of faith within the family, and in the future may provide an approach for further qualitative research.

Our findings suggest that the Roman Catholic religion did play a role in shaping the beliefs and attitudes of the family members we interviewed. Furthermore, their faith reportedly influenced their actual behavior. As indicated throughout the interviews, prayer and forgiveness were used by couples and children to solve conflicts and come to peaceful resolutions, while a faith-based approach to life offered a foundation for the family and provided parents with guidance in directing and raising their children.

This initial research offers some answers to questions of what it is about faith that influences families. Further, with the help of the participants we gain some insight regarding *how* and *why* the faith and family connection works. To restate, we learned that “prayer helps piece the puzzle together,” “faith builds a foundation,” and “forgiveness allows unity to flourish.”

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Appendix A

Interview Questions on Faith and Family Life

Faith and Marriage (Married Couple)

I'd like to ask some questions about links between your faith and your marriage or between your relationship with God and with one another. I am also interested in personal experiences that illustrate your ideas.

1. Did your religious beliefs and values influence how you met and decided to marry?
2. What are some of your *deepest spiritual beliefs* relating to marriage? Can you give an example of how these beliefs have influenced your marriage?
3. Which faith *practices/traditions* hold special meaning for you *as a couple*?

4. How do these practices/traditions influence your marriage? (EXAMPLE?)
5. How has your *relationship with God* influenced your marriage?
6. Have you influenced each other's initial or ongoing involvement with your faith?
7. All couples have some conflict. Are there ways that your religious beliefs or practices *help avoid or reduce marital conflict*? (EXAMPLE?)
8. What do your non-religious friends or family members think you give up because of your faith?
9. Do you feel there are any religious beliefs or practices that, if *misunderstood or misapplied*, can be harmful to marriage? If so, what are they?
10. What are the *greatest obstacles* (external/internal) to your marriage being all you and God want it to be? (EXAMPLE?)

The second part of the interview asks about connections between your faith and your family life; that is between your relationships with God and with family members. I would also enjoy **any personal experiences that might illustrate** the influence of your faith in your family life.

I. Religious Practice and Community and Family Life

11. Which *faith practices/traditions* hold special meaning for you as a family?
12. Can you recall a particular time when these practices/traditions really helped your family?
13. Is your religious congregation important to your family? Your Marriage?

II. Religious Beliefs and Family Life

14. Which of your religious beliefs have the most influence on your family life?
15. How *central* is your religion to how you parent your children?
16. Can you think of a time when you believe God *directly influenced* your family in some way?

III. Faith and Parent-Child Relationships

To Parents:

17. As parents, how do you *share your faith* with your children?
18. *How important* to you is it that your child(ren) *follow in your faith*?

IV. Faith and Surrounding Culture

19. Do your religious beliefs influence what you *let in or keep out* of your family life? What challenges arise from being a religious family in the surrounding culture? How do you *respond to these challenges*? (EXAMPLE?)

V. Challenges of Faith and Family Life

20. Has your family experienced any *major stressors or challenges* that your faith has helped you deal with?
 21. Is there anything else about your faith and your family life you consider important or interesting to mention?
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