

Amen: Transform young hearts into places of prayer

I couldn't help but smile when I stumbled across Pete the Cat sitting by himself in a corner of my 2-year-old daughter's bedroom.

My little one had placed her pink corded rosary on the stuffed animal's lap, not far from where plush giraffes, dogs and her beloved Bear-Bear were having a tea party. With his head bowed, the whiskered critter in sneakers seemed to be quite a faithful feline.

"Pete Cat praying, Dada!" my little one explained with a beaming smile.

It filled me with joy to see my child already thinking about faith and sharing it with others, even in just an elementary way.

A few weeks earlier, my wife and I prayed the rosary with our daughter and her little sister during a prayer gathering with some friends and family. While our 7-month-old was content to examine the soft rosary beads during the prayer, the 2-year-old was soon distracted by books and toys. Both, however, seemed intrigued by the unified voices that surrounded them. They were observing and learning.

Praying with young children doesn't have to be intimidating. There are fleeting moments throughout the day that can be turned into opportunities to teach little ones about God.

Right next to their dolls, puzzles and other toys, our children play with plastic nativity scenes, a Noah and the Ark set and little stuffed dolls of their patron saints.

At dinner, we make the sign of the cross and say grace together. Reading time sometimes incorporates Bible stories, tales of the saints and simple prayers.

Right before we tuck our girls into bed, I swoop the 2-year-old into my arms while my wife holds the baby.

"Goodnight, Jesus!" we say, waving to a painting of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a

crucifix on the wall.

We say a prayer to our guardian angels and ask God to bless our girls. Finally, we ask Georgie, their older brother in heaven, to pray for us.

Nothing complicated. Nothing deep. Just simple words and actions that we hope will help our children recognize God in their lives.

Last year, Pope Francis said it was “beautiful” for mothers to teach their little ones to blow a kiss to images of Jesus or Mary or when passing a church.

“There’s so much tenderness in that,” the pope said. “And, at that moment, the heart of the child is transformed into a place of prayer. And it is a gift of the Holy Spirit.”

If a person learns as a child to turn to God with the same spontaneity as he or she learns to say “Daddy” and “Mommy,” the pope said, the lesson would last a lifetime.

More than four decades ago, Blessed Pope Paul VI insisted that the family, like the church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. The future of evangelization, he wrote in “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*,” depends in great part on the church of the home.

“In a family which is conscious of this mission,” the pope said, “all the members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply lived by them.”

At a time when Archbishop William E. Lori is asking us all to become “missionary disciples,” how better to start than by becoming missionary disciples to one another in our own homes?

Email George Matysek at gmatysek@CatholicReview.org.