

Issue Two: Tradition

“A Time to Plant”: Traditions in the Home

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At the end of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, a group of young boys grieves over the death of their friend. They feel sad and abandoned. Alyosha Karamazov encourages them:

You must know that there is nothing higher, or stronger, or sounder, or more useful afterwards in life, than some good memory, especially a memory from childhood, from the parental home. You hear a lot said about your education, yet some such beautiful, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man stores up many such memories to take into life, then he is saved for his whole life. And even if only one good memory remains with us in our hearts, that alone may serve some day for our salvation.

Alyosha's words touch the hearts of the boys and give them a sense of hope. They share memories of something good and beautiful with their friend who died too soon. Suddenly they are no longer afraid of life. They carry on. If a memory of one single beautiful moment in life can be so powerful, how formative and “salvific” can an entire treasure trove of memories be! Meaningful experiences which are repeated intentionally and lived for the sake of being handed on become traditions.

It is primarily in the family that traditions find fertile ground. These habitual actions and customs create a certain family culture. They are predictable moments of gladness that children can look forward to, anticipate, and prepare for. Whether it is traditions centered on the life of prayer and liturgical celebration, or creative ways of spending time as a family together, traditions transform our everyday experiences into moments of joy. It is in these moments that we witness a glimpse of hope for our broken world. It is in these moments that we realize what it truly means to be human, to live and to love, and to return what was given to us.

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I recall with gratitude the many memories and traditions that have shaped my life. I was born and raised in Czechoslovakia. Despite the atheistic Communist government in charge, I remember my home country being permeated with a truly Catholic culture. Towns and villages in Europe were built with a church at their center. Walking pilgrimages were a natural part of life, though under Communism they often had to be done secretly. People prayed as they worked in the fields, and marked certain places with little shrines so they would be reminded to pause and pray during the day. Feasting and fasting had their place in the life of the faithful. There was a clear distinction between a weekday and a Sunday. I remember sitting on my grandfather's lap listening to stories, waltzing with him in the living room, watching my grandmother make homemade noodles on the kitchen table, and singing folk songs

with her in the afternoons. I remember baking Christmas cookies with my mother and preparing Easter baskets to be blessed on Holy Saturday. I remember countless priests visiting our home. They would share a meal with us, teach secret religion lessons during the Communist rule, and sometimes they would even take an afternoon nap on the sofa after lunch. My grandfather would have theological discussions with them. I remember *Corpus Christi* processions and visits to convents of various religious orders. The most important events of the year were the celebrations and feasting centered on the liturgical year. These moments were tied to a specific time or a season and provided a certain rhythm to daily life. Despite the Communist regime and people's suffering, there was a certain richness to life—a foretaste of something eternal.

In his lectures at the University of Virginia titled *After Strange Gods*, T.S. Eliot makes an interesting observation about traditions. He says that we become “conscious of their importance, usually only after they have begun to fall into desuetude, as we are aware of the leaves of a tree when the autumn wind begins to blow them off—when they have separately ceased to be vital.” Traditions come with a certain responsibility on our part. Naturally, as a mother, I have a desire to create a home filled with good memories for our children, a home where traditions are kept, celebrated, and lived. But traditions do not simply happen. In most cases they first need to be received by us (although there is certainly a place in each family for new traditions to be discovered and begun in the course of their life together). Traditions need to be repeated over and over again until they become a natural part of our lives. In order to truly transform the heart and make sense to our children, they also need to be explained. And only then, I believe, can they keep the vitality so necessary for their survival. We need to be reminded daily of our own responsibility, otherwise all these good “saving” moments will fall into desuetude.

I find it beautiful and somewhat paradoxical that the preservation of tradition is entrusted both to an adult and to a child. An adult has the immediate responsibility to teach and form the child and to hand down traditions to the next generation. But it is through a child that an adult is daily reminded to do so and that he is invited to a deeper understanding of reality. Children naturally ask questions. They are intrigued by life. They want to embrace it and live it fully. But in order to live it fully, they need to understand it. We need to remember that each new child that is given to us needs to be initiated into the traditions of faith and family life. Sometimes I forget. It is easy to assume that our four-year-old knows how to pray the Hail Mary because all of her older siblings do. But each new child needs to be taught how to pray! With each new child I need to explain why there are four candles on the Advent wreath. With each new child I need to wonder at the miracle of Easter. This act of explaining and pondering the mysteries of our faith keeps my own faith alive and stronger with each new child. The Catholic culture, so deeply present in my home country during my childhood, has disappeared almost entirely. The Czech Republic is now considered one of the most secular countries in the world. We must have forgotten God. Traditions are no longer explained. We no longer have children who remind us to ask. Everything is instant and readily available and we have lost our ability to prepare, to wait, and to truly celebrate.

The renewal of a truly Catholic culture must begin in the home—in and through small steps, done with faithfulness and love. In order to do that, our lives need to be rooted in God, His sacraments, prayer, and silence. We need to “encourage one another daily, while it is still today” (Hebrews 3:13). One concrete way to do this is to encourage one another to celebrate Sundays by keeping them holy and set apart for God and neighbor. As a wife and a mother I experience a deeper joy when I truly keep Sunday—by doing simple things like not going shopping or not doing that load of laundry that can wait one more day. It is oftentimes these small things that begin making a difference. If our families have the courage to keep the Sabbath, we will be actively affecting the world around us, changing it one Sunday at a time.

I am experiencing many memories from my childhood in my own family and with our own children now. Once again, the most fruitful and memorable times are those intimately tied to the celebrations centered on the liturgical year and the sacraments, a consistent life of prayer, sharing meals together around the table, reading around the fire, or opening our home to others. I hope that our children will remember these moments and wish to embody them in their own families one day. Among the many traditions that we strive to live and celebrate as a family, there are several that have been especially fruitful and that our children embrace with a particular joy. Praying together every night is probably the first one that comes to mind. Every night we pray the Liturgy of the Hours. Sometimes we simply recite Compline, that is, Night Prayer of the Divine Office. Other times we chant it. But every time we gather to say this particular prayer, our children experience something very powerful and profound. Around the whole world, whether you are a lay person or consecrated, in a small mountain village or in a large city, the Church offers us her beautiful prayer to unite us. The same words are prayed by everyone. Children have a deep desire to be a part of this experience! After just a few weeks, they learn the prayers by heart because they hear them repeated over and over again. There is something very comforting about it.

Most of our other family traditions are tied to particular liturgical seasons or feasts of various saints that are dear to us. For example, every day during Lent we pray the Stations of the Cross together. Younger children announce the stations and snuff a small candle after each station's meditation. After the last station, the room is enveloped in darkness. After a moment of silence, we light a large candle to be reminded of Christ's victory over death. Praying the Stations has become part of our family culture, a way that we and our children have learned to experience Lent. During the Advent season, it is the singing of Advent hymns before the fire every night that our children anticipate with joy. This simple tradition has changed our children's understanding of Christmas. Advent music expresses our waiting and longing for the Messiah. It is teaching our children the importance of waiting not only for the gift of Christmas, but for anything good and important in life. The Feast of Saint Martin of Tours (an old European Thanksgiving Feast), celebrated with a juicy roast goose, red wine and singing, is another day in the Church year that our children associate with joy.

All of these moments might seem quite insignificant, but they are like little seeds that we plant day after day. They are rooted in real life. They invite us to enter into the present moment. You never know how life-changing it can be for someone to be included around your table for a meal, for a family Night Prayer, to join you in folk dancing on the lawn or sitting around a bonfire on saints' feast days. The fruits of these moments are often invisible and only unfold in time. But seeds grow slowly and we need to be patient. Our Lord is at work!

Even though the world is crumbling in front of our eyes, there is hope. When I am back in my home country and see the glorious architecture of the churches that still stand in the center of towns, or pass by a little shrine on the side of a road, I know that somewhere deep beneath the surface the country's heart is still beating with life. It is impossible to erase Catholic identity altogether. Someone might notice these visible signs and wonder. Perhaps he will ask questions. And perhaps someone will remember the answers. In our own homes, we can begin now! Even one good memory of something good and beautiful can serve some day for our salvation. The task of sowing the seeds belongs ultimately to God. But he trusts us to be his co-workers and witnesses of joy and life in the world. It is "time to plant" (Ecclesiastes 3:2)!

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Catechesis with a wider community, keeping traditions, and opening their home to others.

