



Parent Pages

Preparing the environment of the Domestic Church*

* The term "Domestic Church" refers to the family, the smallest body of gathered believers in Christ. Though recovered only recently, the term dates back to the first century AD. The Greek word ecclesiola referred to "little church." The early Church understood that the home was fertile ground for discipleship, sanctification, and holiness.

Lent with Young Children

Walking with young children through Lent is one of the areas where I still tread with great care after a quarter of a century of listening to God with these little ones. Not only do we need to take great care in offering them only what they are able to process, we also need to take care that what we give them is the fullest proclamation of the kerygma, or good news, that Lent has to offer. While adults and children who have reached the age of reason have a need and a desire for moral exhortation, our little ones aren't ready for that. Certainly they can eat the way the family eats, but the idea of "giving up" something for Lent isn't going to resonate. That doesn't mean that Lent has no meaning for them, it does mean that our approach will be different. We will approach Lent as a time of preparation for the greatest feast of Easter. The feast where we celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection.

From our early days in the atrium together we begin making a great announcement of the Paschal Mystery. Christ has died, Christ is risen. Everything in our life of faith hinges upon this greatest mystery. It is something that we adults have had many years to internalize. This helps make it possible for us to bear the focus on individual moments of Christ's passion because we know what happens later. Our youngest children need a more tender approach in order to enter the Paschal Mystery. One way we can do this is to always keep the death and resurrection of Jesus together, even in the same sentence. Not only do our little ones need this approach, but they also remind us of the



rightness of keeping these words together because the Paschal Mystery is one event as proclaimed in the life of the church.

At the very heart of the Paschal Mystery is love, and we know how very rich our little ones are in love so how can we make this match. The parable of the Good Shepherd helps us focus on a deep meaning of laying down one's life. With our early readings and shared reflections with young children we omit the verses that pertain to evil and the wolf and focus on the ordinary ways the Good Shepherd shows extraordinary love every day. First, by knowing each sheep so well, he calls them each by name and leads them out. He goes ahead of them and the sheep follow because they know his voice. There's a real intimacy here that we can relate to in our family life. We love to be together and our ears are especially attuned to hear the voices of those we most love. Together we can focus on listening more closely to the voice of the Good Shepherd during Lent and carry that habit of close listening into the Easter season. If a child becomes distressed over the death of Jesus, we return to this parable where Jesus says He gives His life, it's not taken from Him. We also remember together that Jesus is risen!

One of my atrium families was preparing to go to Holy Thursday with two small boys. Mom and dad decided to put them in pajamas because they would be getting home a little after bedtime, and they thought about what they would see and hear and how to prepare them. In the comfort of home, they got out a pitcher, basin and towel. Each member of the family took a turn washing the feet of the others. I wonder how children of three years and 18 months feel when they wash their parents' feet. When they wash each other's feet? I wonder what they heard and focused on during the long gospel reading later that evening. Dying on the cross



was the final act of sacrifice of Jesus, but it wasn't the only sacrifice. He poured his life out for us every day. All of His time, all of His attention, all of His love. Especially in the small ways of living with us day by day. During the last supper he washed our feet. He fed us. He refreshed us and loved us. After His death, He rose from the dead so that we may remain with Him always. We who are caregivers need first to receive this love of Jesus for ourselves so that we may in turn proclaim it to the children in our lives little by little, even drop by drop.

- Susan Stuhlstatz Reese, CGSUSA Board of Trustees Chair, Formation Leader, and Catechist