



Growing Up Catholic

Faith-fully Navigating Coronavirus with Your Kids

BY PAUL CANAVESE & ANN NAFFZIGER

If you're anything like us, the coronavirus situation has thrown you for a big loop. Our daughters are suddenly out of school, organized sports, and other activities. Meanwhile, we are trying to answer their difficult questions, keep our kitchen stocked, and juggle working from home. You may well have greater challenges than us, such as losing work, struggling to find childcare, or dealing with illness yourself.

We certainly don't have all the answers for how to navigate this difficult time, but we do want to share some wisdom and insights that we have received from others, much from our Catholic faith tradition. This is not the first time that people of faith have faced a crisis, and it will not be the last. We need to remember that we have God and each other to sustain us through difficult times.

A Faith Foundation

A crisis like this one can make both parents and children fearful, confused, and disoriented. The people we meet in the Bible lived almost constantly in crisis—concerned for their survival—so perhaps it's not very surprising that God's most frequent instruction in all of Scripture is not to be afraid. Fear can get our attention and focus us, but it also often leads us astray.

As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded, the two of us have become aware of how our children are looking to us not only for information but for guidance in how to respond and how worried they should be. As usual, our actions speak even louder than our words.

Our faith can keep us on track, even when stress and anxiety pull us in other directions. We trust in a God who cares about everyone and urges us to do the same. We believe in a God who became one of us so he could love us better and understand our own fear and pain. We follow a God who asks us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, even when it is difficult or inconvenient. Our faith guides us to not only look out for ourselves but prioritize the needs of others, especially those most in need.

What Children Need to Know

It is important to reassure children, address their fears, and communicate what we believe from a faith perspective. Here are some guidelines for how to approach the conversation:

- **Keep it truthful.** Don't mislead your child, pass on rumors, or make promises that you can't keep. Don't tell them that they (or you, or grandma) won't catch COVID-19. Instead, explain that very few kids get bad symptoms, very few people get seriously sick, and that there is medical help for those who do.
- **Keep it age-appropriate.** Share only what is helpful for your child at their developmental level. Going beyond that will confuse them. Just because you are concerned about particular aspects of the crisis doesn't mean that you have to share them with your child.
- **Keep it simple.** In general, let your child guide the conversation with their own questions and concerns. Don't volunteer too much information or try to be comprehensive. Because the crisis is affecting all aspects of life and there is ongoing news, it can be easy to talk about it all the time and throughout family meals, but this can make our children anxious.

An excellent NPR cartoon that you can use to teach your kids the basics about the coronavirus at their level can be found at: <http://bit.ly/coronavirus-kids>.

Stopping the Spread

It is our responsibility as parents to make sure our children know how to avoid spreading the virus. These steps are essential to keep not only your child safe, but also family members, friends, and those most at risk in your community. Even those without symptoms can spread the virus, including children. Be an example by following these rules yourself, and make sure your children know

the rules are *not optional*:

- **Wash hands vigorously** for at least 20 seconds (suggest that they sing part of a song that they like and not stop until it is finished). Show them how!
- **Avoid touching your face.**
- **Cough or sneeze into your elbow** or a tissue.
- **Stay home if you become ill.**

Breathing Room

We already tend to jam-pack our schedules with work, parenting, and other responsibilities. The coronavirus just increases the pressure.

Our faith tradition has a check against this called the Sabbath. It's about taking a break, taking time for ourselves, and taking time for God so that we can be spiritually refreshed, physically rested, and emotionally renewed to do the work we need to do. We need breathing room to stay healthy and centered.

There is a lot of new work associated with this crisis—from staying informed to juggling all the changes. We need to do this work well, but we also need breaks from it. If we find ourselves constantly dwelling on the latest news and social media posts, then we may need breaks from them so we won't be completely consumed.

There are many ways to take a Sabbath break. Two important ways to spend this time are attending Sunday Mass and through prayer (which we'll come back to). But you may also need exercise, journaling, walking your dog, or playing music. Maybe it's snuggling and reading with your kids a little more. We need to replenish our spirits during this time so that we can be more present to each other and the movements of the Holy Spirit.

Even our children get over-scheduled in our culture, between school, organized sports, and other extracurricular activities. So this may be a good opportunity to help them embrace and appreciate the unstructured free time. Consider how that can continue after the crisis passes.

Prayer

If prayer is not a regular part of your routine or that of your family, this is a great time to start! If possible, set aside some quiet time to be with God, and don't forget to spend some of that time listening.

As a family, you might begin your meals with a simple prayer for all those affected by the crisis around the world and in your community. Have everyone at the table say a "Thank You" and a "Pray For," as in "I'm thankful for my kitty/these meatballs/my soccer ball," and "I want to pray for all those who are helping the sick people/Grandma and Grandpa/my friends who are stuck at home too."

Home Church

Masses and religious education classes have been canceled at many parishes, giving us an additional challenge as people of faith. However, it's just as important (in fact, *more important*) for families to worship on Sundays.

Our tradition calls each family a "domestic church"—sort of like a tiny parish—where we pray, teach the faith, and live it out. Perhaps this time is a blessing in disguise to help us embrace this reality. If you can't go to Mass in-person, here are some alternatives:

- Scripts and instructions for leading a service at home: <http://bit.ly/sunday-liturgy-hours>.
- Multiple suggestions by Fr. James Martin, S.J. at <http://bit.ly/sunday-without-mass>.
- If you have young children, you may need a simpler option. You could begin and end with the Sign of the Cross and perhaps a song your child knows well. Read one or more passages from a story Bible, then talk together about what you read.

Watch for guidelines and tools from your parish leaders on how you can share faith with your children at home.

Serving Others

It is natural to ask, "Where is God in all of this?" As Matthew 25 reminds us, Christ is present in those who are in need (the hungry, thirsty, stranger, imprisoned, etc.). It is our job to do God's will in the world to make things better. We must always look beyond ourselves to serve our neighbor. Consider as a family how you can reach out to those who are most in need. For example:

- Run errands or shop for neighbors who are staying home because they are most at-risk.
- Call elderly family members, parishioners, or other friends who are isolated and lonely.
- Support small businesses that are struggling with lost business. You may be able to buy gift certificates to give them needed cash now.

*May the Lord bless you and keep you! May the Lord let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you!
May the Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!*

—Numbers 6:24-26



A Growing Up Catholic ministry. Copyright ©2020 Paul Canavese & Ann Naffziger. Published by The Pastoral Center / PastoralCenter.com. Permission is granted to reproduce this resource freely.