

## **View from the Pew**

*by Meredith Mackin Rilley*

Imagine this: You're a mother of four children and your two eldest are enrolled in St. Edward's Faith Formation classes. As Consolidated School students, their religion classes are on Tuesdays immediately following a long day at school. Each Tuesday, you pack up the younger two, who often have to be woken from their naps, to pick up their siblings from the Church Hall, where the thick crowd during the peak of pick-up is enough to throw your toddler and infant into a nearly irretrievable plummet into crankiness. You want your children to have the proper Catholic upbringing that Faith Formation provides so well, but you dread Tuesdays.

Another scenario: You have three children, with one student in Tuesday's Faith Formation and two students at Meeting House who are enrolled in the church's Wednesday program. This means that, along with all the other daily activities your typical mom-taxi-driving requires, you automatically have Tuesday AND Wednesday to add to the mix. You yearn for an easier solution.

Enter the Nazareth Program. Nazareth was sparked by a few parents looking to simplify their lives who requested an alternative to the regular Faith Formation classes. Eager to try new ideas that further reached out to his parishioners, Msgr. Ryan, whose doctorate is in Ministry Development, formed a committee that, along with input from parents, looked at alternatives and developed a proposal for last summer's pilot Nazareth program. Beyond the obvious scenarios, Msgr. Ryan also recognized a pastoral need, because parish families living outside New Fairfield were having difficulty getting their children to the weekday faith formation classes. In addition, the opening of the Magnate School at WesConn forced families to look to other parishes for religious education. Nazareth's Program Director, Beverly Steiger, also involved in the formation of the program, knew she was perfect for the job in bringing these families a solution, having previously been a Heart Association and Red Cross Community Health and Planning professional. Although there was no model program to emulate and although there were 1300 students whose needs had to be met by St. Edward's Faith Formation Program, the pilot program was a tremendous success on many levels, the most obvious barometer to that being the doubling of enrollment from 25 families last year to 50 families this year. That's 41 children last year and 74 this year.

The program consists of two weeks of summer classes, as well as ten family commitments throughout the following school year. During the three-hour summer sessions, the enrolled children in grades 1-5 have two lessons, plus a craft and a snack each day. "It's a co-op program – the parents work in the program, either as teachers, babysitters (for younger siblings), craft and game organizers — wherever staff would typically be paid. Everyone chips in," Beverly said. This includes older siblings who earn Community Service Hours for helping out. "During the year the families participate in a lesson that includes participation in one Mass per month (totaling 10) as readers, singers,

greeters, lectors and Eucharistic Ministers. Following Mass, there is a 30-minute lesson that echoes the Liturgical Calendar and a craft to pull the lesson together. The whole family is involved.” Msgr. Ryan further explained, ““The education objectives are the same as the weekly Heritage program (the standard faith formation program). It’s the same curriculum, but parents must commit to be involved in the program. The parents have formed a community built on relationships that go beyond Sunday Mass. Fathers are involved in the education of their children, and the ten workshops after Mass are built on renewing family traditions.”

Parents unanimously agree that the quality of Nazareth is stellar and they are thrilled that for the first time in their memory, their children look forward to religion class. Jen Sbarra said, “Going to religion after school was an exhausting day and I worried that my children didn’t get as much out of the lessons as they could. My daughter, Pam, thought she would hate going during the summer, but she loves it and is eager to go [each day]. This morning she said to me, ‘Mom, c’mon! We’re going to be late!’”

“My kids learn much more than before. They always talk about it and sing the songs from their day. It’s hands on,” said Michelle Zering. Michelle is referring to the fact that some of the non-lesson activities include music time with St. Edward’s Music Director and Cantor, opening and closing prayers for the day (which frequently include singing along to Fr. Hillary’s guitar), as well as the much coveted class tour of the church by one of the priests. Apparently, the tour is a favorite among the children. It is a chance to learn about the stories behind the stained glass windows, what it means when the candle in front of the tabernacle is lit, how long a candle stays lit in the chapel after a parishioner with a prayer intention lights it, as well as any other questions the children may have about their church and their faith. “My kids loved the tour of the church last year. It explained the church to them and it helps them better appreciate the church during Mass,” Diana Manning said.

The children validate the parents’ claims. Referring to attending classes after a long day at school, second grader, James Leary said, “This is better than school. School is boring. This is fun. I like the crafts and the snack!” In fact, it is not surprising to learn that most of the younger children enjoy the snacks best, but they also commented on what they learned. James mentioned that he learned about the Pope with the glasses, referring to a photo hanging in their classroom of Pope Benedict wearing a very cool pair of sunglasses.

Nothing is one-dimensional in the Nazareth Program. Even the crafts and games are tied into a message. Seven year-old Nicole Manning said, “We made cards for the sick people in the parish. I put a huge heart and a flower in it. I think they’ll be happy.” Last year, the children made sandwiches and cards for the members of Dorothy Day House, a food pantry with 6-8 beds for the homeless in Danbury. What surprised many of the children and parents is that the caretakers wrote back, explaining that they were moved by the personal touch. Most donations come as canned food in a paper bag, but to have sandwiches and a card that had notes like, “I hope you enjoy this meal” and “I’m praying for you” made the gesture that much more special to the recipients, not to mention gave the craft some more meaning for the students.

The program is clearly a success on every level, evident by its climbing enrollment. Andria Hite, a mother of two enrolled students, expressed this sentiment, “The family involvement in the program helps to foster our domestic church, which is the goal, really. It brings our faith back to its roots, not just as a weekly thing, but practicing faith as a family. It’s living our faith.”

With feedback and praise like this, it’s no wonder the number of registered families doubled from last year. Msgr. Ryan said, “It’s 47 families learning and practicing their faith together.” The quality in the lesson, in the family involvement, in measuring every task as a quantity of God’s expression through the family and for the children is really the goal of any faith formation class and, more precisely, any Catholic Church.