

Over the years, my parents have given me many things. In terms of Christmas gifts, some of the ones I remember are a brand new Nintendo system when it came out; a battery tester (true story, I really wanted one when I was about 10 and as a future member of the AV club in high school it was quite appropriate) and a six-band radio that could pull in short wave frequencies and which I spent many a summer night pulling in out of town baseball games listening to Ernie Harwell from Detroit or Harry Carry from Chicago decades before there was anything known as satellite radio.

But as I look back on my relationship with my parents, one of the greatest gifts that they gave me was that of helping the virtue of faith to grow in my soul. Our Church emphasizes that while we have a role to play in faith formation, it all begins in the domestic church of the house.

Ronda Armstrong, who is now in her mid 60s, still to this day prays and reads the Bible. But as for why she does that, a big reason is because of what her mother did for her.

In a story she shares, she writes the growing up, she went to church with her parents, attending Sunday School, and participated in youth groups

and service projects. And although these activities supported her faith development, a daily routine she shared with her mother created the foundation for it.

In one of her early memories, a soft glow floated down the hallway from her parents bedroom when she opened her eyes in the morning. The smell of coffee lingered in the air. During some months, it was still dark outside. She slipped out of bed, grabbed some books from the shelf close by, and padded down the hall in pajama feet.

After mom saw dad off to work for his sand and gravel business, she returned to bed. In her housecoat, she stretched out to read her Bible, daily devotions, and Sundays school lessons.

Her mom smiled when Ronda entered the room, and signaled her to climb into bed with her, flopping down on her dad's pillow and snuggling up to her side. While she finished the page and marked her place, Ronda flipped through a book, her brown hair splaying across the pillow like her mom's wavy locks did on hers.

Her mom tugged a thick book from the pile on her bedside table. “Now, where were we?” She asked, as she opened the book of Bible stories for children.

Ronda would take out the marker and point to a page.

After she finished the story, if they had time, she read from a book of children’s prayers or one of the Golden Books that Ronda had lugged in from her room.

As Ronda listened to the sound of her mom’s voice and the rhythm of the language, the words became stories, and stories became windows to understand a world that sounded different to her, a child with hearing impairments since birth.

They talked about the pictures as they looked at them. Her mom listened patiently to her observations. Sometimes, her words didn’t sound accurate - a concern greater than typical developmental errors for young children - but she didn’t correct her. She simply repeated the word, and then said “let’s say it together!”

The early morning quiet time Ronda shared with her mom throughout her childhood gave her a significant lifelong routine. Reading together, interacting with her mom, and observing her daily life taught her about faith. She believed, no matter what, that things worked out - though not always in ways we first imagined. Ronda gained confidence in a world understood through language, scriptures and stories of the Bible, as well as through people who acted on their faith. She began to believe that she, too, could live successfully in such a world.

Her mother followed her early morning routine until she died. During her college and career years, her quiet time took a less predictable path. Most days she grabbed devotional time whenever she could and sometimes fell short. As years passed, Ronda gravitated toward early morning again, by then recognizing more fully this piece of her mother's legacy - starting with a clam routine set a positive tone for the day. After life-altering surgery in her late 40s, Ronda began writing in the early mornings as well, not waiting to see if opportunities occurred later in the day.

Now in her 60s, she consistently reads the Bible and daily devotions, much like her mother, and follows up with writing reflections. Sometimes she uses her mom's Bible, engraved with her name on the front and inscribed by her older sister who gave it to her mom for Christmas in 1955. The Bible, Ronda reflects, embodies her presence because Ronda left her penciled earmarks and notations and scraps of handwritten notes, prayers and church programs stuck in it, just as they were when she had died more than 20 years prior from cancer.

For Ronda, she says that her mom gave her a foundation in language and faith, but more than that, the lifetime, the routine was there to anchor her. She lived her belief that faith nourished through all times and sustained through all times. Over her own lifetime, as she experienced handling tough situations, because of what her mom did for her, Ronda grew in her understanding of a personal relationship with God - a pattern of ongoing reflection and conversation - and the realization that without it, life could well be chaos and restlessness, with no feeling of safe sanctuary. Whether life seemed happy, mundane, puzzling or troubled, the faith always comforted and centered her.

Rondas mom new, she reflects, that a firm faith meant gratefulness, spiritual growth and a willingness to witness by example. By sharing her routine and acting as a model, she gave her the foundation to nurture her faith through the joys and jolts of life. Thanks to her mom, she keeps it growing stronger every day.

Today, we celebrate the feast of Mary, Mother of God, and the feast invites us to think about the relationship between the parent and the child. We meditate on why it's important that Jesus enters into our human world and is welcomed into a human family.

On the one hand, Mary gives her consent to the angel, and God does not pass through Mary like water through a pipe. Instead from her, he receives flesh; through her flesh, he shares our humanity. As such he is human and divine. As such, from his divinity, he heals humanity from our sins and elevates us to new dignity as adopted sons and daughters of God from the inside. In Jesus, God saves us as one of us: God shares our human nature so that through his flesh and blood we might share his divine life, and he shares our human nature by entering into our human world through a human mother. The point is that God did not just use her body and her

flesh as an instrument to take human nature. There was a relationship there. God chose Mary out of love, and gained her consent, and then gave her His love as a mother. As such in a special way she is born without sin. But as our Gospel tells us as she ponders these things in her heart, like all of us, her faith will be a journey. It will take time for her to comprehend all that this little infant is. Her faith will be challenged when a sword pierces her heart as she stands at the foot of the cross. But ultimately she will come to see who her Son is, which will cause her to say “do whatever he tells you” to the others at the Wedding at Cana, and trust in God’s plan until the very end of her Son’s life which ultimately leads to the resurrection. Mary grows in her understanding of the faith as time goes by.

From that starting point, we can learn that we are called to do the same thing. Ronda’s mother had the faith centered in her life; she herself prayed, went to church, and had an ongoing relationship with God. Because of that, she grew in her faith. That is so important for us to do as well. Our baptism or confirmation are special moments; but just as we received the Spirit then and Mary receives it at the annunciation, the response is an ongoing, daily growth in faith which we do through coming to Mass, through praying. So

like Mary, we must let God break into our life too, because He wants a place there in our hearts.

But from our blessed mother, we also know that we are called to pass on the faith too. Like God, we are able to know and love. But a life of love has to be learned. We have to learn how to love in a human way, and our first school of love is our family which as at its core our relationship with our mother. Every parent knows that after the birth, work has to be done. They are loved into the fullness of life. It is the love of a mother and father for their child that calls or dares out from that child love in response to love, goodness in response to goodness, truth in response to truth. Jesus enters into this dynamic with Mary and Joseph. And in the many lost years, surely He saw love on display often when he went to the Temple with them; when he prayed with them, and saw how they treated one another and him. Mary brought Jesus to us; but in many ways Mary also helped her son understand not just Joseph's love for Him, but His heavenly father's love as well as He discerned His mission.

So the takeaway for us is how can we, like Ronda's mother, like our blessed mother, be that evangelist in the world who makes God's love

known? For those who are parents, it's worth remembering that as Mary did for Jesus, so too, do they have the power to do so much to help children learn what matters most. From my parents, the Christmas gifts were memorable, but far more impactful was how they took me to Mass, how they prayed with me, and how I saw them treat one another and do so much for their own parents. These helped me understand what the faith was all about, as something that we centered our lives around. It's understandable why as a child we might be more interested in the TV or the video games, but it's up to parents to help kids to understand that what matters most is a relationship with God. So make the effort to pray with your kids. Get them a picture Bible or book of the saints. Talk to them about the faith. And above all else, help them to understand that our faith and growing to understand who God is is so important, remembering that even if they fall away from the faith, or it doesn't seem to take root, it's not as if it's gone. Your witness, your lessons really do help them, and many people return to the faith later in life because they remember those lessons they learned as kids from their parents.

But of course all of us too, whether parents or not, can do so much to be like Mary, who gave Jesus to us by giving Jesus to one another not fearing

to evangelize, to talk about our faith, and to let our actions teach others what it means to be a Christian.

This year like years past, I received some useful gifts from mom and dad. Unfortunately the Nintendo now collects dust in my parents basement next to the Atari; the six-band radio kind of wore out, and I'm not sure where that battery tester is. But one thing I do know is that when I test my faith, the reason it is there and ever growing is because my parents revealed who Jesus was to me. May we like our blessed Mother Mary do the same.