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## Family Portraits



October 6, 2014 | [Nathan Schneider](#), [Ginny and Bob Kane](#), [Valerie Schultz](#), [Rebecca Peters](#), [Maurice Timothy Reidy](#), [Kevin Clarke](#), [Rev. Alexander M. Santora](#)

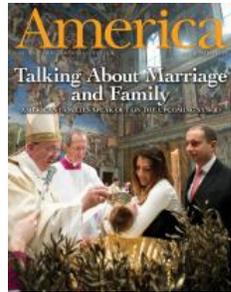
### Discussion starters for the upcoming synod

**E**ditor's Note. "Families," Pope Francis noted in a homily on Sept. 14, "are the first place in which we are formed as persons and, at the same time, the 'bricks' for the building up of society." In preparation for the launch of the Synod of Bishops on the Family on Oct. 5, parish members and pundits alike have wondered how the church might better support families as they seek to live out these roles. America asked seven men and women to reflect on how the church might use this moment to more fully delve into the beauty and messiness of their everyday family lives.



THE GOAL. Pope Francis celebrates Mass on the feast of Corpus Christi at the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome.

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## Martyr Family Values

By Nathan Schneider

My mother's name is Barbara. The saint with whom she shares that name was, the story goes, locked in a tower, subjected to torches and then beheaded by her own father because she refused to be married. This was a common sort of story among early Christians. St. Agatha is the patron saint of breast cancer, but the breasts she is often depicted holding on a plate were not lost to disease. Agatha, like Barbara, chose to die horribly rather than put up with a more or less respectable Roman marriage. More on my mother later.

It is a strange legacy for a Catholic Church that now makes so much of promoting old-fashioned family values. For many early saints, from Barbara and Agatha to the column-sitters and desert hermits, being a follower of Christ meant a chance to escape the expectations of married life for alternatives that at the time seemed scandalous—dangerously so.

That said, I will take whatever old-fashioned family values I can get right now. For most of this year my fiancée, Claire, and I were preparing to be married—the traditional way, in a church and everything. In the process we have benefitted from being part of communities of faith that see upholding marriage as a sacred mission.

Our parish priest has had us over to the rectory for good, long talks; another priest-friend has put cake

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joy of their lives together. They modeled how to bring prayer into the messes we are sure to face. The way they talked about marriage was less lofty and spiritual than I expected, but also so ordinary as to be an even better kind of lofty and spiritual after all. That is incarnation at work.

The church has been good to our marriage, and we have hardly even begun. But we fit the old-fashioned mold pretty well. The real test for us as a church is how we recognize the less sanctioned forms that love might take. For Barbara's sake.

My parents split up when I was a teenager; after that, my mother was on her own. She is a devout soul who finds formidable strength in meditation and solitude, but still I worried about her. People tried to reassure me that she would find somebody new. What she ended up doing I would never have guessed: She invited her brother to move in.

It perplexed the neighbors, but that was the neighbors' problem. For more than a decade, the two of them have taken care of each other, while giving each other freedom to grow. My mother has learned Sanskrit, while my uncle plays saxophone and works on old computers. They have made my childhood home half house, half monastery.

Uncommon forms of life, from our priest's to my mother's, do not detract from my marriage with Claire; they strengthen it. Christ preached the sacredness of marriage, but he also spoke of family values quite scandalously—teaching that there is no need for marriage in heaven, that his truest family were simply those who do God's will. Love at once binds and liberates. Family should embody certain values, but it does not fit a singular mold.

*Nathan Schneider, a columnist for America, is the author of God in Proof: The Story of a Search From the Ancients to the Internet and Thank You, Anarchy: Notes From the Occupy Apocalypse.*

## The Joy of Joey

By Ginny and Bob Kane

Nearly every Sunday we watch our son go up and down the entire length of the center aisle of our church during the greeting of peace. Joey, who has Down Syndrome, generously doles out hugs and handshakes to all he can reach. Naturally, Joey's greeting extends long beyond the norm, and we used to worry that someone, priest or parishioner, would finally say "Enough." We soon learned that parishioners looked forward to making that momentary connection with Joey and were disappointed on the days when altar serving kept him out of the pews!

Joey was the child we prayed we would never have. We were not wise enough to understand what a tremendous blessing he would be in our lives. Put very simply, Joey embodies love and is a constant reminder of the presence of Jesus.

Any parent of a child with Down Syndrome will speak of the challenges involved. It is not easy to raise a child with special needs. We want the best for our child but fear that the needed resources will not be available. We worry about our child fitting in. We see children stare. We see adults sometimes speak past Joey, asking us questions that he could easily answer himself. Mostly, we worry about whether people will accept Joey for the wonderful person he is.

Our parish, our Catholic grade school and high school and our local Catholic nursing home all have played key roles in raising Joey. At Joey's baptism our parish community made a commitment to raise Joey in the faith and that commitment has never wavered. Our Catholic schools welcomed Joey even though there had never been another student with Down Syndrome in their classrooms. The nursing home where he volunteers has provided amazing friendships—not to mention numerous servings of hamburgers and fries, Joey's favorite foods.

What is the benefit of having a person such as Joey in our midst? What do the church, the schools and the nursing home receive for welcoming, accepting and including Joey? They all knew they were allowing Joey to grow as a person and in his faith, but they could not possibly have known the remarkable extent to which their gift would allow that same growth in the lives of those around him. No one could have foreseen how



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school graduation. Whoever would have thought that the nursing home at which he volunteers would throw him a high school graduation party in appreciation of all the time he spent visiting and assisting residents?

Joey has given our family and our community a glimpse of Jesus' unconditional love. Our community has given Joey and our family a rare gift in return. We no longer worry that Joey will not be accepted for who he is. The genuine outpouring of love and kindness toward our son has been truly humbling. Our prayer is that churches, schools and communities will welcome people with special needs, the Joeys of the world, as ours did. We believe that if they do, many lives will be changed in beautiful ways. We know ours have been.

***Bob and Ginny Kane** are members of Holy Rosary Parish in Seattle, Wash. Joey is the youngest of their four children.*

## Are All Welcome?

By Valerie Schultz

My daughter grew up in a town where a gay teenager hanged himself from a tree in his own yard. If you are gay, what can you do but leave a town like that? So, upon reaching college age, my daughter left. Unfortunately, she felt the same inevitability about leaving the church.

I am the Catholic mother of a lesbian daughter. This does not make me unique. I have met plenty of Catholic parents of gay children, both at church and at Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays meetings. We are here. I also have three heterosexual daughters, who defend their lesbian sister against all slights. "If my sister isn't good enough for you," their motto goes, "neither am I." Naturally, this affects their Catholicism.

The church would do well to invest in training for the catechists and youth ministers who work with teens at the parish level. I did not suspect that my daughter was a lesbian until she came out to me, home from her freshman year of college. I knew that she was a deep and quiet young woman, a bit of an old soul, but she had dated boys and was quite feminine in appearance. I regret that I had never perceived her sexual orientation. My unconscious expectations clouded my perception of her. For just this reason, training in conscious sensitivity for those who minister to young people is essential.

Whether a catechist knows it or agrees with it or not, the fact is that some of his or her students are gay. They may be silently struggling. My daughter later related things that well-meaning Catholics had said and taught that wounded her in her adolescence. She believed that God must have made a mistake when creating her, that she was destined only for hell. One catechist told my daughter's class the story of how he had become Catholic rather than Episcopalian because of the "gay thing." My daughter heard the parishioners singing "all are welcome in this place," but she knew in her heart that some did not mean people like her. She still says that she did not leave the church; the church rejected her.

My own faith has been battered these past 11 years, in the storm of accepting my daughter's civil marriage and loving my daughter-in-law. I have become a back-of-the-church Catholic, having withdrawn, with gentle prodding, from active ministry. I used to be a lector, a catechist, a eucharistic minister. I used to conduct Communion services at the prison. I used to have a Catholic husband. Now I have a mixed marriage; my husband has become Episcopalian, in part because of the "gay thing." But I stay.

I stay because I am Catholic. I stay because I have been abundantly blessed by priests, religious and lay people who have ministered to me with love, which is something that the "micro" church gets right, despite some of the "macro" pronouncements from on high. A point I cannot emphasize enough and the synod must remember: the individual shepherds who actually smell like their sheep, as Pope Francis puts it, and who care for us where we are, are truly the saving grace of the church.

*Valerie Schultz is a frequent contributor to America.*

## Examples of Faith

By Rebecca Peters

Perhaps this goes without saying, but I never planned to be a single mom. Some women do, but I always

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They are now 3 and a half and 5 years old, and there are times I look back and am astonished to think that I managed simply to keep everyone fed and alive. I remember the early days when they would wake up in the middle of the night. I would pack them into the car so they would fall back asleep as I drove, heading to the drive-thru window for coffee before cruising around dark neighborhoods until it was time for school.

Now the challenges are different. My children are alive, they are healthy and they are growing up. And now I am the one waking up in the middle of the night. I worry about things. Am I enough for them? Can this most important job, designed to be done by two people, be done by just me? My daughters and I live in Atlanta, far from my family in Massachusetts. Do I give my daughters enough attention, enough discipline, enough fun? Will they be attentive students, early readers, good spellers? Did they brush their teeth correctly? Put on enough sunscreen? And, truly terrifying: am I raising them to be good people?

As an elementary school teacher, the topic of what makes a kid “good” is never far from my mind. I spend my days with kids just a few years older than my own, and I see my daughters’ qualities mirrored in my students. I talk to their parents and see my own hopes and worries reflected in them. I read books about parenting and education, how to communicate, make learning fun and raise compassionate kids. And still, it seems my daughters fight over everything. They use hurtful words, and sometimes I watch them go out of their way to be unkind.

We live in a very international community, and some of our good friends here belong to different faiths. I have been intrigued by how much these different religious communities offer to parents in terms of raising their children. My coworker’s Mosque provides an evening school to better prepare their community’s children (and their parents) for their academic years. Our Baha’i friends have weekend classes with their children about the importance of many virtues, including how to live with moderation, honesty and humility.

I went to a Catholic elementary school, high school, college and graduate school. I also spent two years with the Jesuit Volunteers in Belize. Catholics, and being Catholic, have been a big part of my identity, but it has started to feel less meaningful as I have grown older. Since my marriage ended, my church participation has been the lowest it has ever been. I have not felt like part of the church since I became a mother, and I have begun to wonder what support, what community, I have been missing.

Last Sunday I took the girls to Mass. We sat close to the front, and (although I embarrassed myself several times trying to remember the new translation) we had a wonderful experience. Clare, 5, was fascinated by the altar server. She kept her hands in prayer position and kept checking to make sure the girl on the altar was doing the same. My 3-year-old, Annie, was equally engaged with the hymnal. Every time people picked it up, she was on me, demanding, “What page, Mom?”

I do not yet know if my church offers reading tutorials or teaches classes on the virtues. I hope to find some programs at my parish that will engage our family. What I do know is that for an hour each Sunday, I have a place where my children are surrounded by people they want to emulate. They are in the midst of people dedicated to a community and to a faith. There my daughters have examples of worship, of quiet, of concentration, prayer and peace. I do too.

*Rebecca Peters is an elementary school teacher in Decatur, Ga.*

## Necessary Network

By Maurice Timothy Reidy

When my family decided to adopt a child, it seemed only natural to work with a Catholic adoption agency. I went to Catholic schools through high school, and adoption was, in my mind, part of the robust array of social services offered by Catholic organizations around the country. My wife and I knew the process would not be easy, but we were comforted by the idea that we would be guided by fellow believers with the proper sensitivity and expertise.

Our experience turned out to be different. After doing our homework, we found that a secular adoption agency best met our needs. In addition to guiding us through the adoption process itself, the agency offered a full suite of counseling and post-adoption services. This was key for us, especially as we entered into the

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I suspect that our experience is not unique. There are still many excellent Catholic adoption agencies around the country. But they are not the only option, and in some cities there are none. In Boston, the archdiocese has withdrawn from the arena entirely because of governmental pressures to offer adoption to nontraditional families. The same could happen in many other parts of the country. This is a very sad development. The Catholic Church has many years of experience in the field of adoption. The pro-life cause is best served when multiple agencies are working in multiple ways to find homes for children.

I expect that the Synod on the Family will, in one way or another, praise adoption as a life-giving choice. And so it is. But I hope that the delegates are also sensitive to the changing nature of adoption today. Open adoption, for example, can be a healthy choice for children struggling with a sense of their own identity. It can also provide a ray of hope for birth mothers who are struggling to decide whether to bring a child to term. Some women cannot imagine giving birth to a child they will never see again.

Adoption should also be discussed with a frank understanding of the challenges involved. It is sometimes too easy to say to couples struggling with infertility, “Well, you can always adopt.” The adoption process can take years, especially when couples try to adopt from countries abroad. Domestic adoptions are increasingly difficult, especially in states with lax abortion laws. Costs can be in the tens of thousands of dollars. Sometimes a birth mother decides to raise her child rather than place her with a prospective adoptive family—an admirable decision, but not one without heartache for the potential adoptive parents. Adoption is a lifelong commitment; it does not end on that happy day when the child comes home.

Couples who choose to adopt need support, especially from their faith communities. Sometimes adoptive families will look a little different. Adoption across ethnic and racial lines is more common today. I am happy to say that for most people I know this choice is not an issue, but that does not mean it is easy to raise a multiracial family. Too many subtle prejudices endure. A pro-life community must be actively welcoming to families of all types.

Our adoption agency recently changed its mission to focus on finding homes for foster children and children with special needs. The decision was prompted in part by circumstance—fewer newborn babies are available for adoption in the Northeast—but it is brave nevertheless. Any conversation about adoption today must recognize these changing dynamics and seek to provide networks of support for families willing to take on these challenges.

*Maurice Timothy Reidy is an executive editor of America.*

## Parents at Work

By Kevin Clarke

Like a gazillion other working parents around the world, each school night my wife and I somberly confer like field marshals planning a Prussian offensive, prepping for the morning rush out the door to the big yellow bus on the corner. But it seems no matter how detailed our pre-emptive strategizing—the homework-signing, backpack-checking, clothes-readying and lunch-building—one or two or all four of our children will find some novel, if not diabolical way to turn what should have been our orderly march to the bus into a frantic, expletive-swallowing rout. It is most lovely to find yourself on a September morn chasing down a 6-year-old and menacing him with a bag of Cheez-It crackers and a missing pair of gym shoes in front of all the neighbors.

I was raised on reruns of “My Three Sons” and “Father Knows Best”; both shows featured characters who seemed to have the whole parenthood thing down pat. Yet it has been ages since I was able to get my cardigan and slippers on before some sort of meltdown occurred in my household. Between commuting and after-school activities, homework, after-work work and extra work on the weekends, I find myself wondering how much of the family-building my wife and I actually are accomplishing and how much we have outsourced the job to school, child care programs and an aging Nintendo Wii. How did I get here? Who can help me figure out how to do this thing called family?

It will not come as a shock to most readers to discover that being a family in the United States, the land of dual-income households, spotty child care services and long commutes, is not easy. I will also acknowledge

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But the fact that other families face more daunting, existential challenges does not mean that those confronting parents in the United States can be easily dismissed. Most of us are trying to raise healthy, decent and merciful kids in a culture that seems bent on thwarting that aim. We are desperately trying to keep a toe in the middle class, saving for health crises and college educations or to pay off credit cards, while supervising and safeguarding our children's education and their moral, emotional and physical development. Most times we are just struggling; sometimes we are "failing," spinning our gears and only acquiring more debt and more worries no matter how hard we plan and work.

Unlike many other advanced economies, the United States does not maintain policies on mandatory vacation or sick days that can make family life easier. Its minimum wage traps a growing number of working parents in poverty. American companies are not required to offer the generous paternity leave typical of other Western states, and most do not. Extravagant tuition fees are pricing promising but affluence-challenged students out of higher education. Despite all the rhetoric on family values, too often in the United States it is every family for itself. When I think of the real threats to family life, it is this stress—the financial and practical obstacles to being a family in America—that most comes to mind, not the gender of two people who wish to get married.

We need the church to go to bat for us as an ally on these social and cultural challenges, but we could also use some help at the street level with the many practical frustrations of being a family today. Now that the parish school has closed, the Sunday catechism classes are a welcome support, but could the parish open a morning and afternoon child care service that is actually matched to real-world work schedules? How about some evening classes offering guidance on family budget making or escaping from credit card debt? Can families at your parish share baby-sitting leads?

I know the bishops meeting at the synod on family plan to discuss weighty matters related to the status and treatment of Catholics in "unconventional relationships" and their presumed impact on the family, but I hope they reserve some time also to talk about the many pressures and night tremors faced by folks in conventional relationships, trying to be a family amid work, commutes and soccer matches.

*Kevin Clarke is senior editor and chief correspondent of America.*

## Community Building

By Alexander M. Santora

When I first became pastor of Our Lady of Grace parish in Hoboken, N.J., I saw maybe two babies in attendance at Masses each weekend. Today there is baby-carriage gridlock on Sunday morning. In the last five years, an influx of young families in this gentrified, mile-square town of 50,000 residents has meant more young children at Mass. The city's businesses and housing stock have become family-friendly, and the church is working to do so as well. Another parish in town has built a family chapel in the church basement. Parents are bringing their children to church looking for an environment that welcomes them and provides them with age-appropriate programs.

Exploring the beliefs and expectations of young families is an interesting—and necessary—venture. Many couples are rediscovering their faith. Some come because they need paperwork to become godparents or confirmation sponsors and then keep coming back.

Many young married couples have taken to heart the importance of family and are excited about having and raising children (two or three, on average). Yet beyond acknowledging that bringing life into the world is part of the divine marriage plan, many have tuned out the ongoing debates about all kinds of sexual morality. And that is sad, because there is much good in the church's teachings. But the stridency of some castigating Catholics has resulted in many young Catholics choosing to find their own way. After 32 years as a priest, I can count on one hand the number of engaged couples I have met who were living apart before marriage. Yet, most of them attend Mass fairly regularly before the wedding. Afterward is another story.

For many young couples, issues like birth control, single motherhood and same-sex unions are negotiated by conscience, without much thought of the magisterium. Yet they return to Mass, seeking something to feed their spirit and to help them arrive at ethical decisions. They seek preaching that is relevant and savor

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language. Young adults and parents see justice as paramount, and the old moral shibboleths do not work for them. Support for same-sex unions has grown. Parents feel that if their child were to identify as gay or lesbian, they would want a safe and pleasant life for him or her, filled with opportunity.

Most parents revel in their roles as parents and want their children to be part of a larger community. Often, I invite the children at Mass to gather around the altar as we recite the Our Father. Our parish includes a diverse group of parishioners. The children hold hands and, although they do not yet sense it, the prayer unites those living in Section 8 housing and those living in \$1.5 million brownstones. They sometimes smile at each other as they return to their pews. Our hope is that the community building will continue after they leave the church building.

Hope is another thing families seek from a parish community. Families contribute widely to the Advent Giving Tree to help the poor, the elderly, military families and children. They generously donate to the annual Hoboken Shelter collection. They bring food, clothes and baby items for the pro-life advocacy center. They want to make a difference and to teach their children that giving is better than receiving.

And yet, on a sunny Sunday, more people can be found enjoying brunch al fresco on the sidewalks of Hoboken than sitting in the pews. How might we go about welcoming people back inside? I have observed that when families have a good experience at Mass, they tell their friends, and that personal connection and conversation can be the most powerful form of evangelization. How can parish leaders help to create that experience? Call people by name. Pay attention to the children at Mass. Inquire with care about the particulars of parishioners' lives. Help to create a friendly, faithful environment that families want to be a part of.

**Rev. Alexander M. Santora** is the weekly Faith Matters columnist for *The Jersey Journal*, a New Jersey daily newspaper, and a recipient of a 2014 Religion Newswriters Association Award.

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