Add some “smells and bells” to your family prayer

This article is adapted from the book 77 Ways to Pray with Your Kids.

The Catholic liturgy is sometimes said to be one of “smells and bells,” a reference to the use of incense, candles, scented oil, altar bells (sanctus bells), elaborate vestments, and other elements that engage the senses.

Why do Catholics have all these “smells and bells”? The *Catechism* offers this simple answer: “As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationship with God” (1146).

Kids, especially young kids, really connect with these tangible signs and symbols of prayer. Why not try some of them out in your family prayer time? Here are a few simple things you can do.

Candles. Make and use prayer candles to set aside your time of prayer, and to indicate different liturgical seasons.

Bells. Use a hand-held bell or other appropriate musical instruments to call children to prayer.

Incense. During special times of prayer, consider burning incense. The use of incense to accompany prayer dates to ancient times (Psalm 141:2 refers to it), symbolizing sanctification, purification, and the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven. Myrrh resin (the type of incense burned in churches) can be purchased from Catholic supply retailers.

Holy water. A reminder of our baptism into Christ, holy water can be incorporated into your prayers and blessings.

Tablecloth or banner. Use colored cloth to make a tablecloth or banner for your Home Oratory, and change them as appropriate for each liturgical feast or season.

Other symbols. Use other sacred or symbolic objects, as appropriate: icons, crucifixes, flowers, and so on.

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Catechism 1145–1152