

# PASSING ON FAITH TO YOUR CHILDREN

PETER KAHN



FAMILY MATTERS

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by Peter Kahn

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I am indebted to many people for this booklet. The notion of explicitly placing love at the heart of family life stems from a reading of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar and from Aidan Nichol's book *Christendom Awake* (T and T Clark, 1999), as well as various Church documents. In addition to those authors and sources quoted with the text, insight has come from reading work by Clayton Barbeau, G K Chesterton, Elizabeth Davies, Thomas Dubay, Michael Paul Gallagher, Bishop Victor Galeone, the Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, Michael Hornsby-Smith, Peter Leithart, Thomas Mann, Francis Mannion, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Patrick Riley, Mary Shivanandan, David Thomas, Jean Vanier, Christopher West and others. The idea for a booklet was stimulated in part by the Listening 2004 initiative on the family that was carried out by the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales.

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## INTRODUCTION

Parents and godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. He is to walk always as a child of the light. May he keep the flame of faith alive in his heart. When the Lord comes, may he go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom. (*The Rite of Baptism*)<sup>1</sup>

Do you remember receiving a lighted candle at a Baptismal ceremony? The candle expressed the hope that the faith of your child would burn brightly; and maybe since then you have seen your child's innocent bedtime prayers or a cherubic First Holy Communion. A young child's faith has charm beyond measure.

These early acts of faith may flourish as a child's life unfolds. Perhaps the parents will see their child's courage in standing up for their beliefs at school or they are eventually able to celebrate Mass with their child's own children. Other parents, however, will see a different story: belief in God disappears at the same time as belief in Santa Claus or the child tries to get out of going to Mass on Sunday while still in primary school. Who can appreciate the sorrow that someone can feel at the loss of faith in a son or daughter?

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the rite allows for 'he' or 'she'.

And yet it seems now that stories of sorrow are common while tales of elation are rare. If you simply hope for the best, living much the same as everyone else around you, the chances are that your child or your children will leave their faith far behind.

But we do make a promise during the Baptism to pass on faith to our child. After all, the candle is given to the parents rather than to the baby! How can we carry out this promise? The aim of this booklet is to consider this question, whatever our circumstances. We begin by exploring what faith actually is; otherwise how can we pass it on?

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## THE FAITH OF OUR FATHER

Abraham is our father in faith. He somehow managed to pass on faith all the way down to us, so where better to start than with his story. It begins with a call from God:

Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I will show you; and I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you and make your name famous; you are to be a blessing!  
(*Gn 12:1-2*)

God asked Abraham to move house. God did not expect him to be perfect all at once, but he did ask him to take a risk. Imagine the precariousness of Abraham's life as a wanderer in foreign lands all those years ago: he would surely have been at the mercy of every local warlord. All this for a crazy promise that stood little chance of ever being fulfilled, and with pleasures of life at home in Ur that were only too real. Pope John Paul II<sup>2</sup> in his poetry captures the impossibility of God's promise to Abraham:

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II (2002) *Roman Triptych*, translated by Jerzy Peterkiewicz, Catholic Truth Society, London.

The Voice said: You will be the father of many nations.

Your offspring will be numerous as the sand  
on the seashore.

How can this promise be fulfilled, thought Abraham, since nature has denied me the gift of fatherhood?

My wife, whom I have loved from the days of my youth, gave me no son. It pains us both.

But the Voice kept saying: You will become a father, you will become the father of many nations.

Your offspring will be numerous as the sand  
on the seashore

The Voice is insistent, and in response Abraham set out into the wilderness with everything he possessed; and with Sarah his wife, and his servants and other relatives who were willing to come with him. Blessing did follow for Abraham, as he became the father of a vast people; not because he was so virile, but because God had called him.

### **Love alone**

Abraham's story teaches us a great deal about faith, and how to pass it on to our children. Imagine what Isaac must have felt when he was about to be sacrificed, only to

hear a voice from heaven call it all off and then see a ram take his place on the altar! Isaac was able to see in an entirely concrete way that God was looking after him. We also read later in the story that Isaac married in an unusual fashion. Abraham's servant travelled all the way back to Ur to find a wife for Isaac, and the first person he met was one of Isaac's cousins, a young woman who also believed in God and was ready to leave everything. Abraham thus allowed his son Isaac to experience the power of faith.

We can see in all of this that God revealed himself as someone who wanted what was good for Abraham. After all, God did not actually require Abraham to sacrifice his child, a habit to which other gods of the time were prone.

God's care for us provides the key motivation for faith. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* observes that faith involves giving over our entire lives to God in response to his call: 'Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God.' (150) Why else would you adhere to God other than because of his care for you? The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it this way: 'Only love can be believed'.<sup>3</sup>

The love that God bestows on us also underpins what we believe. (This is even true of more controversial beliefs - an issue we will return to later in the booklet.)

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<sup>3</sup> Balthasar, Hans Urs von (1968) *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation*, Sheed and Ward, London, p 68.

The Catechism goes on to state that our beliefs about God are inseparably related to our personal adherence to him: ‘At the same time, and *inseparably*, it (faith) is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed.’ (150) We do not believe the various truths of our faith - the contents of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as it were - simply because the Church tells us to. The Church asks us to believe in a God who wants what is good for us. We see this in Jesus Christ, who only thought of our interests.

### **Our call**

The call that we receive from Jesus to love each other stems quite directly from his concern for us: ‘This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you.’ (*Jn* 15:12). We too are called to put the interest of others first; St Thomas Aquinas puts it in the classic definition of love: ‘to love is to will the good of another’.<sup>4</sup> Life is a series of opportunities to do good to others; nothing more, and nothing less. God calls us to a family life in which we are continually sacrificing our own interests for each other. This does not mean that individuals no longer find fulfilment, but that everyone gains by pulling together.

If our children see us as parents responding to such a call, then like Isaac they too will be able to see in their own lives that God is merciful; and they will believe.

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<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, St Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Primae Secundae Partis, 26, 4.

They need concrete experiences that generosity to others offers more than designer clothes and admiring glances. This means that we will need to take a good look at our family lives. Companionship in one's leisure time is hardly a sufficient basis for mutual self-sacrifice, as Aidan Nichols points out in *Christendom Awake*. We will need to see how work, child care, finances and so on can all support a mutual exchange of love within the family.

### **A pair of shoes**

Such an extended companionship within the family also gives us the space to point out to each other how God is at work. In this we can follow the example of the martyrs, who lived and died as witnesses. St Margaret Clitherow chose to suffer a gruesome death, by suffocation, to ensure her children were not forced to testify against her Catholic faith and perjure themselves. But she not only suffered martyrdom because she loved her family, she *also* used her death as an opportunity to witness to her children. St Margaret walked barefoot to her place of execution so that her daughter could be given her shoes, and follow in her footsteps. This is the witness of a Christian parent. It is no surprise that her daughter gave her life to God as a nun and that two of her sons became priests.

### **Towards the impossible**

Perhaps the examples of both Abraham and St Margaret seem a little beyond us. We are more likely to find ourselves shouting at our children rather than dying for them! Are we really expected to think of the interests of others when we ourselves can barely cope, in the face of accidents, illness, separation or conflict in the family? And what of teenage children who are simply not interested in anything to do with faith? Everyone will experience ways in which a life of sacrificial love, and thus any credible witness, seems impossible to achieve within their own family.

As we shall see throughout this booklet, we can only give ourselves to others as a response to God's intervention in our own lives. We need to experience in a truly profound way that God cares for us; not simply as an abstract belief, but in an utterly practical fashion like Isaac.

The rest of this booklet explores how, in response to God's love for us, we can emulate these heroes of faith in our families. How can our daily lives express an openness to the intervention of God, so that we can witness to our children? How does parental love influence whether our children believe? We will explore how the parent's own example can convey the centrality of love, as we look at the union between a man and a woman. Finally, the way in which a family interacts with society more widely is

critical, so we look at how our interactions with parish, school, community and the media affect our ability to put others first. If we walk in the path of love, and give witness to this, then with God's grace our children too will follow in our footsteps.

## FAITH-SHAPED DAILY LIFE

We look now at specific ways in which faith can shape our daily lives, teaching our children in the process what to value, and allowing them to experience for themselves the compelling power of love. Part of the challenge is even to conceive the possibilities, as the tendency is to live like everyone else around you.

We will need to build patterns of exchange amongst the family members, so that there are natural opportunities to put each other's needs first. This will involve relying on your own industry as a family to a significant extent, although each family will do this in its own way. We can forget how much of life is determined not on the spur of the moment but by these more hidden choices about how we live our lives. Sociologists have long recognised that our beliefs, habits and patterns of thinking stem in large part from the particular social and cultural setting in which we each live. The challenge is to shape this environment in the light of love.

### **Closed for business**

Employment is certainly a key influence on family life. Parents often find that employment takes priority over time with the children. The practical concerns of earning

money for the family and perhaps pursuing a career as well can easily dominate. If you are, though, to have scope for a life that goes much beyond companionship in your spare minutes, it may well be necessary for you to make a change and to carve out further time together. You may be able to work a flexible day, reduce your hours, work in part from home or find nearby employment so that you can cut your commuting time.

But why would you allow your career or your finances to suffer for the sake of a few extra hours with your family each week? Surely you can choose the good of contributing to a thriving economy or providing a service for other people, instead of the good of being with your children?

It is difficult to weigh up one good against another, but we need to remember that the duty to pass on faith to our children is fundamental to being a parent. During the marriage rite itself, we say 'I am' to the question: 'Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?' To do this we need to be ready to structure our lives in a way that makes it possible for us to be present to our children, so that they can see an example of self-denying love. And self-denial is exactly what we need in the face of the lure of a career or the expectations of our consumer society. Jesus asks us to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow him. Children thus present us with a

wonderful opportunity to deny ourselves in relation to our work. If you, say, refuse to relocate for the sake of your children, and miss out on a promotion as a result, then God has given you the grace to witness in a concrete fashion to your children that they matter more than your own prestige.

Louis Martin, the father of St Thérèse of Lisieux, refused to open his jewellery business on a Sunday, even though he could have made a great deal more money. Some of his clients suggested opening an extra entrance onto the shop, which especially-valued customers only could use on Sunday. But if he hadn't closed his business on Sunday he would have demonstrated to his daughters that money meant more than honouring the Lord's Day or time with them; and perhaps St Thérèse would never have become a Carmelite nun. Louis chose an eternal good, rather than simply pursuing the transitory things of this world. We too can demonstrate, like the heroes of faith from Hebrews 11, our hope in an unseen homeland.

### **Structuring work around love**

The Church has always recognised that taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience can make it easier to put others first. These vows structure your life around love; your own will, for instance, is laid aside, giving you greater capacity to be selfless. We need to find comparable ways for love to structure family life,

ordering our lives to a radical openness to choosing the greater good. We are looking beyond an occasional willingness to work a lighter week towards a readiness to reorder our entire pattern of work for the sake of others. In many families the wife will choose to work part-time or not at all while the child or children are young, but the husband equally needs to be ready to display an enduring detachment from the office.

We may also be able to choose the actual work that we do on the basis of how much scope there is to make personal exchanges with others, something that will be fostered by spending longer periods of time in one work environment or by taking on a career more directly focused on serving others. We can choose tasks our colleagues would rather not do, so that we become identified with Christ in his readiness to put others first. Do we take seriously the words of Christ: 'make your way to the lowest place and sit there' (*Lk 14:10*)? St Margaret Clitherow quite evidently was willing to take on the lowest tasks in managing both her household and the family butcher's shop - even clearing out the chamber pots!

### **Poverty and riches**

We are likely to be less prosperous if our work is affected by faith in this way. But life need not consist so completely in consuming clothes, shoes, hand-bags, home décor, foreign holidays, furniture, toys and gadgets

on an annual basis; or cosmetics, takeaways, magazines and petrol on a daily basis. We can make do with much less of these than our society regards as the norm. The next few times you want to buy something ask yourself what would happen if you didn't!

This approach will certainly be essential if we are to live within our means, but even in the midst of debt God can still provide. One mother of three young children sees it this way:

Cash - we simply cannot get our hands on it towards the end of each month. My youngest son goes to nursery. It's much easier if he can stay for lunch as well, but that costs £3.50 per day. I have to pay it each week, and not on the credit card. What a worry! I'm sure that I have less energy for our children. We shouldn't be in this position; but we have been unable to escape from it. At least there is a positive aspect: God often provides for us. I find some cash that I had earlier lost or someone returns a fiver, and our children know that God is looking after us.

It takes faith to see that it is God providing something for you even in difficult circumstances; but this is *everyone's* reality.

There is a connection, though, between austerity and depth of faith: 'Listen, my dear brothers: it was those who

were poor according to the world that God chose, to be rich in faith and to be the heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him' (*Jm* 2:5). The self-sufficiency of the rich can block any exchange with others. So why not give away a few prized possessions, to bring home the truth that life does not consist in what you have and to indicate your willingness to have God look after you? Anyone approaching life in this way will have opportunities galore to demonstrate to their children that faith comes before possessions ('Mum - why can't I have this when all of my friends do?' 'Well, ...!'). Our children will also have natural opportunities to witness to their friends as well, allowing them to pass on faith to others in their turn: 'The believer has received faith from others and should hand it on to others.' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 166)

Where can we find the readiness to choose a witness to our children, above career success and unnecessary consumption? God prompted Abraham to survey the nature of his promised inheritance: 'On your feet! Travel the length and breadth of the country, for I mean to give it to you.' (*Gn* 13:17) We too need to see what God's promises to us look like, perhaps by finding others who strive to live in this way or investigating what is possible in our own employment. When the Holy Spirit inspires us to act, we may then find the grace to respond, as we see that love rather than prestige leads to fulfilment.

### **Love across the board**

Other areas of daily life can also be structured in ways that promote love within the entire family, but we will only be willing to choose any of this if God makes it both desirable and possible. So we must also seek an encounter with God, as we will explore towards the end of this section.

The issue, for instance, with the care of young children is to discern how best to ensure they experience self-sacrificial care, so that they can copy this in their own lives. An institution, for instance, cannot usually display the same degree of love as a mother. Single parents face a particular challenge here as a two-parent family can divide the responsibilities, but in both cases the fundamental choices remain similar. Perhaps this will mean part-time work, a more modest career or a helping hand from grandparents and other relatives, if they are nearby. My mother, at any rate, waited until my younger brother was at school before training as a lawyer, and then started working part-time only when he was at secondary school. She feels that this approach helped give her, in an entirely natural fashion, the space to teach her children what to value.

How we spend our money also affects our ability to love others. The theologian John Milbank observes that people can forge bonds with each other through giving

and receiving, so that the economy becomes informed by generosity.<sup>5</sup> We may be able to buy things from local businesses where we know those involved, enabling us to retain a sense of an exchange of gifts, even though mediated by money. Fair trade items also retain this sense of exchange. Or we may simply be able to swap skills or resources with other families. Of course, it is easier to employ a professional or stop in at a superstore and purchase everything in one go - and we may well still do this at times - but this need not mean that we always ignore the other options. Even trying to set up an exchange with someone else can provide an occasion to witness to your children that love matters more than convenience.

We will also need to take care of our possessions in order to extend their useful life. St Benedict, certainly, was aware of the need to look after the possessions and property of the monastery, advising his monks to treat these like the sacred vessels of the altar.<sup>6</sup> We might even want to rediscover skills that our society is beginning to lose, whether in sewing, joinery or gift making. Now, creating gifts is something that all the family can participate in, however young! People frown on the use of such skills, in that money is expected to provide for a professional product

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<sup>5</sup> Milbank, J (1990) *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford.

<sup>6</sup> St Benedict, *The Rule of St Benedict*, Chapter 31.

instead, but where is the scope to witness to your children that some things in life cannot be purchased?

Leisure activity is closely related to this - do we prioritise the life of a consumer in the spare time that we have, or do we take the initiative ourselves? Some forms of leisure activity encourage a more passive stance towards life: television, films and computer games can all do this, and that is without analysing the actual content. There is a dynamism to love that we can lose sight of when we expect life to be centred around experiences that are provided for us. We can also consider how and when we take our holidays, and which events in life we choose to celebrate. Perhaps a pilgrimage would be more appropriate than lying in the sun or taking days off to celebrate the great feast days of our faith that fall during the week, rather than a second foreign holiday.

There are choices to be made in the way in which we as families care for others, whether sick, disabled or elderly. One mother certainly has seen how taking in her father-in-law provided endless scope for self-sacrifice:

At first he was fairly self-sufficient, but he soon needed the children to run little errands for him, and then simply to sit with him. My youngest son had the room above him. This son was the one who would hear his granddad fall out of bed in the middle of the night and then, without anyone else

knowing about it, get up to settle him back down. He would ask 'Why do you do this for me? And the response could only be - because we love you.

Endless inconvenience - or opportunities for love? We need to learn to look with the eyes of faith.

We can welcome guests into our homes on a regular basis, receiving them as if they are Christ, and we can seek to help people who live further away from us and in dire need, whether through campaigning, donations or, if possible, personal contact. A direct link with a specific orphanage, missionary priest or aid worker abroad is often more fulfilling and enduring than simply handing over money to a charity. And a whole gamut of needs arise before us each day, if only we have the eyes to see them, and the courage to meet them. The aim is to display a solidarity with those in need rather than a condescending charity that leaves us otherwise unchanged. We may well find that loving those who cannot return a favour helps to free us from an undue concern with our own needs. Faith allows us to see that what we receive in return far outweighs our gift (see *Lk* 6:37) - indeed, we ourselves encounter God.

Such an approach to life will mean that you need to call on the support of other families and your extended family. We thus see a society that is based more on households than on institutions or businesses, as Aidan

Nichols notes in *Christendom Awake*; and this in turn promotes a life built on mutual exchange rather than efficiency. If you look after an elderly relative at home then you will quite naturally build friendships with others around you. We will find ways to exchange things with other families, helping each other out. Love, after all, unites us with others.

### **Double your chances**

The role of faith, though, is still somewhat implicit in this approach. So we look now at how to incorporate religious practices into family life, opening ourselves more directly to an encounter with God. This is, of course, essential to passing on faith. Strommen and Hardel observe within a Lutheran context: ‘...religious practices in the home virtually double the probability of a congregation’s youth entering into the life and mission of Christ’s church.’<sup>7</sup>

We can draw on our Catholic traditions, shaping as they do our cultural identity as Catholics: setting Sunday apart by not shopping or by spending time with someone who is lonely. We can pay attention to the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter, and actually fast on Fridays. We need to capture our children’s imaginations, with regular occasions for short plays on religious

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<sup>7</sup> Strommen, M and Hardel, R (2000) *Passing on the Faith*, Saint Mary’s Press, Winona, Minnesota, p 98.

themes, recounting or embellishing Bible stories and speaking of our own experience of God. Children can learn to understand the truths of their faith through such informal activity, as well as through more formal instruction. Teaching our children about the faith is essential, supplementing what is on offer in schools; as we point out how life should centre on love and prepare our children to counter the arguments that they will surely meet from others.

If something is valuable then we need to speak of it as the occasion arises, when getting up, resting at home, out walking or going to bed (cf *Dt* 6:7). St Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that faith comes from what is heard (10:17). God blesses our words of witness and our willingness to stand out from the crowd, as the Old Testament prophets were keenly aware.

So when you see God providing for your family, even in a difficult situation, point it out to your children! One father of a large family has been able to see God at work in the face of possible homelessness, and thus witness to his children:

We lived with my mother until she had to sell the house: the sale went through more quickly than we had anticipated, leaving us quite bewildered. I was looking for work, trying to improve my qualifications, struggling against ill health, and my

wife was pregnant. After taking advice we applied to our local council, and were initially given a flat; then a house; and finally a four bedroom house, with a garden and a parking space!

At first I resented having to find a home; but I remembered how many times I had asked God to help us. Suddenly, in the midst of the crisis, I saw that God had heard my prayer for help and was housing us! Now I am able to recall this event, both for the sake of our children and also to encourage us in our continuing difficulties.

This means that the language we speak must enable this witness. Unfortunately our modern-day English is almost entirely secular: we are simply not comfortable using turns of phrase that invoke spiritual realities or the intervention of God. Irish Catholics have a real advantage here, as does anyone brought up in a traditionally Catholic nation. Certain sayings seem a little archaic, whether a customary blessing or a ‘Thanks be to God!’, but they express patterns of thought that stem from faith - such as thankfulness or regard for motherhood. We need to search out, and try out, phrases that give voice to our faith. If others are to hear you speaking of the wonders of God in their mother tongue, then the Holy Spirit will have to give *you* new powers of expression! (Ac 2:8)

### **Heartfelt tears**

Prayer also needs to punctuate our daily life, through night prayers with the children, reciting the Angelus at noon or saying the Rosary. Such practices within the family require a readiness to engage in the same activity. We cannot expect to live as autonomous individuals for the large majority of life and then suddenly come together for religious activity. A football match on television or a friend who wants to play can only too easily tear apart any such celebrations. Such family prayer can help us to realise how attached we are to our own little projects or activities, as we realise that we don't want to break off from them. It can also support a regular and sustained personal habit of prayer, enabling us to follow the example of St Monica's love for her son St Augustine, as we intercede for the conversion of our children, even year after year and with heartfelt tears.

Suffering, in particular, can lead to this deepening of prayer. Think of some difficulty that you have been through: perhaps someone has taken advantage of you or your marriage has broken down. God may well seem totally absent from this situation. How can his love possibly be in evidence? Perhaps, though, you have come to realise through it that there is a hole in the centre of your heart. The great mystics, such as St John of the Cross or St Teresa of Avila, teach us that we can only experience God's love if we appreciate our need for it.

This was certainly in evidence for Louis and Zélie Martin, the parents of St Thérèse of Lisieux, who buried both their sons. Their desire for a priest in the family was not fulfilled by God, but as their heartbreak increased so did their awareness that only God could provide what was needed. God did grant their desires as St Thérèse's willingness to make little sacrifices has led to many priestly vocations. A realisation that we are not self-sufficient is certainly hard to take, but it can open the door to prayer and to the recognition that only God can meet our needs.

### **Renewing society**

And yet there is something of a reluctance for families to incorporate religious practices into the home. Some of this may arise from the nature of the Christian faith. Family life is not built in strongly to the structure of our faith in quite the way it is with Judaism, where formal liturgical celebrations in the family, such as the Sabbath rituals and the Passover seder, are highlights of Jewish life. In some ways Christianity has relied more heavily on converting the wider culture and calling whole nations to conversion. A missionary thrust is present in Christianity that is not evident in Judaism, with religious orders providing schools, hospitals and nursing homes. However, when the wider society is no longer Christian, we can rely less on these other supports, and we instead

need to begin to renew the Christian basis for society through our families.

A communion of persons cannot be sustained through an emotional commitment to each other alone. We also need a human basis that gives shape to the daily exchange between the family members and to provide occasions to give witness to our faith. God's grace and human nature go together, so that our spiritual life is not something that we should detach from the rest of life.

## PARENTS AND CHILDREN

### Taking the initiative

**D**o you remember the birth of your first child. What was it like? Perhaps you stood in awe at the marvel God had given to you. The love of a mother or father starts with the gift of life, but it doesn't stop there. There is plenty to do afterwards, as any parent can testify! Our society, however, takes the view that the sooner this contribution scales down the better, a trend that is becoming increasingly evident with wrap-around schools from 8am-6pm, and all manner of activity and entertainment to serve as a baby-sitter in the remaining free time. But to take the initiative with your children and to spend time with them is not to brainwash them: it is to be a mother or a father.

This initiative needs to come in a whole host of ways, in teaching them to share their toys, choose their friends wisely, tell the truth or even just explore the woods rather than always play on the swings. This depends in significant part on actually being there with your children; hence the importance of our earlier discussion on daily life. For the purposes of this booklet, though, parents also need to initiate their children into the Church, and thus into a life of faith.

Faith is not received in some quasi-magical form; it comes to us in its fullness through the sacraments, and in particular for our children through those sacraments that initiate them into the Church: Baptism, the Eucharist (and especially First Holy Communion) and Confirmation. But we also need to remember that Baptism in the Early Church was preceded by a long period of formation, the catechumenate, in which the catechumens were only able to progress as evidence of conversion emerged. This formation led converts to understand their faith, to love the Scriptures, to be generous with their money, to pray each day, to witness to others and to love each other. The Church has long known that without appropriate preparation the sacraments can easily turn into hollow ritualism.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recognises that those who are baptised as infants need this formation after their baptism (1231). How we do this is another matter, but one of the most obvious ways is to provide this formation as preparation for both First Holy Communion and Confirmation. After all, these are sacraments of initiation, so why not help to ensure that your children actually receive a mature faith through them: before First Holy Communion teach your child the catechism, explore the great stories in the Bible and enable your child to take a daily period of personal prayer; and before Confirmation find concrete ways for

your child to witness to others, to take a more active role in the wider Christian community and to be generous with money and possessions. How can we not initiate our children into the life of the Church as fully as possible? It is at this point that religion becomes fascinating, drawing us in ever deeper.

We will still want our children to attend programmes within school or parish, but with the current crisis in the transmission of faith from one generation to the next we need to go far beyond these programmes, as the right and duty of parents to educate their children is both original and primary.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps in time the Church will develop programmes that do more fully initiate children into a life of faith or even develop rites attached to First Holy Communion and Confirmation that incorporate such formation.

### **Dialogue to bridge a four-year gap**

It is not enough, however, to just take the initiative. Children grow up - hard as some parents find it to believe! It has been said that readiness for independence comes two years after the adolescent claims, and two years before the parent will admit. Your relationship with your children can never be one way, with you leading and

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<sup>8</sup> Pope John Paul II clearly acknowledges this in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*.

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