

# THE ROLE OF A CHRISTIAN MOTHER

ANNA MELCHIOR



FAMILY MATTERS

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# **The Role of a Christian Mother**

by  
Anna Melchior

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## **Introduction**

Congratulations! You are a mother or about to become one. As a mother, you are or will be doing the most fundamental job there is: raising children. The work of a mother is extremely important, difficult and tiring, and profoundly rewarding. This little book aims to support you in your work as a mother.

Even experienced mothers want additional support from time to time because being a mother is quite like being a Christian in that we are always apprentices, never masters, of our vocation. It is helpful, therefore, frequently to remind ourselves of the principles of what we do - the profound motivation, the basic strategies, the long-term aims - principles that are easily lost sight of in the daily struggle to get this here thing done now.

In the following pages, I consider the enormous significance and challenges of mothering, suggest ground rules of action and interaction that can make mothering easier, and point out the many-layered relevance of the Christian faith to the work of a mother. I hope that reading this booklet will help you to experience the incredible joy that is the reward of being a mother.

## **Responsibilities**

The responsibilities of mothers are awesome. By loving your children, you enable your children to love themselves and to love others. By respecting your children and meeting their needs, you show your children that the world is a safe place to be. By providing a good example, discussing your goals and hopes with your children, and setting boundaries, you give your children values that will support and guide them throughout their lives. By encouraging your children to contribute to the on-going team effort that is the family, you teach your children to act responsibly. By sharing your faith with your children you help your children to believe and trust in God and to put their faith into practice. By loving your children, meeting their needs, sharing your values with them, giving them responsibilities they can handle, and teaching them about your faith, you help them to become well-adjusted, responsible adults capable of loving others and of a deep, sustaining faith. The effective communication of love, security, values, a sense of responsibility, and of faith depends on a bond based on unconditional love. This is why an institutional childcare setting, no matter how well run, cannot communicate these fundamentals to children anywhere near as effectively as mothers can. The work of mothers, therefore, is necessary to the functioning of our homes, our communities, our society, our economy, and to the future of the Church.

## Challenges

The challenges mothers confront are also awesome. A friend of ours expressed this succinctly: “They said it would be hard, but it was harder”.<sup>1</sup> As a mother, you give of yourself for up to twenty-four hours a day; you are permanently on call. You have to acquire diverse knowledge and apply it to the task at hand; being a mother can require you to learn about allergies one day, guinea pigs the next, and school policy on the third. You make small as well as big decisions almost constantly and generally quickly and independently and have to keep in mind the, at times, big implications of small decisions. You manage people in all their complexity, diverse situations, ever-changing logistical requirements, a budget, and a household: mothering is the management challenge par excellence because it requires the simultaneous management of disparate areas. As a mother, moreover, you need to remain flexible and persevere because being a mother is the one job from which you cannot walk away. There are no other jobs quite as challenging as being a mother because mothering challenges you on all levels - physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. At the same time, mothering is generally looked down upon in our society and considered a worthless occupation, easily

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<sup>1</sup> A mother of three by adoption.

replaced by professional childcare, ready meals, and computer games. And it is unpaid. Those who nonetheless opt to mother tend to find themselves isolated from the rest of society, outcasts from the prestige-seeking, money-driven mainstream. This makes being a mother even more challenging.

### **God is your support and guide**

It is just as well then that, as a Christian, you know that God is at your side. The Christian faith is a fantastic resource for mothers. Your faith helps you to recognise the importance of what you are doing. We venerate Mary, the mother of God, not because she was heroic, learned, wealthy, or powerful. We venerate her because she was a mother and, through her mothering, taught us about the demands and the blessings of a life lived for others. Your faith, moreover, is an excellent guide to mothering. You cannot do better than to consider how God loves and guides you and try to emulate His example in loving and guiding your own children. Good mothering is as simple, and as difficult, as that. Your faith, finally, offers support in times of trial. Faith deepens your love, focuses your vision, enriches your understanding, and teaches you to submit to the will of God which you know to be good. And it is from such rich soil that hope can grow. And hope is the driving force of mothering.

When you delve the depths of your faith as you confront the responsibilities and challenges of being a mother, you will find there sustenance, guidance, and hope. Your relationship to God helps you to love, to forgive, to persevere, and to hope. When you can love, forgive, persevere, and hope, you can build enduring relationships with others; you can share yourself with others, do your duty, and cope with difficulties. You can fulfil the responsibilities and meet the challenges of being a mother. When you think of your work as a mother as faith in action, your work is enriched by your faith and enriches your faith. Mothering helps you to grow as a Christian.

## **Loving your child**

The love that underpins your attitudes and actions towards your children is what, more than anything else, makes you a mother. It is central to your identity as a mother and central to your relationship with your children. It is also the foundation of all that you will ever be able to teach your children. But feeling love for your baby in the early days when you are overwhelmed and exhausted and the two of you may be effectively strangers can be difficult. And expressing your love to your growing children when time pressures, diverging values, and your children's occasionally unfathomable behaviour pull you apart, can also prove challenging. Before considering these issues, let us look at God's love for you to help us understand better the source and nature of a mother's love.

### **God's love for you**

God loves you like the perfect mother. He loves you unconditionally. He loves you when you succeed and when you struggle; He loves you when you are kind and when you are angry; He loves you when you rejoice and when you suffer. God's love is, moreover, transformative.

It is ‘an effective and operative love. [it] is a love which, far from presupposing in us any lovable-ness, actually produces that lovable-ness within us.’<sup>2</sup> God’s love lifts you up, as it were, out of your own ways and into His way; it helps you to grow in virtue. God’s love, then, is unconditional and it is enabling. God loves you even when you fail to be kind and wise and good. And God’s love enables you to become kind and wise and good.

Practising your faith can help you to experience God’s love. When you keep in mind God’s word as you go about your activities, when you devote time to prayer, read spiritual texts, attend Mass, seek out the sacrament of reconciliation, and give as well as receive love through countless acts of kindness, you can come to know and enjoy God’s love for you. You can come to feel yourself held by Him and guided by Him and experience the joy of being known and loved. And when you know yourself to be loved by Him as His child with an unconditional and enabling love, you can come to love yourself with an unconditional and enabling love. When you know yourself to be loved by Him as His child with an unconditional and enabling love, you can also come to love your children with an unconditional and enabling love.

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<sup>2</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., G. (1977) *The Three Ways of the Interior Life*, Tan Books, Rockford, Illinois, p 9.

Margaret Hebblethwaite, a Catholic mother and author, captures the link between God's love for us and our love for our children:

When we fail we need to turn to the one who has not failed, in whom hope and achievement are perfectly united, in whom motherly love has lived up to its promise.[...] We have already drunk deeply, more deeply than we know, of that divine love, and have our children drink of it through us. But it is not ours to give for ever, it does not originate in us. We must turn back, and drink again, like children, trust again, pray again, depend again. Then, strengthened and consoled by our mother, we can be a mother again to our little ones, letting maternity flow through us, not from us but from God.<sup>3</sup>

Like God's love for you, your unconditional love for your children enables your children to grow in holiness and happiness. Your unconditional love for your children communicates acceptance, respect, and concern to your children. This helps your children to experience their life as worthwhile and to develop self-confidence and trust in others. From this position of profound security, your children are enabled to engage with the world and to

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<sup>3</sup> Hebblethwaite, Margaret (1984) *Motherhood and God*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, p 70.

develop loving relationships - to pass on, in effect, the love they have received.

As you let God's love flow through you to hold and to guide your children, you yourself become changed. When you love your children unconditionally, you give of yourself without looking to your own advantage. And as you give of yourself to your children, you find that your children become a part of you. You are then at once diminished in finite external assets such as money and professional prestige as you pour of yourself - your time, your energy, your dreams, your ambitions - into these little beings, and infinitely enriched internally by these new lives and this new love.

### **Becoming a mother**

Motherhood comes as a shock to many women. As most women in the Western world have little to no experience of babies before having their own, they are unprepared for the challenges of young motherhood. Sleepless, exhausted, confined to the house, and isolated from friends and colleagues, they may wonder what they have brought upon themselves and feel not a little resentful towards their baby whose demanding presence is upsetting their world and, with their world, their sense of self. In addition, mothering a baby involves rapidly learning many new skills, such as bathing and breastfeeding the baby, as well as acquiring a vast amount

of new knowledge, such as that pertaining to a baby's dietary requirements and signs of illness in a baby. Learning these skills and acquiring this knowledge can be a nerve-wrecking, anxiety-ridden process as your baby's well-being hinges on your success. Most babies are very demanding, moreover, and all babies are entirely dependent. Mothering a baby therefore also involves, initially, at any rate, focusing entirely on the needs of your child. If you were used to having some time to yourself as well as time to engage in paid employment, this may be difficult. Mothering, finally, is a low status occupation in our society as it is unpaid and - wrongly - considered not to require much in the way of skills and knowledge. If you enjoyed professional status, then becoming a mother can seriously shake your identity. Here is how one mother described this experience:

There was a way in which having that first baby shook everything for me - the bits of me that weren't central started flying off in all directions, and then you're left with this question of what is there left in the middle and what am I really about.<sup>4</sup>

Note that this mother said that it was the bits not central to her identity that became lost to her when she became a mother. This point is important. The cliché

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Figes, Kate (1998) *Life after Birth*, Penguin Books, London, p 39.

about losing your identity when you become a mother is, it seems to me, a tired one and a false one. Far from losing your identity when you become a mother, becoming a mother is a chance to find out who you are when you are stripped of the trappings on which your identity superficially hinged. Once you are over the initial shock and exhaustion of new motherhood, there is a good chance that you will find plenty of opportunity to be yourself in and through your work as a mother. A mother I know with a love of photography takes photos of her two small children; another is an illustrator and has taught one of her children to draw and visits galleries with both her teenage children; an extremely funny mother has got a very funny child; I take our children on walking holidays and discuss environmental issues, theology, and washing-up methods with the older two. With a little imagination, you can integrate your whole personality as well as your interests into your mothering. A formerly high-powered PR executive discovered that being a mother allowed her ‘to unite all my life’s experience in what I’m doing right now... I can’t imagine another job where I can do that.’<sup>5</sup> Becoming a mother is, moreover, a chance to add depth and dimension to your identity as you slowly but surely become someone who is defined first and foremost by their love. Becoming a mother is a

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<sup>5</sup> *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, May/June 2007.

journey of self-discovery which is frightening indeed, but also tremendously rewarding. The bestselling author Erica Jong writes about motherhood:

Its demands are so compelling, so clearly important, and also so profoundly satisfying. ...You give up yourself, and finally you don't even mind. You become your child's guide to life at the expense of that swollen ego you thought so immutable. I wouldn't have missed this for anything. It humbled my ego and stretched my soul. It awakened me to eternity. It made me know my own humanity, my own mortality, my own limits. It gave me whatever crumbs of wisdom I possess today.<sup>6</sup>

Having that first baby is a major life change. It helps to decide deliberately to take this time apart and to live it in the moment, without plans and preconceptions crowding between you and your baby. The period after the birth is a period of transition for you; your body as well as your heart, mind, and spirit are undergoing a process of reconfiguration.<sup>7</sup> Your sense of self changes as you gradually become a mother to your baby. Let your baby be your guide in this process. As you are available, attentive, and responsive to your baby, you find that you gradually

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<sup>6</sup> Erica Jong in *Fear of Fifty*, quoted in Exley, Helen (1998), *Thoughts on Being a Mother*, Exley Publications, New York.

<sup>7</sup> A good book to guide you through this period is Stern, Daniel N. (1998), *The Birth of a Mother*, Bloomsbury, London.

ease into your new identity as a mother while also laying the foundation of your relationship with your child and your child's life.<sup>8</sup> This time in your life cannot be subjected to the usual pressures of the outside world, pressures that demand routine, control, efficiency, immaculate appearance, measurable achievement, and recognisable success. Breastfeeding is a particularly striking illustration of this point. Breastfeeding can be difficult, awkward, and utterly unglamorous and its success, measured in amounts drunk, impossible to ascertain. And yet - given time - breastfeeding can become a wonderful and hugely beneficial experience for both you and your child.<sup>9</sup> The standards of the world of work are irrelevant to the mother-baby relationship which is about intimacy, getting to know each other, and, above all, about love.

Get as much help as you can to start with so that you have guidance in looking after your baby as well as people around to look after you. You may want to draw up a rota for your friends and relatives prior to the birth of your baby and get them to commit to bringing meals round, doing some shopping and cleaning, and simply sitting with you and holding the baby during the first few weeks after the birth. Ideally, your husband or a close friend or relative can take time off work and be there for you and the baby in the days

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<sup>8</sup> Adopting a child of any age requires a process of adjustment similar to the one described in this paragraph.

<sup>9</sup> For help with breastfeeding, see *laleche.org.uk*.

after the birth. It would also be helpful if you could get in touch with one or two experienced mothers while you are still pregnant who could then give you advice as well as assistance after the birth of your first-born. Such a system of mothers' mentors, if it became as common as ante-natal classes and were funded by the government, could contribute significantly to the well-being of mothers, babies, and families by helping to give them a good start.

Given time and support, you will learn the skills and acquire the knowledge needed to mother your baby. Given time and support, you will also come to love your baby. As you get to know your baby, looking after your baby becomes easier because you are able to interpret more accurately your baby's cries and expressions and to respond more effectively. And as looking after your baby becomes easier, you come to enjoy your baby more. And as you come to enjoy your baby more, you fall in love with your baby. As your love for your baby grows, so does your enjoyment of your baby. This is how one mother recalls falling in love with her baby:

I had discovered true love. The love which repays slavery and exhaustion with a brief smile. But what a smile! It was more than enough. My present prostration was somehow sweeter than all the pleasure of my past life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sue Limb in *Love Forty*, quoted in Exley, Helen (1998), *Thoughts on Being a Mother*, Exley Publications, New York.

By doing what is best for your baby, then, you are helping yourself to enjoy being a mother. By meeting the demands of love, you come to enjoy the rewards of love. In my book *Mothering*, I refer to this as ‘the lovely loop’<sup>11</sup> - and lovely it is indeed when what is virtuous is also pleasurable!

### **Expressing your love for your child**

Once you have fallen in love with your baby, expressing your love for your baby will probably come easily. You want to hold your baby and cuddle your baby, snuggle up to your baby, look at your baby, listen to your baby, talk and sing to your baby, and play with your baby. All these activities communicate your love to your baby provided they are geared to your baby’s personality and needs. A disregard for your baby’s personality and needs in your interaction with your baby, for example through overstimulation, would confuse and irritate your baby. It is absolutely vital, therefore, that you take the time to get to know your baby. By taking that time you can help your baby to grow up healthy and happy as babies who enjoy plenty of loving, sympathetic contact with their mothers develop better physically, emotionally, and mentally<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Melchior, Anna (2007) *Mothering - a spiritual and practical approach*, St Pauls, London, p 81.

<sup>12</sup> The more babies are spoken to - by a person, not by a tape or the radio - for instance, the more intelligent they will become, according to research cited in *The Herald Tribune*, 18th April 1997.

Letting your baby sleep in your bed with you and carrying your baby on your back can help your baby to feel loved and secure and to gain weight more quickly. Sharing your bed with your baby is safe for your baby unless you or your husband are drunk, drugged, smokers, or excessively tired. Do make sure, of course, that your baby's head is not covered by a blanket or duvet. When you need to go out or do jobs around the house, putting your baby into a sling enables you to keep your baby close by - smelling your familiar smell and feeling your familiar movements - while you get on with other things. I found that both practices make mothering a baby a great deal easier: keeping our babies in our bed at night ensured that I got the sleep I needed and carrying our babies on my back from about three months<sup>13</sup> enabled me to engage with the rest of the world - by cuddling an older child, cooking, writing, shopping, travelling, even teaching - while looking after our babies.

Do share your baby with your husband, older children, parents and parents-in-law and close friends! Sharing your baby with others who also love your baby can give you precious time to recharge either by resting or by doing what you enjoy doing without your baby. Provided you are your baby's main carer, the additional stimulation provided by other carers is beneficial and enjoyable for

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<sup>13</sup> in the *Wilkinet Baby Carrier*.

your baby. It is, moreover, wise to give other family members and close friends the time and opportunity to develop their own relationships with your baby because, by and by, you want your child to become part of a network of loving relationships that will help to strengthen and guide your child and provide a sympathetic, child-friendly community for you both.

As your children grow up, love continues to require time to grow as well as time to show. After the shock of early motherhood has subsided, spending time with your children remains the essence of the lovely loop, the virtuous spiral in which you continually get to know your children, fall in love with your children, express your love for your children and discover that, as you express your love for your children, your love for them increases. Spending time with your children allows you to stay in touch with who your children are and are becoming and to respond to your children's needs and concerns as they arise. Spending time with your children also feeds them with the knowledge of being loved and of being part of a family that has particular values and traditions, interests and tastes. Spending time with your children gives your children a sense of belonging, which is the basis of healthy growth.

An aside of a political nature is in order here. Rather than pressurising mothers back to full-time work as soon as possible after giving birth and putting the burden for

children's development on schools (which can only do too little, too late), governments could choose to afford mothers - and fathers! - more time with their children by giving them extended and flexible parental leave, tax breaks, part-time jobs, and flexible working hours as well as advice and support. Contrary to the impression given by current political propaganda, incidentally, most mothers *want* to be able to spend more time with their children.<sup>14</sup> With their mothers and fathers spending more time with them at home, children would have a chance to become grounded in their family culture and to feel loved and appreciated. Without that chance, children can easily grow up disoriented, a ready target for existential angst and its many pseudo cures such as drugs, alcohol, and casual sex.

Small children enjoy having their mother available, perhaps for half an hour to an hour a day to join in their games. I used to sit on the floor in the children's room for a while most afternoons when our older two were little. I would cut up and distribute apples and oranges, and wait for our children to engage me, or not, in their imaginative

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<sup>14</sup> According to figures cited in a UK government document entitled *Choice for Parents: The Best Start for Children*, published by the Treasury in December 2004, 63% of British mothers in employment would like to work fewer hours and nearly half of all working mothers (44%) would prefer to give up work altogether to stay at home with their children if they could afford to do so. See also the book by the sociologist Catherine Hakim (2000) *Work-Lifestyle Choices in 21st Century: Preference Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

play. This gave me a chance to observe their fascinating imagination at work and, because I was there for them - available, attentive, and responsive - it showed our children that I loved them. Now that we have four children and they and I are increasingly busy, our evening meals ensure that we all come together at least once a day. Eating together - at a table, without a television or radio running - is a good way of developing family life. It provides the opportunity to keep in touch with each other through conversation, to learn to be considerate by listening and observing decent table manners, and to enjoy home-cooked food. At present, only fifty per cent of UK families eat together three or more times a week.<sup>15</sup> That's sad.

For school children of all ages, a welcoming kitchen is likely to be a great attraction. There they can sit and rest and draw or do homework, get a drink and a snack, be near their mother and assist her as she prepares the evening meal or washes up, and perhaps, ever so casually, tell her about the day's events and ask her for help or advice. Doing jobs together with your children is generally an effective way of spending time together with your children while showing them that you appreciate them and their efforts. Walking places with your children is also a pleasant way of being together. Reading to your children at bedtime is another mutually beneficial way of

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<sup>15</sup> See *raisingkids.co.uk* for more information.

sharing time as well as an interest which need not be reserved only for small children.

The most important way of expressing your love to your children of any age is to listen to them. When you listen to your children, you show them that you are interested in them and in what they have to say and that you care for them and their well-being. This knowledge gives your children a profound sense of security and self-confidence which, in turn, enables them to relate to others. When listening to your children, it is helpful to maintain eye contact at the same level and occasionally to reflect back your children's statements so that they know you are listening. Avoid jumping in with your own judgments and reactions. Instead, show your children that you accept them and their thoughts and feelings. This allows your children to reach their own conclusions and find their own solutions, though they may need your help in thinking constructively about a situation.

Praying together as a family in the evenings, finally, gives you all a chance to share with each other your gratitude, regrets, hopes, and worries as you reflect together on the day and anticipate the next. Praying together allows you and your children to remind yourselves of the good in your lives, such as the fine weather and others' kind deeds, and to give thanks to God. Praying together allows you and your children to acknowledge wrong-doing, such as hitting and

intentionally annoying others, and become reconciled again to God and to each other. And praying together allows you and your children to express your concerns, about school or a relative's health, perhaps, and to entrust them to His loving will. Held, then, by Him, you are better equipped to hold each other lovingly through the daily trials and triumphs of family life.

## **Guiding your child**

When you love your child, you want what is best for your child. And as you know that what is best for your child does not simply come about without any effort on you and your child's part, you try and guide your child towards what is good. Guiding your child is mainly a matter of communicating your values to your child by providing good example and setting boundaries. Love is not only the motive but also the mainstay of this process of guiding your child. 'Only if our children know that we love them, will they be inclined to pay attention to, ponder, and respond positively to our attempts to guide them.'<sup>16</sup> When you are motivated by love and express your love to your child and are ready as well as able to let love overcome resentment or disappointment and to forgive, then your efforts to guide your child will bear fruit.

### **Providing a good example**

What you do and how you do it and what you talk about and how you talk about it reflect your attitudes to your children, to other people, and to the wider world. Based

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<sup>16</sup> Melchior, Anna (2007) *Mothering - a spiritual and practical approach*, St Pauls, London, p 109.

in large part on the attitudes communicated through your actions and words, your children devise their own value systems. Those value systems or moral frameworks inform your children's understanding of themselves and of society and therefore their behaviour. So, what you do and say matters, a lot.

At a practical level, you can teach your children about consideration for others and about the value of food and much else besides simply by engaging them in your activities around the house. As your children pick up the skills it takes to run a household, they also pick up the values expressed in your daily round of chores. Just think of everything your work in the home says about you! When you put away your shoes and coat, it tells your children that you value tidiness. When you clean the bathroom, it tells your children that you value cleanliness. When you spend time cooking, it tells your children that you value fresh food. When you keep left-overs and make sure that all the food you buy is consumed rather than binned, it tells your children that you avoid waste.<sup>17</sup> When you adhere to the LOAF principles when shopping for food and buy food that is **l**ocally produced, **o**rganically grown, **a**nimal friendly, and **f**airly traded,<sup>18</sup> your children

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<sup>17</sup> In the UK, one third of all food bought ends up in the bin. See *lovefoodhatewaste.com* for ideas and advice on how to stop this waste.

<sup>18</sup> See the Christian Ecology Link, *christian-ecology.org.uk*; and have a look at CAFOD's *livesimply* challenge.

learn to value the local economy, the environment, animal welfare, and the quality of the lives of the people producing your food. When you avoid packaging whenever possible, recycle rubbish, switch off lights that are not needed, use water sparingly, and walk and cycle (etc, etc, etc), your children, too, will end up with good habits that will help them as well as others. And if you give your children a chance to join in the work as well as in the decision-making processes involved in the work and get your husband in on the act, as well, these habits will help to shape your children's values.

In addition to your work around the house, your children also observe how you run your own life. Do you take time to exercise? Do you meet up with friends and relations? Are you hospitable? Generous? Do you take an interest in community events, in politics, sports, the theatre, music, art? Do you attend Mass at least once a week? Do you gladly do favours for others? Are you generally punctual? What books do you read? What television programmes do you watch? On what do you spend your money? How do you cope with illness? Everything you do expresses your values. And your children, clever and observant as children are, learn from your example not only what to do but also what to think and even what to feel. Research indicates that our own example above all else determines whether or not our children will have a well developed faith, for

instance.<sup>19</sup> God willing, we will not have to follow in the footsteps of St Margaret Clitherow, wife, mother, convert and martyr who set up a school for Catholic children, harboured priests in her home, and was executed in the reign of Elizabeth I, but our own devotion to the sacraments, commitment to the teachings of the Church, and daily little sacrifices can still teach our children most powerfully that our faith is profoundly worthwhile.

You communicate your values to your children not only through what you do but also through what you say and don't say. What stories do you tell your children? What questions do you ask them? Do you listen to them? How do you respond to their questions? Do you swear? Do you gossip? Do you complain a lot? Do you pass judgment? Do you discuss important decisions as a family? Do you say grace before meals? Do you talk with your children about God? You teach your children about respecting others, for example, primarily by respecting them. If you take the time to listen to your children, your children learn about the art of listening to others and they learn about respecting the thoughts and feelings of others. And this will help to make your children not only more secure and kinder individuals but also individuals genuinely capable of learning from others.

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<sup>19</sup> cf. Strommel, Merton and Hardel, Richard (2002) *Passing on the Faith*, Saint Mary's Press.

A great advantage of teaching your children by providing good example is that your children can pick up as much or as little from your actions and words as they are prepared to understand. Children develop at different rates in different respects and have different personalities. While one child may want to join in an activity you are engaged in - say, repairing your bicycle - and learn all about it, for instance, another will barely notice what you are doing. Similarly, one child may tune in to a conversation her parents are having about a cousin's baptism, for example, and ask questions about it, while another continues to focus on her game as the conversation is carried on in the background. As long as you provide your children with plenty of opportunities to join in, listen in, and ask questions, and leave it up to your children to respond to these opportunities, you will teach your children about the world and their place in it through real, hands-on experience at a pace that matches and appropriately stretches their abilities and interests.

Guiding your children by providing good example obviously requires that you spend time with your children. A few words about the distinction between so-called quality and quantity time, or, as Frank Furedi, author of *Paranoid Parenting* puts it, between 'engaged' and 'accessible' time are necessary here. While time spent engaging directly with your children is certainly very important, we underestimate the importance of merely

accessible time spent with our children at their peril. A child's upbringing is to a large extent shaped by time spent with a parent who is present and available but not focusing on the child. It is only when children are integrated to some extent in the life of adults that they can learn from those adults and about that life and that you can effectively pass on your values to your children. Children learn a great deal by observing their parents' at work in the house, interacting with each other as well as with other adults, and pursuing their own interests. By spending time with your children as you cook, read a book, discuss a job with the builder, talk with your friends, listen to music, mend a shirt, dig in the vegetable plot, prepare for a feast day, and so forth, you allow your children to learn about the world, the work, the manners, and the values of adults. Your children also learn that they cannot always expect to be the focus of their parents' attention whenever their parents are around. These lessons prepare them in many ways better for adult life than regular thirty-minute sessions of quality time.

With children increasingly farmed out to all-day nurseries and breakfast and after-school clubs as well as holiday schemes, children decreasingly have the chance to learn from their parents' example. Nursery and school teachers cannot replace parents in providing good example because children do not witness their teachers in a great variety of situations and engaged in a great variety

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