



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



HANDING ON THE FAITH

by Father Dominic Lenk, OSB

[Father Dominic's article complements that of Father Michael that precedes it. He emphasizes that the education of their children is primarily the right and duty of parents, and goes on to show how teachers can cooperate with parents, and vice versa. Ed.]

“But Jesus said, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’ And he laid his hands on them . . .”¹

Handing on the faith to the young is no easy task. While on the one hand it is necessary to hand on the teachings of the Church so that the young have a clear understanding of what we believe and practice, on the other hand there is the danger of hindering them in their honest search for God by making religion a burden rather than a life-giving gift.

It is also important to remember that youths are at various stages of faith development. Some have a deep abiding faith that comes from their heart. Some hold onto clear, precise teachings and practices, yet are troubled when others do not share their sincere devotion to a particular ritual. Others, while not denying the existence of God, question Church authority or why something is done (or not done) a certain way.

The same can be said for adults. The search for God is a lifelong process that leads each of us on differing paths headed toward the same goal. And while we are each on different stages of our faith journey, all of us are called to witness to the faith and hand it on to the young. It is by our witness that the young gain the clearest picture of what the Catholic faith is all about.

Teachers of theology can stand in the front of a classroom from now until the *parousia* reading from the Bible and the Catechism so at least God's word will have entered the mind of each student. But if those teachers do not live as if they believe the truth of what their teaching, then God's word will not have easy entry into the heart of each student. Invariably a student will ask, “If what you say is true, then why doesn't so-and-so (another adult) live that way too?” There is no answer to this question since only God can read man's heart.

Yet, classroom teachers are neither the primary nor the sole instructors in the faith for children. This task is the right and duty of parents. Throughout the baptismal liturgy, reference is made to the parents' responsibility to hand on the faith in word and example. The liturgy opens with the priest instructing the parents to teach their child by their example, “You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor.”²

Prior to the baptism itself when the parents and godparents profess the faith in the name of the child, they are again reminded of their duty to hand on the faith to their child, this time by their words, “On your part, you must make it your constant care to bring him

¹ M 19:13-15a, RSV.

² *Rite of Baptism for Children*, English Translation approved by the National Conference for Catholic Bishops and confirmed by the Apostolic See, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1985, p. 39.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



up in the practice of the faith. See that the divine life which God gives him is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in his heart.”³

Each of these two texts emphasizes the importance of the teaching of the faith by word or example. The liturgy of baptism then concludes with a blessing that speaks again of teaching the faith by word and example. Though directed to the father of the child, this blessing speaks to the shared role of handing on the faith by both the father and the mother. “God is the giver of all life, human and divine. May he bless the father of this child. He and his wife will be the first teachers of their child in the ways of faith. May they also be the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do, in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁴ Just listen to anyone reminisce about his parents. While they may recall what their parents said, they will most willingly share stories about what their parents did.

Indeed, it is clear that young people learn by the example of their elders. Sometimes they learn better by example than from the words of their elders. For over fifty years, a poem has been widely circulated which makes this same point. Dr. Dorothy Law Nolte composed “Children Learn What They Live” to emphasize just that. Some parents wonder where their child may have learned a certain behavior or attitude. By looking in the mirror they may just discover from where some of their child’s attitudes and values have come.

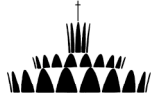
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.
If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.
If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.
If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.
If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.
If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.
If children live with fairness, they learn justice.
If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.⁵

Notice that Dr. Nolte uses the phrase “live with” rather than “are taught.” It is in living with an attitude that one begins to take on that attitude. The same can be said in regard to faith and religion. By living the faith with their elders, children come to learn certain habits and behaviors.

³ Ibid., p.49.

⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

⁵ Dorothy Law Nolte, 1954 <http://www.EmpowermentResources.com/>, posted April 17, 1997



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



If the parents' practice of the faith extends beyond attending Mass to permeating every aspect of their life, then most likely their children will also practice their faith with the same fervor. If children live with the regular practice of such things as grace before meals, the fostering of devotions to Mary and the Saints, and attending religious services other than Mass (e.g., Benediction), then they learn that faith is an integral part of their lives. This, however, will be true only if children experience faith and religion as a natural part of their lives and not as a burden forced on them out of some sense of sin or guilt.

At the other extreme, if the parents' practice of the faith is limited to Mass at Christmas and Easter or even just attending an occasional wedding or funeral Mass, then the children will most likely approach their faith in the same limited way. They will not possess a deep understanding of their faith, and they may not even give it much thought until they come face-to-face with a personal crisis that prompts them to call on God for help.

Many young adults who have grown up with little or no practice of the faith often come face-to-face with the question of how to approach their faith when they find that they cannot have a church wedding simply because it's what everybody expects. Hopefully, their pastor will gently explain that a wedding in church is a sign of the life of faith which the couple values and will share as husband and wife.

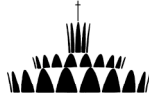
Yet, as in all aspects of life, regardless of how the parents live their faith, some children will do the opposite. Some will rebel and either drop their practice of the faith in a seeming search for God's relevance in their lives or even reject Him entirely. It is during these times of spiritual crisis that parents should show their support of their children by gently encouraging them to return to the faith and by sharing God's love with them. Trying to pressure the child to return to the faith will only widen the divide between the child and the church, and perhaps between the child and the parents also.

While it may not be termed rebellion, a child who increases his participation in the faith because he truly hungers for a closer relationship with God, may do so because he has not had the experience of an active faith life from his parents. In some cases parents have returned to a more active faith life due to the example of their children.

Parents, however, cannot pass on the faith by themselves. Families do not live in a vacuum cut off from the rest of society. There are many forces in the world today that counter the life of faith that Our Lord has called us to live. With the support of teachers, the passing on of the faith becomes more a labor of love rather than a struggle of wills.

It must be said that this support between parents and teachers has to be mutual. Though parents and teachers should always be in dialogue concerning the education of children, when it comes to matters of faith they are not just speaking about an academic exercise. Religion is a way of life. Our Lord himself said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life". Parents and teachers need to live as if they believe this. Children need to know this so that they can believe and live it as well.

In the classroom, regardless of whether the child has had a thorough grounding in the faith or if all they know is that they have been baptized, all children will pose a variety of questions concerning Catholicism and its relationship to them. These questions range from the purely ridiculous to those that provoke serious thought and reflection. What follows are actual questions raised in Theology classes:



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



What is Heaven (or Purgatory or Hell) like?
Is it a sin to do this-or-that?
Why is this-or-that a sin?
What if you're being held hostage and this guy threatens to kill you or your family if you don't renounce your faith—are you going to hell if you say what he tells you to say?
Can you be sent to Hell from Purgatory?
What if a super race of intelligent dogs were discovered living beneath the surface of the earth (or if aliens came from another planet) which had their own religion, would we have to evangelize them about Christianity?
If you are a soldier, is it a sin to kill someone in battle?
Why are priests celibate?
Why must we confess our sins to a priest?
Why do we have to go to Church on Sunday if we go to the School Mass on Friday?
Why do we eat fish on Fridays during Lent?

When one of these or any questions like them is posed in the classroom, the teacher has to make a choice. He can either brush it off and tell the student that he doesn't have time for such nonsense, or reply with the valid but unsatisfying “because the Church says so”, or use the question as an opportunity to explore some aspect of the faith that is perhaps the real underlying impetus for the question.

If the teacher chooses either of the first two options, then the student may feel frustrated and either disengages from learning about the faith or tries to see how outlandish he can make his questions. This sometimes results in students seeing if they can outdo each other in a game of one-upmanship through off-the-wall questions. By choosing the third option, the teacher has taken what could very well have been a time-wasting question as in the case of “Why do we eat fish on Fridays?” and turned it into a discussion of the meaning and place of sacrifice in our lives.

By their example and how they teach their religion classes, teachers have the ability to draw students closer to God or to have students push away from God. Teachers do not always know until many years later the effect that their teaching had on particular students. Even so, teachers should ask themselves this question, “How did I let my students encounter God today?”

In the Gospels, Jesus tells several parables which recount our common search for God. Two in particular could be seen from the viewpoint of the young. In looking at these parables, all of us (not just parents and teachers) should ask ourselves how we help or hinder the young in their search for God.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”⁶

⁶ M 13:44-45, RSV.