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Passing on the Faith (II)

Second part of an article on passing on the faith within the family.

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When striving to bring up children in the faith, “one cannot separate the seed of doctrine from the seed of piety.” [1] Knowledge needs to be accompanied by virtue, the intellect by the affections. In this area more than in any other, parents and educators must be vigilant in order to ensure children’s harmonious

spiritual growth. A few practices of piety coated over with a thin veneer of doctrine is not good enough, nor is a knowledge of doctrine that fails to strengthen the conviction that we must give God the worship owed him and set aside time for prayer, living the demands of the Christian message to the full and doing apostolate. Doctrine has to give rise to specific resolutions lived out in daily life, with a real commitment to love Christ and those around us.

A crucial part of educating in the faith is the living example and witness of parents who pray with their children (morning and evening prayers, grace at meals), who give due importance to the place of faith in the life of the home (attending Mass during the holidays, choosing holiday destinations judiciously), who teach children in a natural way to spread their love for Jesus to others. Parents will thus “penetrate

the innermost depths of their children's hearts and leave an imprint that future events will not be able to wipe out." [2]

Parents need to dedicate time to their children. "Time is life," [3] and the life of Christ present in the soul is the best gift parents can give. This may involve going for walks with them, organizing outings, talking with them about their little worries and conflicts. In striving to pass on the faith, the key thing is to be there for them and to pray for them; and if as a parent one has made a mistake, to ask their forgiveness. It is also important that children experience forgiveness by their parents, which will strengthen in them the certainty that their love for them is unconditional.

Occupation: parent

Benedict XVI reminds us that "children stand in need of God from

an early age; they have the ability to perceive his greatness, and grasp the value of prayer and of ritual, and sense the difference between good and evil. May you be good guides, accompanying them in the faith, in the knowledge of God, in friendship with God, and in knowledge of the difference between good and evil. Accompany them in the faith from their most tender age.” [4]

Helping children to attain unity between what they believe and how they live is a challenge that cannot be met with mere improvisation, but requires careful planning and forethought — a "professional mentality," as it were. The message of salvation affects the whole person and needs to take root in both the head and the heart of the one who receives it. Its recipients are the people we love the most, and at stake is our children's friendship with Christ, a goal that deserves our most

diligent efforts. God is counting on our effort to make his teachings accessible to our children, in order to grant them his grace and take up his abode in their souls. Therefore the way we communicate it is not something added on or secondary to the endeavour to pass on the faith, but rather is at the very heart of its internal dynamics.

To be a good doctor, it is not enough to just sit around and wait for patients to show up at the clinic. One needs to study, read, reflect, ask questions, do research, attend conferences. The same is true with parenting: parents need to devote time to learning how to improve in their educational commitments. In family life, we need both theoretical and practical knowledge, and above all the will to put it into practice. It may not be easy, but we can't deceive ourselves by using other responsibilities as an excuse: we

have to find a few minutes every day, or a few hours during holiday periods, for upgrading our parenting skills.

There is no lack of resources for doing so: well-oriented books, videos and websites are readily available with many good ideas on how to be a better parent. Especially helpful are family orientation courses, which transmit not just knowledge or techniques but abundant real-life experience of bringing up children and improving in one's personal, marital and family life. A clearer knowledge of the characteristics proper to each age, as well as the kind of environment that children their age are exposed to, can be very helpful here. Ultimately it all comes down to knowing one's children better, which enables parents to bring them up in a more thoughtful and responsible way.

Showing the beauty of the faith

Helping children to interiorize the faith requires showing them the beauty of living it. Parents and educators certainly need to set forth goals, but in doing so they also need to show children the beauty of virtue and of a truly Christian life. They should open up horizons, not just lay down laws and prohibitions. Otherwise, we might give the impression that the faith is a hard and cold set of rigid rules that are a hindrance rather than a help, or a list of sins and obligations. Then children could easily end up seeing “only the rough part of the road, without keeping in mind Jesus’ promise: ‘My yoke is sweet.’” [5] On the contrary, we have to get across to them the reality that our Lord’s commandments give us strength to reach a fuller human development. The commandments aren’t negative prohibitions, but rather specific ways

to foster life, trust and peace in one's family and social relationships. We are being asked to imitate Jesus, following the way of the beatitudes.

Consequently, it would be a mistake to regularly associate supernatural motives with doing unpleasant jobs or carrying out burdensome obligations. It is not always helpful, for instance, to ask children to finish their soup so as to offer our Lord a sacrifice. According to their age and level of piety, this approach may be appropriate, but we should also try to provide other reasons. God cannot be seen as merely the "enemy" of caprice; rather children should be helped to overcome their whims, so that they can lead a happy life, detached from material goods and guided by love for God and neighbor.

A Christian family passes on the beauty of faith and love for Christ most effectively when its members

live in harmony with one another out of charity, taking things with a smile and forgetting their own petty concerns in order to care for the others. “They need to forget about the insignificant little frictions that selfishness can magnify out of all proportion, and put a lot of love into the small acts of service that family life requires.” [6]

A life guided by self-forgetfulness is an ideal that is very attractive for a young person. We educators may sometimes not fully believe this ourselves, perhaps because we still have a long way to go in this area. The secret lies in tying formative goals to reasons for achieving them that children can understand and appreciate: in order to help their friends, to be useful or courageous.... Each child has his or her own concerns, which we must know how to build on when explaining why they should be chaste, temperate,

hard-working, detached from material goods, careful when using the Internet and not spending hours playing video games.

The Christian message will then be perceived in all its inherent beauty and rationality. Children will discover God not just as an “instrument” their parents use to get things done around the home, but as their Father in heaven who loves them madly and whom they too must love and adore, the Creator of the universe, to whom we owe our very existence, the good Master, the Friend who never lets us down and whom we cannot let down.

Helping them find their own path

Above all, bringing children up in the faith means teaching them to make their whole life into an act of worship of God. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, “without the Creator, the creature would

disappear.” [7] In worship and adoration we find the true foundation of personal maturity: “If people refuse to adore God, they will end up adoring themselves in various ways, as the history of mankind has shown: power, pleasure, riches, science, beauty.” [8] Fostering an attitude of worship requires that children meet Jesus face to face, even at a very early age, helping them to talk to him personally. Praying with children can mean something as simple as telling them about Jesus and his friends, or taking advantage of some daily event to get them to imagine themselves in a Gospel scene.

Fostering piety in children comes down to helping them to put their heart in Jesus, to speak to him about the good and bad things that happen to them each day; it means teaching them to listen to the voice of their conscience through which God

reveals his will and to try to put it into practice. Children acquire these habits almost by osmosis, when seeing how their parents speak to our Lord and strive to make him present in their daily lives. Indeed, faith refers first and foremost not to a list of duties or a catechism text that has to be memorized, but to a Person in whom we believe wholeheartedly because we trust him. If we want to convince them that the Life of one Person has changed mankind's whole existence, ennobling all our human faculties, it is only natural that children should first see clearly that our own life has been transformed by Christ. Being good transmitters of faith in Christ means showing through our own life our adhesion to his Person. [9] Being a good parent means above all being a parent who is good, who struggles to be holy. Children quickly notice this, and will admire their parents' effort and try to emulate them.

Good parents want their children to achieve excellence and to be happy in all areas of life: professional, cultural, emotional.... It is only natural, therefore, that they don't want them to be content with spiritual mediocrity. God's plan for each person is something marvellous and sacred. The greatest service we can render to someone, especially to one's children, is to give them the support they need to respond fully to their Christian vocation and discover what God wants of them. This is not something secondary that would lead to a bit more happiness, but rather affects the outcome of one's entire life.

Discovering the specific parameters of one's personal call to holiness means finding *a white stone, a stone engraved with a new name that no one knows except him who receives it* .
[10] It means finding the truth about oneself which gives meaning to one's

whole existence. Each one's happiness and that of many other people depends on one's generous response to what God is asking.

The children's vocation, and the parents'

Faith by its very nature is a free act that cannot be imposed, even indirectly, by "irrefutable" arguments. Believing is a gift grounded in the mystery of God's grace and each one's free response. Therefore Christian parents need to pray diligently for their children, asking that the seed of faith they are planting in their souls may grow and produce fruit. Often the Holy Spirit will use these holy desires to bring forth from within Christian families a great variety of vocations, for the good of the whole Church.

A child's vocation may require parents to give up plans they have made that are dear to their hearts.

“No sooner is a child born than his mother starts thinking about how to marry him off to so-and-so and how they’ll do this or that. The father is thinking about the career or business he’ll get his son into. Each creates their own ‘novel,’ an enchanting rose-colored novel. Later, the child grows up to be bright, and good, because his parents are good, and he tells them, ‘That novel of yours doesn’t interest me.’” [11]

The vocation of one’s children is part of the wonderful vocation of motherhood and fatherhood. It could even be said that a child’s vocation is twofold: that of the child who gives himself or herself to God and that of the parents who give their child to God. And sometimes, the merit of the parents is even greater than that of their child, since God has asked them to give up what they love the most, and they do so joyfully.

Thus a child's vocation becomes "a reason for holy pride," [12] which leads parents to assist them with their prayers and affection. As Blessed John Paul II stressed: "Make sure you are open to vocations in your family. Pray that, as a sign of his special love, God may deign to call one or more members of your family to serve him. Live your faith with a joy and fervor that will encourage vocations. Be generous if your son or daughter, your brother or sister, decides to follow Christ by a special path. Help their vocation to take root and grow strong. Give your wholehearted support to the choice they have freely made." [13]

The decision to give oneself to God springs forth naturally from the seedbed of a Christian upbringing, and can even be seen as its culmination. Nurtured by the parents' loving care, the family thus becomes a true domestic Church, [14]

in which the Holy Spirit bestows his charisms. In this way, the parents' educational role reaches out beyond the confines of the immediate family circle to become a source of divine life in environments previously closed to Christ.

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Footnotes:

[1] *The Forge* , 918.

[2] John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* , 22 November 22 1981, 60.

[3] *Furrow* , 963.

[4] Benedict XVI, *Address to the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome* , 13 June 2011.

[5] *Furrow* , 198

[6] *Christ is Passing By* , 23.

[7] Second Vatican Council, Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes* , 36.

[8] Bishop Javier Echevarria, *Pastoral Letter* , 1 June 2011

[9] St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th II-II*, q. 11, a.1: “Now, because he who believes adheres to the word of someone else, that which seems primary and which seems to play the role of end in any belief is the person whose word one adheres to. The truths that we know because of this adherence seem almost secondary.”

[10] *Rev 2:17*.

[11] St. Josemaria, Notes taken during a family get-together, 4 September 1972.

[12] *The Forge* , 17.

[13] John Paul II, Homily, 25 February 1981.

[14] Cf. Second Vatican Council,
Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen
Gentium* , 11.

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