

FAITH AND FAMILY

The single most important factor in the religious development of a child is the example set by parents. In an Associated Press poll, taken by ICR Survey Research a few years ago, 7 out of 10 adolescents said that their parents have done the most to shape their religious beliefs and attitudes, while only 1 in 10 sighted the effects of a priest, minister, or rabbi.

"For indeed, the household is the little church" writes St. John Chrysostom. "They learn more from example, than from us telling them. They have to see love in the home. They have to see love between the parents," says evangelist Billy Graham. Dr. John Boojamra writes in *Foundations of Christian Education*, "love for human kind, grows not as an abstraction, but in the immediacy and intensity of family life; it is this love that is the foundation of our love for God."

"Ask children at St. Joseph's Catholic School how God's love is expressed in their lives, and many will draw a direct line from the Heavenly Father to Mom and Dad," writes David Briggs, a religious writer. "Katie recalls the moment before her family's car crashed, when her mother's hand reached over to shield her—an act of unselfish love that made the fifth grader feel as if the hand of God had come down to protect her. A classmate, Meghan, remembers when her Dad 'decided to stay home from a meeting to help me with my homework.' Nicholas, a second grader, recalls when his 'Dad took time out of his day to help me build a model dinosaur, it made me feel he really cared about me.'"

It is clear, from many studies on the subject, that religiosity and Christian education do not occur in a vacuum. When parents' behavior contradicts the religious teachings provided by themselves or the church, a crisis of faith can occur early in their lives. The consequences of this can be a gradual drift into disbelief or apostasy in adult life. "Kids report feeling confused and anxious when parents merely drop them off at Sunday school or pick them up at the end of worship services."

Dr. John Boojamra takes a systems approach to faith and family members. "The family for the person, like the church for all its members, is the matrix of faith development." Horace Bushnell in *Christian Nurture* wrote over 150 years ago, "no truth is really taught by words or interpreted by intellectual and logical method; truth must be lived into meaning before it can be truly known." Boojamra writes "he (the child) makes sense out of the church and its faith by seeing what the adults around him do with it—their love, hope, trust, faith and faithfulness."

Billy Graham states, "children have to see parents go to church and be interested in the church. They have to see their parents read the Bible and pray; otherwise they will grow up and faith will be meaningless to them or they will look upon it as a great big hypocrisy when they're told to go to church."

David Briggs in his series of articles on faith and children writes, "how do parents raise religious children? Offer them unconditional love, attend church services together to show them in word and deed that your faith is important to you, says a consensus of sociologists, religious leaders and children themselves." The formational role of the family in nurturing trust, love, identity and personhood lay the foundation for a child's openness to God and his love. In this way, parents share a sacred role in God's creative work.

In helping parents with this role, the church must take a lead in educating parents in regard to nurturing faith. Too often the church takes the various stages of life and breaks them down into isolated blocks in carrying out its educational role, that is, children up to the age of 16 or 17 receive formal Christian education in classrooms broken down by age group. Adults and parents do not. Teens have youth groups many times detached from significant adult interaction. While the various stages of life have their special needs regarding faith, community units also have special needs to be addressed and the most important community is the family unit. Again, Boojamra writes "we will have our faith in one space and a family in another with no meaningful interaction; there will be no flesh on our theology, and theology without flesh is dead and deadly to its practitioners."

Parishes that build its members' faith on foundations that neglect the family system approach or family-centered educational ministries are building a church that will be inherently weak.