

FR. CLIFF'S NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

Home Based Faith Formation

We believe that faith formation/religious education is a lifelong process for Catholic Christians, and that parents are called to be the primary spiritual and moral educators of their children. This has been the consistent teaching of the Church, if not its actual practice, from its earliest days.

In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, (December 7, 1965) we read: *As a result, with their parents leading the way by example and family Prayer, children and indeed everyone gathered around the family hearth will find a readier path to human maturity, salvation and holiness. Graced with the dignity and office of fatherhood and motherhood, parents will energetically acquit themselves of a duty which devolves primarily on them, namely education and especially religious education.* (*Gaudium et Spes*, Part II Chapter 1:48)

More recently the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

2226: *Education in the faith by the parents should begin in the child's earliest years. This already happens when family members help one another to grow in faith by the witness of a Christian life in keeping with the Gospel. Family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith. Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and to discover their vocation as children of God. The parish is the Eucharistic community and the heart of the liturgical life of Christian families; it is a privileged place for the catechesis of children and parents.*

2227: *Children in turn contribute to the growth in holiness of their parents. Each and everyone should be generous and tireless in forgiving one another for offenses, quarrels, injustices, and neglect. Mutual affection suggests this. The charity of Christ demands it.*

2228: *Parents' respect and affection are expressed by the care and attention they devote to bringing up their young children and providing for their physical and spiritual needs. As the children grow up, the same respect and devotion lead parents to educate them in the right use of their reason and freedom.*

2229: *As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.*

It is the Parent who first passes on, and consistently reinforces, the Faith. Parents are meant to be the principal models of Catholicism. Our responsibility as a parish church is to support parents in their role as the first and best of teachers and evangelists in their families. St. Mark the Evangelist Department of Faith Formation, will seek to give the children and adults in our care the knowledge, experience, skills and materials necessary to become faithful and fruitful disciples of Jesus.

Although Catechists will continue to support parents as primary teachers of faith by providing a time and place for children to gather together to pray and learn as a small community, the best environment for Faith Formation in the most formative years (kindergarten through Sixth Grade) is the family home.

As a result, with their parents leading the way by example and family Prayer, children and indeed everyone gathered around the family hearth will find a readier path to human maturity, salvation and holiness. Graced with the dignity and office of fatherhood and motherhood, parents will energetically acquit themselves of a duty which devolves primarily on them, namely education and especially religious education.

Initiation, the ecclesial community and the family

19. It should be kept in mind that the whole of Christian initiation is a process of conversion undertaken with God's help and with constant reference to the ecclesial community, both when an adult is seeking entry into the Church, as happens in places of first evangelization and in many secularized regions, and when parents request the sacraments for their children. In this regard, I would like to call particular attention to the relationship between Christian initiation and the family. In pastoral work it is always important to make Christian families part of the process of initiation. Receiving Baptism, Confirmation and First Holy Communion are key moments not only for the individual receiving them but also for the entire family, which should be supported in its educational role by the various elements of the ecclesial community. (53) Here I would emphasize the importance of First Holy Communion. For many of the faithful, this day continues to be memorable as the moment when, even if in a rudimentary way, they first came to understand the importance of a personal encounter with Jesus. Parish pastoral programs should make the most of this highly significant moment.

CATECHIST (Teacher)

Catechists support parents as primary teachers of faith by providing a time and place for children to gather together to pray and learn as a small community. Catechists are responsible for preparing and presenting lessons with the help of their grade level coordinators with whom they will meet with up to four times per class year. Catechists are also required to attend the faith formation sessions "Echoing the Word." This is a 20 hour program offered over a two year period. Those who are interested in becoming a Catechist will meet with the Director to discuss both the rewards and responsibilities of this ministry. No prior teaching experience is necessary for catechists; only a willingness to learn, a desire to share faith and a commitment to worship in a Catholic Community.

Mission

At St. Gregory the Great's Family Faith Formation Program, we believe that religious education is a continuous, lifelong process. Students are encouraged to learn in an environment where they experience a sense of community, celebrate the Sacraments, as well as learning the truths of their Catholic faith.

Director's Message

Dear Parents,

We know that you feel a tremendous burden to try to raise your children in the faith. We know you take seriously your responsibility to teach your children about God, the Sacraments, the Church and its tradition. We want you to know that YOU ARE NOT ALONE! Your Family Faith Formation staff supports you in this responsibility. We too feel that your children are entrusted to us. We support you in your role as the primary teachers of your children. Children are best able to integrate the meaning of religious truth into their lives when parents support instruction by regular attendance at Mass.

No parish or school can ever replace the parents as the primary teachers of their children. No parish or school can ever replace the home as the primary locus where religious formation takes place. The parish religious education program for children and youth supports parents in their parental responsibility as the first and most effective teachers of their children. It is not intended to replace the parents as the first teachers and exemplars of Catholicism.

Passing on Our Faith to Our Children

Teaching our children about God and leading them into a relationship with God can be intimidating. Nonetheless, all parents have a responsibility to teach their children about God and His Word.

by Jim Servidio

Passing on our faith to our children may seem daunting, yet each parent can be effective in ways no one else can. Each child has a special bond with his or her parents that was designed by God. Because of this special relationship, parents have a greater opportunity to teach and profoundly influence their children than anyone else. In recognition of this unique situation, God commissions parents with the task of training their children spiritually.

Every parent has the responsibility to teach his or her children about God—to regularly provide them biblical truth and not just take them to church services each week where someone else can teach them.

Consider what the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: ". . . I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5, emphasis added throughout). Timothy's grandmother had this faith and was able to pass it on to her daughter, who then passed it on to Timothy. In this example, the faith of God was passed down through three generations.

All Christian parents undoubtedly have a desire to see their children live by the truths of the Bible, the very Word of God. Yet parents can sometimes worry that they might be pressuring their children into conformity, and may therefore shy away from necessary spiritual interactions. Others may be too preachy or appear overly spiritual. Both approaches can hinder a young person's response to God.

Some may hope that just an association with others of like mind will result in a kind of "spiritual osmosis" for their children—that the truth will sink in automatically.

Some parents may feel they do not have the creativity or experience necessary to conduct interesting family Bible studies. They may feel inadequate or ineffective in the task of guiding and leading their children. Indeed, we may feel that the religious instruction of our children should be left to "experts" like pastors, or perhaps those especially gifted in working with children and young adults.

While humility is an admirable trait and others may be able to help our children learn about God, the fact remains that God has given us as parents the primary responsibility for passing on His truth and way of life to our children. So how can we best accomplish this?

This series of two articles will provide the biblical background as well as useful guidelines to help parents instill biblical knowledge, values and behavior in their children.

The urgency of this responsibility

Clearly our society is deteriorating morally. Many sociologists call this the "post-Christian" era because traditional Judeo-Christian values have been rejected by our culture.

George Barna, who founded the Barna Research Group and does regular surveys regarding religious matters and issues in the United States, conducted two nationwide polls in 2002. They showed that fewer than one out of three professing "born-again" Christians believes there is such a thing as absolute truth.

The surveys also found that few Americans turn to their faith as the primary guide for their moral and ethical decisions. Truth today is considered relative. The vast majority doubts absolute moral truth. Yet the Bible says God does not change (Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8) and that pure religion is to keep ourselves "unstained from the world" (James 1:27, Revised Standard Version).

If we are to remain unstained, there must be a standard to delineate between right and wrong. Unlike in the past, American youth today do not have moral principles reinforced on a day-to-day basis in society. On the contrary, they are regularly undermined.

Key scriptures in the New Testament show that events looming on the horizon will make this situation worse, not better. As Matthew 24:24 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, 9-11 tell us, false religion will be on the increase (to understand more about this, please request our free booklet *Are We Living in the Time of the End?*).

Clearly a time of great testing is coming in the future. Our children will need to be able to discern what is happening to our world so they can be prepared to face its dangers. It is crucial that we help them.

God wants our children to learn

The apostle Paul told Timothy: "From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures" (2 Timothy 3:15). How had he known? His mother had instructed him in the Scriptures starting in his childhood. Now he himself was receptive to that teaching. This is a responsibility of our children as well. Parents have to do the teaching, guiding and setting the example. But children have to be receptive. That's their part.

They should be taught to not resist learning and understanding. Proverbs 1:8 encourages them, "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother." Young people have a responsibility and a duty too. They need to open their eyes and ears and in a willing attitude learn the truth as their parents instruct them.

A note of caution: When children are resistant, parents need a great deal of wisdom and patience in dealing with them. Every family's situation is a little different and you may need some help in patiently working with your children. Our booklets *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension* and *Making Life Work* are available free as helpful resource materials.

In any case, your children need to be taught God's truth—by you. They will not absorb it by osmosis or by breathing the air in your home. They will not become convicted of God's truth by default. Throughout the Bible, we see that God's intent has always been that parents should provide the basic spiritual instruction. Ministers and youth teachers can help and assist, but the chief responsibility rests with parents.

A right approach to instruction

Parents are unique in that each has a bond with his or her child in a way that no one else does. When we speak from the heart in love about what is in our hearts from God's Spirit, it is more likely that we will reach them. Love is a very powerful motivator. When we take time to instruct our children, we are teaching them something about our family's priorities and the value we personally place on God's Word.

If we make the effort to provide them with biblical instruction—however awkwardly we may appear in starting out—they will learn that this is important to us and should be to them as well.

Notice God's instruction in Deuteronomy 6:5-7: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk

by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." This instruction implies different kinds of teaching for different contexts.

So parents do have a clear biblical responsibility to teach their children about God, His instructions for them, His plan for the human creation and how they can have a personal relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. Parents should realize that they have this responsibility. And it is clear from this scriptural passage that it can be achieved by using more than one method.

The patriarch Abraham was praised by God for his dedication to teaching God's way of life to his family. In Genesis 18:19 God said of Abraham, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment, that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him" (King James Version).

We don't know all that Abraham said and did as he taught his family the way of God. The Bible doesn't give the details. As parents we're all to look at our scriptural responsibility and ask ourselves, "How am I going to apply this? What's going to work with our lifestyle and our schedule so that I'm fulfilling my biblical responsibility?"

Looking to a brighter future

In Isaiah 44:3, God shows us the kind of model He wants to see in families in describing the future time when His utopian Kingdom will be established over the earth: "For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on your descendants, and My blessing on your offspring."

That is God's clear desire. If we are following God and are surrendered to Jesus Christ, this is a promise to us and our children (compare Acts 2:39). So we start from this biblical premise to understand what God wants for us as parents and young people.

A similar sentiment is found in Isaiah 59:21: "And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: my spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children's children, says the LORD, from this time forth and for evermore" (Revised Standard Version).

This passage reminds us again of the remarkable example found with Timothy's grandmother teaching her daughter, and her daughter, in turn, teaching Timothy.

A sacred duty and responsibility

Parents can play a powerful role in encouraging their children to choose God's way of life. It doesn't matter if they are not trained as teachers. Parents who walk with God have the Creator in their lives and know His way. Some parents may be more naturally gifted in teaching, but all parents share in this sacred duty and responsibility. We do affect the faith of our children, even if it's only by our example.

As parents, let's all make sure that we apply Deuteronomy 6:5-7. If we do our part, we can help our children embrace the true Christian faith from God's Word. Like Lois and Eunice, we too can pass this faith to our children from generation to generation.

Next time we'll look at some of the actual methods we can use to teach our children about God and His ways and several areas that form the foundation of parental instruction. GN