

Children and Church: Sewing and Nurturing the Seeds of Faith

Reflecting on the responsibility and challenges of parenthood can be quite sobering. In this age of moral confusion and conflicting values, it is important for parents and faith communities to understand the crucial role they play in a child's spiritual, moral and religious development. This series of articles will address issues that surround the spiritual nurturing of our children.

The first three years of life, as psychologists agree, are the most significant period of a child's development. The experiences of these years strongly influence a child's character, personality and attitude in later life. No less significant than physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual growth is the spiritual growth of the infant and toddler. Parents must not underestimate their ability to affect the depth of their child's bond with God and the development of his/her faith. In these formative years, parents are, in fact, the face of God to their children. A child's experiences of tenderness, compassion and love are directly related to his relationship with God in later years. A grave responsibility is placed upon parents and all members of the Christian community, as we must be keenly aware of the fact that our behaviour and our deeds are the child's very first experiences of God.

Our Church has much to offer our youngest members who are forming lifelong bonds through their senses of sight, smell, sound, touch and taste. The colour and beauty of icons, the scent of incense and beeswax candles, the sound of bells and singing, the feel of the loving touch of the hand delivering God's blessing, the sweet taste of the Eucharist, are all experiences that form the emotional ties that will later give sustenance to faith during a time of doubt and turmoil. These very early and deeply formed bonds have incredible endurance, even when confronted with the innumerable challenges of our secular world.

It is we, the parents and Christian community, who plant and nurture the seeds of faith in our children. This task, so sacramental in nature, must be given at least as much attention as the nurturing of physical, psychological, and emotional needs. A child's home environment must include icons, prayer, religious books and music. Children must witness Christian love and good deeds among family and friends. They must be allowed to experience joy in the celebration of religious feasts and names days (patron saint's feast day).

A prerequisite of a child's spiritual development is weekly attendance at divine services. We must give our little children every opportunity to absorb through their senses all that the Church has to offer. It is never too early to bring the infant to church to kiss the icons, to light a candle, to "drink-in" all of the sights and sounds of community worship. We must permit the Holy Spirit to be alive in our children's lives through participation in the holy sacraments. In her book *Our Church and Our Children*, Sophie Koulomzin writes,

Over and above all we have mentioned in speaking of religious growth in infancy, there remains the holy and mysterious action of the holy grace of God that touches it. No one can measure or evaluate precisely the effect of the sacraments which our Church gives to young babies. In faith and awe we can only make sure that those channels of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are kept open in the life of our children. 38.

Regular attendance at divine services, gives the infant and toddler an opportunity to fully experience the sensual beauty of worship and the warmth of community life. By age three, those essential emotional bonds are formed and our self-centred little individual begins to look outward, developing another dimension of the “spiritual unconscious”. Slowly, he becomes aware of the feeling of belonging to a group and actively participating in its activities.

Social and verbal skills developed between the third and sixth year facilitate participation in community celebrations. These include the ability to follow instructions, take turns, follow rules and take on simple responsibilities. The pre-schooler becomes keenly aware of the movements, gestures and behaviour of adults and wishes to imitate them. He derives great satisfaction from knowing what to do and doing it correctly. This sense of belonging and feeling at home in the church deeply influences the rooting of the child in the faith community.

The pre-schooler has begun to distinguish between good and bad behaviour, relating “good” to that which brings approval and recognition, and “bad” to that which brings disapproval. In a healthy, loving family relationship, there is a strong desire to please. In this desire, children can be motivated to adapt appropriate church behaviour. This is not an easy task at an age when constant physical activity is the norm. Parents find themselves frustrated with the struggle to balance a child’s needs with community expectations. The child is faced with the tension between asserting his independence and conforming to the accepted behaviour of the group. Special care must be taken not to push him so hard toward conformity that he reacts with obstinence. Parents must take comfort in the realization that they are not alone in their struggle, while members of the community must understand their responsibility in supporting parents through active participation in nurturing our little seedlings.

All adults and youth present at divine services should know that pre-schoolers learn by imitation. Thus it is our collective responsibility to provide lessons for the little eyes watching us. The children will mimic our actions and attitudes, both good and bad. How do we cross ourselves? How and where do we stand? Do we sing the responses and listen to the recited prayers? Do we conduct ourselves with reverence in this sacred place by observing the rules of good church etiquette? As a community, we create an atmosphere of prayerful and wholehearted participation in ritual prayer. In this atmosphere, our children

will grow to love God and the community in which He dwells. They will feel loved and accepted in this house of God as full participants in the holy gathering, which is climaxed with the reception of Holy Communion. Sophie Koulomzin writes,

A major element in the young child's experience of church life is frequent communion. This is the point where the Holy Mystery that lies at the heart of Christian faith penetrates into the life of the child. The reality and the validity of the sacrament cannot be identified with the child's rational understanding of it. From the reverent attitude of the parents and the congregation the child may realize that there is something special about the act. Explanation cannot go much further than saying that Holy Communion is the holy food God gives us. One can say that this is the food Jesus gave to His disciples when He had supper with them for the last time, and that every time we eat this holy food, it is like Jesus Himself giving it to us. 43

By the end of his fifth year, a child should have accumulated a wealth of religious impressions, including the colourful rituals of the feasts of Christmas, Easter, and Jordan and baptisms, weddings and perhaps funerals. These impressions, along with the love and emotional security of the family, form the foundations of all future religious development. If we deprive our children of these experiences, we are doing them a great disservice. Thus, it is imperative that parents make a commitment to providing their children with a wide scope of religious experience, forming the "spiritual unconscious" which will, in turn, feed the conscious religious growth in middle childhood and beyond.

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