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RELIGION IN THE HOME

By Gerard A. Pottebaum

Times have changed. We're running out of Catholic schools. Parents are knocking at rectory doors asking, "What do we do now?" And they are hearing, "Send your children to CCD class." The answer leaves them feeling shortchanged. They're worried.

They've contributed to the parish school. Why can't they get their children in? The school isn't big enough. Besides, there aren't enough nuns. The Bishop's policy is three nuns for every lay teacher.

The severe shortage of schools and teachers has thrown a strong spotlight on the basic fact of parental responsibility. No wonder parents are worried.

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For years they've been told they are the primary educators: "You are responsible for sending your children to Catholic schools." Now that there aren't enough schools, it's no wonder they ask, "What do we do now?"

Parents Mistake Their Role

The situation, however, is worse than they think. When Catholic schools were available, parents defined the fulfillment of their responsibility as primary educators in terms of sending their children to Catholic schools. Now they are redefining their role as primary educators in terms of seeing that their children attend one or two hours of Confraternity of Christian Doctrine instruction each week. This is progress?

The basic problem is not that we've run out of Catholic schools, but that parents have been leaning on the Catholic schools to tend to the parents' own business as primary religious educators. One might ask, "Why weren't parents worried before, when Catholic schools were available?" The answer in part is that instruction given parents on their role as primary educators seldom went beyond "send your children to Catholic schools." Also, schools were assuming more and more parental responsibility and parents willingly gave it up.



Are We Turned Around?

Another factor that continues to condition the attitude of parents toward their responsibility is the way in which parishes are frequently founded these days: first build the school, then the place of worship. An ironical situation. Preoccupied with building a Catholic school system, we find that we are spending almost all of our educational resources on a project that provides Catholic education for less than half the total number of Catholic children.

This disproportionate expenditure is frequently described in arguments to support spending more money and energy on formal religious education under the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. It is a good argument for a vital organization.

But even more fundamental, no matter how much money and energy are spent on formal instruction, neither the parochial school nor the CCD can ultimately succeed without a family life that reflects the nature of the people of God as a worshipping people. The vitality of this people comes from the real center of parish life — the altar.

So far, the CCD solution to the school problem lacks completeness. The biggest concern is training CCD teachers. At CCD conventions the speakers almost without exception refer to parents as the primary educators, and then move into their “pitch” on teacher-training and what needs to be taught in CCD classes. An overdose of this point of view is as unrealistic and dangerous as the opposite would be: parents don’t need the help of formal religious education.

Somehow the two must harmonize.

Before Harmony, Understanding

Both CCD organizers and particularly parents need to take a closer look at what “primary educator” means. It means, first of all, that parents create an environment, the surroundings at home that shape the child’s attitudes toward life. This responsibility comes from God Himself.

God, our heavenly Father, created the

environment of the world for us, His children. The duty of parents is to create the environment of the home to bring their children to love and serve our heavenly Father. This makes parents God's co-creators, the primary educators here on earth. They cannot afford to think that sending their children to Catholic school or CCD class can relieve them of this natural and holy duty.

What, then, does this responsibility entail? What must parents accomplish that formal education cannot? Is there a common ground upon which parents and formal educators must work?

Let's Start From Beginning

In Holy Scripture we read that God, our Creator, made us according to His own image. As God's cocreators and coeducators, parents are responsible for projecting this image into the next generation. The nature of this image is both human and divine. It is a mystery. It is Christ.

Holy and sacred, therefore, is the duty of parents. Christ used the union of husband and wife as a figure of His own sacred union with His bride, the Church: "And as a bridegroom He went forth from His bridal chamber." In the words of St. Augustine this means, "The Word took to Himself a spouse — human flesh. His

bridal chamber — the womb of a virgin. There He joined the Church to Himself that there might be fulfilled what had been foretold: 'And the two shall become one flesh.' ”

Through the natural union of husband and wife, parents participate in a very special way in the life of the Church. This union is not only analogous with the union of Christ and His bride, the Church. Christ drew parents into intimacy with His Church by instituting the sacrament of marriage. Through their sacramental union, parents found homes that reflect the image of Christ by reflecting the image of His Church.

Altar Is the Center

Parents project the image of Christ into the next generation by participating in the mystery of His Church. This mysterious life we learn about through Holy Scripture, and we live it through the Liturgical Year, the annual commemoration of the life and work of Christ. Through the Scriptures, God speaks to us. And through the liturgy, whose center is the Mass, we respond to God's word. This is our heritage as God's chosen people, a heritage handed down to us through the generations as far back as Abraham, and our first parents.



Love, the Foundation

Upon this ground parents, as God's co-educators, must work in creating an environment where their children can love and serve God. And within this context, formal educators also must work. Not only in word but in practice must the altar and not the school be the center of life for each family in the parish. Because the center of life is not knowledge but love.

By loving one another and their children, parents create a religious environment in the home. And through this love, children discover God, because God is Love.

Parents also create a religious environment by commemorating various feasts of the Church Year, by formal religious practices, by using circumstances in their daily routine to call their children's attention to God's presence, by co-operating with the graces of their marriage, by their daily conduct, conversation, television and reading habits. In other words, parents create a religious (or irreligious) environment simply by being themselves. They teach by the fact that they live with their children, and their children imitate what they see.

The teaching that parents do, therefore, is quite different from that of a school. "There is one thing that a professional teacher can do so much better than a parent that the parent had better not even try it," writes Willis Nutting in *Schools and the Means of Education* (Fides). "The professional teacher can keep a roomful of 50 restless young ones in some semblance of order for several hours. She (or he) can also arrange it so that each of these is able to learn something even though no two of them have the same capacity. The parent can't do that, but



the beautiful thing is that he doesn't have to. The lack of this educational technique need not hinder him at all. He is not teaching a school. He is teaching a child — *his child.*”

Parents Are Always Teaching

Schools or no schools, parents are always teaching. They are giving their children religious and moral — or irreligious and immoral — training. The method does not depend upon professional know-how, but on an awareness that every time dad tells mother how he outwitted the traffic cop and their child stands by listening — they are teaching. When dad and mother pray together, they are teaching. The child learns more from these exposures than he does from whatever a professional teacher or a parent may say to him.

Clearly, the role of parents as teachers is a grave responsibility. Perhaps that is why Christ recommended a millstone for those who give scandal, and instituted a sacrament especially for the married. Given this sacramental help, parents are responsible for using it. By co-operating with these graces they not only save their own souls, but they also help their children get to heaven. The two concepts are inseparable.

When parents use their graces and involve themselves in developing a mature spiritual life, their children come to discover this pattern of living, and thereby also discover God.

Actually parents do not only create an environment; they *are* the child's environment. They are educators not only because of what they might *teach*, but because of what their children *learn* from them. If parents grudgingly help their children do religion homework, they might be teaching the right answers, but the children are learning that religion is burdensome. Parents can't give what they themselves don't have.

When parents discover that they are the child's environment, they will begin to have insight into their responsibility as God's coeducators. They will become aware of God's presence in their own lives. By responding to this awareness, parents teach their children that God is present. They put themselves in a position to take the next step — to use things at hand and occasions as they arise as teaching tools. Their teaching can then be more direct without the stilted formality and artificiality of a classroom atmosphere at home. But parents need to watch for the occasions.



Teaching by Word

A father gives his boy a black and white, long-haired terrier. The boy cuddles it for less than five minutes when he names it "Hector." The father sees a chance to talk about how the animals got their names.

"Did you know that when God put the first man in Paradise," the father says, "He didn't tell him the animals' names? Instead, God brought the animals to Adam, and he named them."

"How come?" the boy asks.

"To show us that we are master of the animals, just as you are Hector's master. God made us better than animals."

Parents need to watch for ways natural to them for drawing their children to a sense of God's love. Taking a walk in the neighborhood, through the park, or going for a family drive in the country, appreciating things for what they are, helps to expose children (and parents themselves) to the fact of creation and the Creator, even though no one may actually say a word.

Give a child a can of water, some paper and paint and he's off to a wonderland. For parents, he's making a mess perhaps, but he's expressing himself, creating a house, a tree, or something he'll name when he's finished. The bright color fascinates him. In his way he is praising God.

Parents need to recognize when the time is right to take the "mess" as an opportunity to tell how God made the world and saw that it was good . . . just as the child sees the six-legged dog he drew as the greatest thing that ever existed. In this way, the child learns to enjoy his powers and senses as God intended. He is learning about creation and about his own creatureliness. And in discovering that he is a creature, he will discover his Creator. It must be a discovery, and discoveries take more time than one or two hours of class each week. With his parents' help, the child grows up to these discoveries.

"Grace Follows Nature"

"It is an axiom of theology that 'Grace follows nature,'" Father Leo Trese writes in his book *Parent and Child* (Sheed & Ward). "This means that the more fully human a person is, the more saintly he is likely to become. The more completely he cultivates his human potentialities, the more there is for grace to build upon. The stronger he is in natural virtue, the easier becomes the acquisition and practice of supernatural virtue. Thus we may say that while the parents' ultimate objective is to help the child become a saint, the parents' immediate objective is to help the child on toward becoming a mature, well-balanced and integrated adult."

The child's image of his heavenly Father grows out of the image he holds of his earthly father. So the father must be mature. The security he feels in his heavenly Father grows out of his relationship with his own father and mother. Their relationship must be spiritually mature. The child stands on the love he experiences at home to reach up and feel the texture of the garment of Love Himself. When a child experiences love with other human beings, he enlarges his capacity for a genuine encounter with God. Though formal education might help, it's not like-

ly that he'll discover this in class. Parents must understand that this lesson is their responsibility as God's coeducators — to teach their children to love.

The Family and the Liturgy

With nature and grace so integrated, it is clear why parents must lead their children to an awareness of God in a way that is natural and unaffected. The master plan to follow in creating a religious environment is Holy Mother Church's own plan, the Liturgical Year of Grace.

The expression "Liturgical Year" or "Church Year" frequently causes ordinarily receptive minds to close. People of this mind unfortunately have been brought to think of the liturgy as something for an elite, who, among other things, eat purple beans during Lent. On the other hand, the "liturgical family" might consider those of a different mind as belonging to "the novena crowd."

We need to understand that many events called liturgical, actually are not such. Without going into strict definitions, a liturgical event demands the presence of a priest, and must be an official form of public worship of the Church. Events that have their roots in these official forms of public worship are called *paraliturgical*, "on the side of" the liturgy.

PRAYER FATHER O

*O Father of mankind, Who
and entrusted them to my charge,
and to prepare them for ever
heavenly grace to fulfill this
give, and what to withhold;
forbear; make me gentle, yet
neither weakly indulgent nor
both by word and example, I
wisdom and piety, and that
them to the unutterable joys of*

OF A MOTHER

*Thou hast given me these children,
O God, to bring them up for Thee
in Thy long life, help me with Thy
sacred duty. Teach me what to
say and when to reprove and when to
comfort; considerate and watchful;
not excessively severe. Grant that,
O God, they may lead them in the ways of true
piety and may finally be admitted with
me to our true home in heaven.*

No Purple Beans for Lent

Parents need not feel guilty about not responding to the Church's official public worship with purple beans during Lent and the like. Parents do have an obligation to participate in the truly liturgical functions, and to carry the spirit of these events into their family life.

Through the liturgy man responds to God's word, which we hear through Holy Scripture. This is the dialogue of love between God and man. When families follow the Church Year, they are participating in the fullest possible way in the mystery of God's love.

By following the Church Year, the people of God celebrate Christ's life and work. The year revolves around two central mysteries: the Incarnation at Christmas and the Redemption at Eastertide.

Weekly Instruction

The themes of Sunday Masses set the liturgical seasons and moods. Parents need to learn to use the Mass of the Catechumens, which includes the Epistle and Gospel, as the family's weekly instruction. Through these lessons, taken from the Bible, God speaks to the family. And through the Eucharistic liturgy, the family responds to God's word.



All of Life Is Offering

The quality of that response is in part determined by what the family brings to the altar from its daily life. If that daily life at home is permeated with the spirit of the liturgy, that is, the spirit of the life and work of Christ, then the family members can return to the altar as "other Christs." One with Christ, they then offer themselves in a way pleasing and acceptable to the heavenly Father.

Then, as pleasing victims, the family is justified in eating at the Eucharistic banquet, where the family's life in Christ is renewed through the power of the Holy

Spirit. With the power of the Holy Spirit, the family returns to its home in the city, the suburbs, or the country, to bring to their corner of the world the word of God, the Word who is God, Christ.

Home a Miniature Church

The cycle of the Church Year that follows the life and work of Christ is called the *temporal* cycle. The Church Year also follows a *sanctoral* cycle — the feasts of saints. By celebrating the seasons of the Church Year, by remembering family patron saints' feast days, by commemorating anniversaries of when family members received the various sacraments, parents bring the spirit of the liturgy into the home. These celebrations need not be more elaborate than a little extra dessert and a token remembrance, a baptismal candle burning at the evening meal. In ways such as this, parents co-operate with the Church, who is Christ, the master teacher. They make the home a little Church, a miniature Mystical Body.

Phony Gimmicks Are Out

While following the Church Year is an educational program in itself, we need to remember that the liturgy is primarily the Church's form of worship. Liturgy has

often been called "dogma prayed." This doesn't mean a lot of verbiage and kneeling. Our Lord simply prayed, "Abba, Father." By commemorating the Church Year in the home, the entire family routine becomes a prayer joined to the greatest prayer, the Mass.

Parents need to guard against allowing their commemorations of the liturgy to become shallow mechanisms. Children are the first to discover something phony. Parents may think they are teaching children the spirit of Advent via the Advent wreath, but unless their use of it is genuine, they are learning that religion is a set of gimmicks, or a formula. This is so especially of older children. It points out why parents should start religious habits even before children are born: later their children from the very beginning will find religious customs a part of life.

This brings back the point made at the beginning: parents themselves need to be developing their own spiritual lives so that their children will discover this pattern of living. In turn, parents will find it more natural to talk about God in relation to the ordinary things around the house. They will discover that following the life of Christ is something to live for.

How to Get Help

Creating specific ways of observing the Church Year at home is not easy without help from other parents. As in other things, parents need to exchange ideas, to share successes and failures. They need to feel they're not alone, to see other parents overcome their embarrassment and awkwardness as they try to get their religion out of their heads and into their hands. If no man is an island, certainly a family isn't.

Parents today particularly need each other because they have been given very little to work with. Until recently, the bulk of Catholic publishers' energies in the area of religious education has been spent developing material for use in the classroom. Slowly, more material is becoming available, in book, pamphlet, and magazine form.

Parents can learn about available tools through CCD parent-educator discussion groups. In such groups, parents learn to shed some of their embarrassment in trying to express their religion in terms beyond the usual meal formulas and Friday abstinence. They no longer explain that they go to Sunday Mass "because they have to." They learn from each other that parenthood is not a burdensome set of demands, but a holy duty, richly rewarding.

Your pastor can help you start a parent-educator group if none exists in your parish. Don't fear leading such a group.

You'll probably want to form the group with parents whose children are roughly in the same age group. One meeting a month will do wonders. Make sure *both* husband and wife attend.

For a topic outline, follow the Church Year. In a short time, the group, parent by parent, will discover the meaning of their holy duty as God's coeducators.

Against this background describing the responsibility of parents as the primary educators, it is clear that the complete answer to "What do we do now?" is not "Send your children to CCD class." It should be clear also that parents with children in Catholic schools are not necessarily thereby fulfilling their duty as God's coeducators. What then does formal instruction offer? How can parents harmonize that with what goes on at home?

Education: Yesterday and Today

The way religion is taught today is not the same as it was taught when today's parents were in school. All parents should know about new developments so that when dealing with their children's situation they are not thinking in terms of the way they were taught.

Formal religious education has always and still does put a wealth of religious knowledge in order. For example, in regard to the teaching of the sacraments, the child in class studies all the sacraments in one neat order, although in actual practice he may receive the sacraments in any of several orders, and some of them he will not or cannot ever receive. Because the presentation is systematic, it has the flavor of artificiality.

This type of training may have been adequate at one time. Not too many years ago, formal education played only a supplementary role because children had already acquired religious knowledge at home and from Sunday sermons. When industrialization came, it exerted a major de-Christianizing influence on the home. Children came to school with very little religious background. The school tried to furnish what normally the home supplied — not only instruction, but also example.

It was soon discovered that what had been taught was too abstract to be useful. Catechetical training frequently and inadvertently cultivated in children an indifference to religion. They found the religion class dull and boring. Therefore, religion itself lost its appeal. This generally characterized the instruction many of today's parents received.



Narrowing the Gap

Today's method of teaching religion and the content of the religion courses are different. They have narrowed the gap between the environment of the classroom and real life. The instruction is adapted to the child's mental capacities. The presentation proceeds from the concrete and visual to the abstract, from the known to the unknown. When teaching about the gift of faith, for example, the teacher might first ask the children what happens at birthday parties.

"You get presents!" is the response.

"And if you get a bicycle from your

father, you can't wait to use it," the teacher might say. "What if you'd not use it at all — but just put it in the garage and leave it there to rust? Wouldn't that insult your father? He gave it to you to use. This is the way our heavenly Father feels when He gives us His gift of faith." And then the teacher would probably draw out of the children ways of using God's gift.

Bringing Religion to Life

The instruction involves the whole person — senses, heart, mind, will — so that the child learns not only religious knowledge but also experiences a conviction to *live* the truths he has learned. In the past, children received mere instruction; today to teach religion means to make the whole Christian mystery — the mystery of God's love — live.

Each doctrine is presented in the context of the whole story of salvation. Each lesson is presented from the viewpoint of God's love for the child and his response to that love.

The two central wellsprings that refresh formal catechetical instruction, therefore, are Holy Scripture (that is, God speaking to man) and the liturgy (man's response). Today, unlike the past, the catechism formula is not the starting point. First,

the teacher develops the child's understanding of a religious truth. Having drawn upon the Scriptures, and instilled the child with the liturgical expression of a doctrine and a desire to respond in Christian living, the teacher then arrives at the formulation.

Not too many years ago, instruction began with the catechism formula. The success of the lesson was determined more by how well the child knew the formula than by his appreciation of the truth expressed.

The modern catechist, drawing upon Holy Scripture, the liturgy, and experiences from the child's life, develops in the child a desire to respond in word, in worship, and in action. In a word, the objective is to form Christian witnesses.

Home Life Is Crucial

For the school child, his home is the scene of his response to formal religious education. With this realization, we can see now how the environment created by parents dovetails with the formal instruction: through a Christian home life that is liturgically oriented. In class, the child learns the realities of the mystery of God's love. The role of the parents is to create an environment where the child can *participate* in the mystery of God's love.

Obviously, formal education cannot re-

place the home or make up for what the home must provide. From the teacher's viewpoint, the warmth of love that the child takes from class will either be snuffed out or grow into a flame, depending upon the home. But more important, from the parents' viewpoint, the warmth of love that the child brings to class determines whether or not the child has the capacity to appreciate God's love. "Grace follows nature."

Liturgy: Response to Love

It should be clear that family life in the parish cannot revolve around the school or formal religious education program. The Mass, the core of the liturgy, must be the parish core. Parishioners need to be conscious of the altar as the central source of life just as the family knows that it gets its food from the family table. In a most sublime way does grace here too follow nature: in the image of Christ and His bride, Holy Mother Church, the father and mother of the family provide the meal for their children. This mystery, reflected by Christian parents, becomes a living reality when the family of God gathers around the altar for the Eucharistic banquet, the love feast.

When the child comes from a family in the habit of celebrating the liturgy, and

the teacher in class explains the meaning of one or the other event in the Church Year, this instruction is meaningful to that child. But to the child from a home where the Mass means only "going to church" and where liturgical feasts are never mentioned, the religious instruction can make little sense as far as life is concerned.

Split Spirituality

Where no harmony exists between the classroom and home, the child may be learning all the answers, but he is also learning mixed standards. He develops a set of standards for the Church, another set for dealing with life at home, and perhaps a third set for when he is at public school with his friends. When this happens, the child begins to live his life as presented in a news magazine, with religion as one of several distinct, unrelated categories, isolated from the rest of life. The result is tragic.

Harmony between classroom and home also means that parents provide their children with time and a quiet place to do homework. They need to keep up with what the child's homework requires. There must be communication between teacher and parent and not only at report card time.



Exchange of Ideas Essential

Nor is it out of place for parents to offer their services in organizing a meeting where all parents can hear the teachers explain what doctrines they are teaching in the various grades. The religious instruction system, after all, is to help the parents fulfill their responsibility, not the teacher's. Such parent-teacher meetings offer a chance to exchange ideas on how to apply class lessons to home life. It lessens the chance of a contradiction arising between what the child hears in class and what he hears from his parents. Teachers have a chance to explain what is expected of the

child and parents for homework. Still more important, it offers parents a chance to explain what they expect of the teacher. Otherwise the tail wags the dog.

Without an exchange between parent and teacher, each remains an unknown quantity to the other, with the child oscillating between the two. Parents who don't bother to bridge the gap between home and classroom show either lack of interest in religion or in the child. When this happens, what is the child learning? That he, or religious education, is a necessary burden. He attends school about 30 hours each week to learn about the world, and one or two hours each week to learn about God. If his formal education remains as categorical as that, the child can only conclude that God is one-thirtieth as important as the world. Parents are always teaching, and the children are always learning.

The Real Task of Parents

Bringing religion and life into intimate union is really the problem that underlies making the transition between the classroom and home. Education doesn't take place in the classroom, but in the child.

Parents plant the seeds that grow into the child's attitudes toward life and God. They set his standards. Parents need to

understand that if they do not create a religious environment at home, they are creating a secularistic environment. They cannot turn over the task of religious education to the school or CCD, even if they want to. If they try, they are not only cheating their children of the chance to grow up spiritually, but they are also turning their backs on God-given opportunities of developing their own spiritual lives. They are standing in the way of their children's baptismal graces and failing to co-operate with their own graces of marriage. Parents can't escape their holy duty. They are by nature always teaching.

Religion means that God has come to us, and lives in relationship to us, through Christ, through His Church, and in turn, through the parents. This is the way God made it, and "He saw that it was very good."

NIHIL OBSTAT—John L. Reedy, C.S.C.
Censor Deputatus

IMPRIMATUR—✠ Most Rev. Leo A. Pursley, D.D.
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

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