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How To

TEACH RELIGION

TO

PRE-SCHOOL  
CHILDREN

T. E. TOBIN, C.S.S.R.





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LIGUORIAN - QUEEN'S WORK PAMPHLETS  
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*Here, in the form of a letter to the mother of a young child, are some very practical suggestions for the most important job in the world—training your little ones to know and love God.*



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# HOW TO TEACH RELIGION TO PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

T. TOBIN, C.S.S.R.

Dear Mary,

Several months ago I wrote a letter of congratulation to you and Bill on the birth of your daughter, Mary Geralyn.<sup>1</sup> In this letter I tried to explain that "Mary Geralyn, born of human and divine love, is a human person composed of body and soul, who by baptism has been raised to the marvelous supernatural life, and who is destined to attain the fullness of love in heaven."

Now I would like to talk to you about Mary Geralyn's education. It is true that at baptism she received the theological and moral virtues plus the Gifts of the Holy Spirit which will enable her to live the supernatural life of grace. But the development of this life as a daughter of God and sister of Christ depends, in large

(1) Cf. LIGUORIAN PAMPHLET, "*What Is a Baby?*"

measure, upon the education and training that you give her.

Let me remind you that the primary obligation of forming Christ in her rests upon you and Bill. The purpose of marriage is not only the procreation, but also the education of children. The right to educate rests basically with the parents and not with the state or the school. So many parents nowadays are shoving this responsibility off onto the shoulders of others. Teachers tell us that many parents expect the school not only to teach but also to discipline and train the children without much help from the home. The priests and sisters and teachers can help you educate your child, but their role is always subordinate and auxiliary to yours.

Your responsibility is to educate Mary Geralyn as a daughter of God, as a sister of Christ. Right now her physical needs of feeding and changing take a great deal of your time. But do not let concern with food and diapers obscure the fact that she, above all else, needs personal love and training.

## BEGIN EARLY

You may wonder why I am writing so soon after her birth to remind you of the privilege and responsibility that is yours to train her as a child of God. You may think it premature, since she is so young that the satisfaction of her physical needs seems to be all that she requires now. Probably you have heard the story about the famous child psychologist who was asked by a mother when she should begin training and educating her child. "How old is the child?" he inquired. "Two years old," she replied. "You have already lost two years," he answered. This little story emphasizes the fact that education and training should start very early in the life of a child.

## THE POPES

Listen to what the Popes have said on the necessity of beginning religious training very early.

Pope Leo XIII: "It is altogether necessary for good parents to take care that each of their children learns the precepts of religion when first it begins to understand."

Pope Pius X: "There is in man from his birth a power of understanding, a power which requires a mother's word that it may be aroused to action, and so to speak, reach outwards."

Pius XI: "Disorderly inclinations must be corrected, good tendencies encouraged and regulated from tender childhood."

Pius XII told Catholic mothers: "It is your task from the cradle to begin their education in soul as well as in body; if you do not educate them, they will begin for good or ill to educate themselves."

The Bishops of the United States have added their testimony to that of the Popes: "From his earliest years he (the child) must be taught that his chief significance comes from the fact that he is created by God and is destined for life with God in eternity."

## WHY SO EARLY?

There must be very good reasons why the Popes and Bishops are so insistent on beginning the religious training early. A close look at the goal of education as well as at the nature of Mary Geralyn will



make very clear the reasons behind their statements.

## THE GOAL

The purpose of education is to form Christ in Mary GERALYN so that she becomes a true Christian. Christ is the Model and Exemplar of all true living. He became Man not only to die for all men, but also to set an example for all to imitate. At her baptism Mary GERALYN received the grace of Christ in her soul. But this likeness of God that she possesses by sanctifying grace must grow by the virtues that she practices with the help of God. Since Christ has told us that we must be as perfect as our Heavenly Father, and since this is a superhuman task, the sooner it begins the better.

## HER MIND

Christ must be formed in her mind and will. A look at the mind and will of a child emphasizes the necessity of early formation.

The statement that a child reaches the use of reason at the age of seven can occa-

sion grave misunderstanding. This might be understood to mean that the child goes along for almost seven years without using reason, and then suddenly on the seventh birthday begins to use it. Such a sudden emergence of reason is, of course, not true to fact. The development is a very gradual one. As she gets older she will guide herself more and more by her reasoning power. But at first she uses her instinct and will need to be trained.

When your daughter was born her mind was, as the philosophers tell us, a blank tablet. The first writing on that tablet will come from you. Her first ideas, her first emotions will arise in response to what you say and do. Like all children, Mary Geralyn is a mimic, at first unconsciously, then consciously. The things that she sees you do, she will begin to do herself. When she sees a smile of approval on your face for what she has done, she is going to learn that this is something good; on the contrary, when she sees a sign of disapproval she is going to learn that what she is doing is not good.

This is very much on an unconscious or pre-rational level in the early days. As a

youngster she is very much self-centered and her world is a very narrow one, bounded mostly by her mother and father. Her sense of security comes from knowing that she is loved and wanted and approved of by you.

When she gets older she will consciously try to imitate the things that you do. Mothers wonder where their children pick up certain words or phrases. Many times they are just repeating what they have heard from their parents. Sometimes you will be able to see and hear yourself in your daughter.

It is important in the first years to gradually train her to say words and to imitate actions that may not have too much meaning to her at the time except that they are something approved by you. And not only approved by you, but something that you and Bill do yourselves even when you are not explicitly trying to teach her.

This young mind, we must also remember, is also infected by original sin. This does not mean that its power of knowing

about God and His law has been lost, but only impaired. Original sin darkens the mind in relation to God and hence every effort must be made to enlighten the mind about spiritual truths. The pull of the mind is toward the things of this world and your efforts must be directed to making the things of the next world very real to her.

## HER WILL

The will of a child also needs guidance. The will, the power to choose good or evil, is dependent upon the ideas presented by the mind; it can choose only from among things that it knows. Thus the more Mary Geralyn knows about Christ and the more she is encouraged to follow Him, the more surely her will is to be used properly.

With the use of reason comes freedom of choice between good and evil. Hence your concern must be to give her the true ideas that will make this decision easier. But the training of the will demands also the practice of virtue in order that habits which make good actions easier may be

developed. Thus a word of approval for a good act will encourage her to repeat it. Original sin has weakened the will so that it more easily seeks self-satisfaction rather than the good pleasure of God. This tendency of the will away from God is an added reason why you must train the will of your baby. Experience shows how early self-will asserts itself in temper tantrums.

### EXAMPLE

Before I begin to suggest some of the truths and practices for the religious training of your daughter, I would like to emphasize again the paramount importance of example. Not so much what you say, as what you are and what you do, will be the great factor in the religious life of Mary Geralyn. Parents have no reason to condemn children for following their own example! The very atmosphere of the home must be one of love and happiness. Religion must be a normal and natural part of her life, not something that is practiced only on certain formal occasions. It must fit into the general framework of

the day. It must be made a matter of joy and happiness, not a sad and painful duty to be endured.

Her idea of God as a Father will depend greatly upon her idea of Bill. If Bill is severe with her and punishes her without reason or moderation, she will picture God too as such an irrational tyrant. Her idea of Mary, the Mother of God, as her spiritual mother will depend likewise on her relationship with you. If you treat her as a child who is loved, she will think of Mary as one who loves and helps her.

## THE PERSON OF CHRIST

Since the basic purpose of all education is to form Christ in the soul of Mary Geralyn, I would like to emphasize that Christ must live as a person for her. He must not remain as some remote figure who lived and died two thousand years ago. He wants to be in intimate contact with every age, with every soul. He is as important to Mary Geralyn's life as He was to the lives of those who knew and loved Him when He lived on earth. She is a member of His Mystical Body and

must resemble Him Who is the Head. Virtue becomes so much easier when it is seen in Christ. Obedience, charity, and purity are more attractive when exemplified by His example. Mary Geralyn must be able to say with St. Paul: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me."

## THE CHRIST CHILD

The normal way to make a child love Christ is to show her Our Lord as a Child. There is something always warmly appealing about a child and much more about Christ, the Son of God Who became a Child. Tell her, then, the Christmas story of the birth of Christ, the shepherds and the angels who came to celebrate that great day. You should have beautiful and appealing pictures of Christ as a Child or of Christ as a Man surrounded by children. Tell these stories in a way that she will understand. Celebrate Christmas each year as the birthday of Christ. I am not campaigning against the abolishment of Santa Claus, but I am insisting that Christ be invited to His birthday celebration. It might be a good idea to

bake a cake for Christ on His birthday and even have a candle on it, and blow out the candle and sing "Happy Birthday" to Christ at this time.

A wonderful way to inculcate obedience in her is to explain that Christ, Who knew everything and could do everything, still took orders from Mary and Joseph who were only human. Explain the various household chores with which he helped His Mother as well as the work with St. Joseph in the carpenter shop. You can tell her also that the Bible says very little about Christ as a Boy, but it does say He was obedient and subject to His parents in their house at Nazareth.

## CHRIST ON THE CROSS

Christ became a Man in order to show the greatness of His love for men, who had sinned against God and therefore had closed the door to heaven. Now God required something big to be done in order that the door might be opened, and for that reason the Son of God became the Son of Mary.

Bring out the sufferings of Christ and the greatness of the love that led Him



to make such a big sacrifice. To explain this sacrifice of Christ tell her, for example, what a big thing it would be for a brother not to tell on his sister but to take the blame and the punishment for what she had done. Every time she is bad she displeases God, but Jesus, her big Brother, took all the blame and made everything all right with God. Hence her love for Jesus should be very great and she shouldn't want to hurt Him any more.

A woman who trained her family very well was Eliza Vaughan, the mother of thirteen children, of whom eleven became priests or religious. She was very careful to instruct her children about the love of God and the sufferings of Christ. When they were old enough to understand, she would take them aside and say to them: "Look at those dear five wounds; imagine all that pain suffered and all that blood shed for you. You must never forget, no matter how long you live, to love more than anything on earth those precious wounds. If ever you are naughty and offend God, it will be because you forgot how much you cost Him."

## CHRIST IN THE TABERNACLE

Mary Geralyn must also learn to know Christ in the Eucharist. She should be taught at an early age that the church is the home of Christ. Take her there and point out the tabernacle where Jesus lives in a special way. Show her the sanctuary lamp that keeps Him company when others cannot be present with Him. Bring her some afternoon to Benediction so that she can see our Lord in the Host.

To return to the mother of the Vaughans, one of her priest-sons tells us: "Our mother reminded her children that there in the tabernacle, One who loved us more even than she did, was always abiding, ever ready to greet us when we went to see Him. She loved her garden, but would have been shocked if the fairest flowers had been sent to her room instead of to the chapel."

## MARY, OUR MOTHER

It is a part of our Catholic way of living that we honor Mary whom God has given to us as our Mother. Thus, to be another Christ, Mary Geralyn must

learn to love and honor her who is the Mother of Christ as well as her own spiritual Mother. It is so natural to associate the Mother with the Child in the Christmas scene. You must remind her that she has Mary as her Mother, that just as she can depend upon you, so she can depend upon Mary. Appealing and artistic pictures can do so much to build up this relation of confidence and trust toward Mary. Remember, again, that she will judge her spiritual Mother by the way that you yourself are and act in her regard.

## PRAYER

Once you have, by stories, pictures and music, established that Jesus is a very understanding and a very powerful friend, it is only natural that you teach your daughter to turn to Him in prayer. Prayer simply means talking with Christ, asking Him for what we need, thanking Him for what He has given us.

By your own actions you can show Mary Geralyn what prayer is. When you help her when she calls upon you, it will

be easier for her to understand that God can also help her. When you teach her to thank those who helped her, it will not be too difficult for her to learn to thank God. Explain to her that Christ loves her even more than her parents do, that He is all-powerful and can do so many things that they cannot do. Prayer can thus be made a very normal and joyful part of the day. Let me remind you again that Mary Geralyn will not pray better than she has learned from your words and example.

## FAMILY PRAYER

In these days you hear so often that "the family that prays together stays together." This is true, because a family that is united with God will be united with each other through God.

It is a very good idea to accustom Mary Geralyn to the fact of prayer from a very early age. Have her present for the Family Rosary, even though at times she is a very cute or annoying distraction. By this she will begin to associate prayer

with a serious and yet a happy time in her life. The respect that you show during prayer will wear off on her. At first she will only realize in a dim way that something solemn is going on, and then begin to take prayers for granted as a necessary part of her life. As she gets older you will find that she will call your attention to the fact that prayers have been missed or delayed.

## WHAT PRAYERS?

Several years ago a well-known sociologist, Father John L. Thomas, S.J., asked teachers to select the prayers that children should be taught at home before they enter school. The teachers agreed upon five prayers that should be known by all pre-school children. Unfortunately, a large percentage of children do not know those prayers — an indication of a grave neglect in the home.

I will briefly mention these prayers so that you will have some guidance as to what to teach your daughter.

1. *Sign of the Cross.* This act of faith in the Trinity and the Redemption can be

taught without too much difficulty. The correct way is to allow her to watch you. Then you can take her hand and make the Sign of the Cross for her. Gradually she will catch on, though the motions she makes may not at first bear too much resemblance to the Sign of the Cross, and you have to suppress a smile at her difficulty in distinguishing the "Son" from the "Holy Ghost" shoulder.

2. *Meal Prayers.* The prayers before and after meals should be a normal part of your day. Mary Geralyn will follow your lead in this matter. The prayer of petition before the meals and prayer of thanksgiving after the meals will help instill the naturalness of these two forms of prayer. If she is taught well, at times she will remind you and Bill to say your prayers. There are many ways in which you can avoid routine in the recitation of these prayers. The whole family can say them, or each member can take turns in leading the prayers.

3. *Our Father.* This prayer, taught us by Christ Himself, should be learned by

your child as soon as possible. As the words are learned by heart, explain that God really is her Father. When she gets older tell her that in the first part we praise God, and in the second part ask for all the blessings we need.

4. *Hail Mary.* In teaching this and other prayers, first say the words aloud. Then have her join in. Finally listen to her as she says them alone. It is best to go phrase by phrase. Devotion to our Lady must be part of the atmosphere that surrounds her from her earliest years.

5. *Prayer to Guardian Angel.*

“Angel of God, my guardian dear,  
To whom God’s love commits me  
here,  
Ever this day be at my side,  
To light and guard, to rule and  
guide.”

The survey revealed that only one out of seven children knew this prayer when they entered school. It is a beautiful prayer that helps a child see into the next world and to have confidence in the protection of his Guardian Angel.

## CONFIDENCE

I have tried to indicate some of the ways in which you can fulfill your great role of helping to form the image of Christ in the soul of Mary Geralyn. This is the reason for which she was created by the concurrence of human and divine love; this is why Christ died for her. Your noblest task, your highest privilege is to work with God in making your daughter His child.

The responsibility should not frighten you. When you and Bill received the sacrament of matrimony, Christ promised to give you all the graces necessary for married life. Divine grace will illuminate your mind so that you will know what to do in educating your child; it will strengthen your will so that you have the courage to do what is right even if it goes against what your daughter wants to do.

Besides this supernatural help, you should have confidence in your own ability and knowledge. You had a good Catholic education. As she gets older her questions will make you search for an-



swers, but that will be good for you. There are many books written for parents, as well as for children, that will be of immense assistance.

So with full confidence in God and your own ability, begin your great task of forming Mary Geralyn in the image of Christ. Your joy will be overwhelming as you see her develop spiritually.

I will keep this intention in my Masses and prayers.

Sincerely,  
Father Tobin



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