The role of parents as Christian educators – leading our children to God

Article

Sister Gillian explores the importance of parents as the first influence on children's faith development, and the potential for the Church to support them in their vital role.

by
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'Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.' *Proverbs 22.6*

Parents – the first educators of their children

'As the little prince dropped off to sleep,' wrote Antoine de Saint--Exupéry, 'I took him in my arms and set out walking once more. I felt deeply moved, and stirred. It seemed to me that I was carrying a very fragile treasure. It seemed to me, even, that there was nothing more fragile on all the earth.'

Parents are the first educators of their children, of those fragile treasures. They are the first educators in time: from the moment of conception the parents (and especially the mother) are providing the environment in which their child will grow up. And they are the first in importance: studies show that parental influence is the single most important factor in the religious formation of their children.

Husbands and wives give themselves to each other: they put their hearts into caring for each other. And God is really and truly present in the depths of their hearts whether they know it or not. This total gift of one to the other is the most important dimension of the faith life of the couple. It is their love of each other that is pivotal to the way in which they find meaning for themselves and make sense of the world around them. Christians are able to name what is happening in their lives, share their understanding of it with their fellow Christians, and celebrate it and purify it in their regular worship. Christian parents give themselves knowingly and willingly to their babies, desiring to love them from the earliest moments and so 'train them in the way they should go'.

The reaction of most of us is: 'Me? First educator of my children? Leave it to those who have proper training!' But parents are already teachers. They do not have to become teachers. Who taught your children how to walk, how to pronounce words, how to hold a knife and fork, to tie their shoelaces and to know their colours? Parents are teachers already.

When we say that parents are teachers already, this does not mean that they have to teach them all the intricacies of modem mathematics or the history of the Second World War (though they could). It does mean an education in values and love for the Lord. Parents do not need degrees in theology to be Christian educators, they need the capacity to love God and to love their children. They need to know and live their faith so that they will pass it on to their children, and they need to know that what they are living in their families is based on sound gospel values.

Living gospel values in the family – living reconciliation

Despite the number of problems that attack family life today (divorce, separation, isolation from the extended family, unemployment, consumerism and the success ethic, drug and substance abuse, to name a few of the major ones), Christian families are trying to live a fruitful and rich family life, and this desire is rooted in our need for love and companionship. (We may laugh at The Waltons and Little House on the Prairie but we have all watched it and in some ways have craved after their ideals in our own families, though we would never admit that to anybody!) For us, the gospel offers a vision of life, of how we should live together; making love, forgiveness, truth, honesty, respect central to all our relationships. If we look at reconciliation, for example, we see that we are challenged to live that gospel maxim at every moment of our lives just as we live all the other gospel values.

Parents of naughty children know how to forgive over and over again and they do not think themselves superhuman in doing so. They instruct their young children to make up after a fight, they try very hard to believe their adolescents who stay out late at night, and are always ready to give them another chance.

Children also watch the interactions between their parents and the way that their parents behave with other adults. If the relationships are healthy, they see how disputes are resolved amicably, respecting the dignity of

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both parties. They hear adults comment on crimes and evil acts reported on the news, and on the behaviour, good or bad, of others known to them. Gradually, children can build up a very sophisticated sense of right and wrong, dealing with both absolutes and grey areas.

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Good parents know their children. They recognise their weaknesses and their strengths. They set limits and standards, and make clear how they expect them to behave. They correct them when they go wrong, and as they grow older they explain the consequences of their actions. Quite often in discussions with youngsters, some will moan about 'strict' discipline but their peers reply by saying that at least their parents care! (Of course, your children will tell you that it's not fair, but in reality it does give them the security of knowing that they are loved.)

Children only know forgiveness when they experience it day after day, and they will only make it part of their lives if forgiving and being forgiven is their constant experience day after day, at home as well as in school.

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Since birth, children have been learning about good and evil, about loving relationships, about the rules that help us live together in harmony, about justice, correction and encouragement, repentance and forgiveness, and thus, implicitly if not explicitly, about God.

Family prayer

Imagine any two people in love. What marks them out as lovers? What announces to all who see them that they share something deep and special? It is their constant desire to be together. They are together every available moment, and when they cannot be together they write letters and talk on the phone for hours. Now think of God as our great love. He is constantly reaching out to hold us. All we need to do is reach back. As families, our conversations with God reflect the ever-growing presence of God in our lives. That awareness, and the actions that result from that awareness, are the goals of family prayer. We do not have to do a lot in order to teach our children to pray. In a sense children are born with an instinctive attitude towards prayer. A small child's emerging appreciation of his or her surroundings develops into an endless exploration of flowers, stones, rock pools, insects, animals, and a whole range of objects seemingly mundane to the adult eye. The child has an innate capacity for discovering and appreciating the extraordinary within the ordinary. Every experience is a point of growth, every discovery an occasion for wonder, joy, exclamation or celebration. The young child is a natural pray-er.

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This natural prayer will only deepen if it is reflected back in the relationships and responses of those around them. Grown-ups must redevelop this ability to express awe and wonder, joy and celebration in the lives of their children and in the world around them. Family prayer isn't only about the formal prayers that are said together; it is about this sense of celebration in the relationships within the family and in the beauty of the world. There are so many ways of doing this, through sharing the Scriptures, and through art, poetry and music as well as in the appreciation of the created world. Throughout the year we are given wonderful opportunities to 'pray', discover and reflect with our families as the liturgical seasons invite us to reflect, feel and respond in different ways. (Herein lies another article for someone to write!)

The family in the church

Fortunately, Christian parents are not alone in carrying out their task. The Churches have a very important part to play in helping their own children to assume their role as Christian educators. Churches need to offer couples adequate and realistic marriage preparation, giving them the tools to 'hang on in there' when the going gets a bit rough. Couples need to be made aware of their vocation to marriage and all that it entails. When children come along the parents will then need to be offered support and formation in parenting and baptismal programmes so that they know what their responsibilities are and how they can achieve them. In this way parents will also meet with peers who can provide another level of support within the Christian community. They must be given the means to acquire the necessary skills in order to be able to help their children to grow in faith.

The Churches must continue the fight against the erosion of family life. They must fight for the right of all families to adequate and affordable housing and they must fight for just wages to enable parents to make choices about the care of their children.

Christianity is not primarily a philosophy, an ideology, a set of rules, or even a theology, but the transmission of a life. This life is transmitted by people not by word only, as a verbal message, but as something that is alive and active. Parents play a vital role in the Christian formation of their children and in their faith life: they set the scene, live the

values, protect their children from unhelpful influences around them, yet give them the freedom to develop their own personality in the knowledge that when they make mistakes they are loved unconditionally. They introduce them to the local faith community and its practices and talk to them about what they believe. But they should not do this in isolation: they should be given support from their faith community which in its turn transmits the ideal of the family of God to all its children and, like any good parent, is always there to love unconditionally, to challenge, to listen and to answer in a time of need.

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