

*Parents Form the Hearts and
Minds of Children through
Love and Example*

**A message from
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“...[P]arents ...are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators.... Parents are the ones who must create a family atmosphere animated by love and respect for God and man, in which the well-rounded personal and social education of children is fostered. Hence the family is the first school of the social virtues that every society needs. It is particularly in the Christian family, enriched by the grace and office of the sacrament of matrimony, that children should be taught from their early years to have a knowledge of God according to the faith received in Baptism, to worship Him, and to love their neighbor.”

As a new year of our religious education and sacramental preparation programs and our Catholic schools commence, it is good to recall these words taken from the Declaration on Christian Education from the Documents of the Second Vatican Council. The Council reminds us that “the primary and principal educators” are the parents in the family who set the example of what it means to be a Catholic for their children.

Furthermore, the Council reminds us that, through the sacrament of matrimony, parents receive particular graces. These graces are given so that parents may help each other grow in holiness and raise the children entrusted to their care to be in a loving relationship with God and the Church. Recognizing the essential role parents play in the lives of their children and seeing the challenges parents face today, I wish to address parents in this column.

Constant care

On the day of their children's baptism, parents promise to "accept the responsibility of training" their children "in the practice of the faith." This responsibility is to be their "constant care." Parents are to "see that the divine life which God gives them (their children) is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in their hearts." Let us reflect on these words to understand what they mean for parents today.

First, in order to accept the responsibility of training their children in the practice of the faith, parents must both practice and have knowledge of the faith. Today parents are blessed with easy access to the Bible, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), and faith formation programs for parents and adults. More important than materials, though, is the desire to deepen one's knowledge of the faith by reading Scripture and the Catechism, and participating in various programs offered by our parishes or the diocese. Knowledge of the faith is something that continues to grow and deepen and is never complete until we enter into the fullness of eternal life. Hence the "constant care" for your own personal faith life will carry over to the "constant care" for your children's faith lives.

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Good questions for us to ponder in our hearts are:

- How well do I know and practice my faith?*
- How often do I read the Bible or the Catechism, which are the essential sources for knowing the faith?*
- How often do I learn more from some Catholic newspaper or periodical?*
- How often do I participate in adult faith formation programs?*
- How well do I know and understand the virtues and explain them to my children?*
- If my children are in sacramental preparation, how much time do I spend each week teaching them how to pray, helping them memorize prayers or making it my "constant care" to ensure that*

- they understand the material presented to them?*
- *How much time do we spend in prayer as a family?*

The divine life

This brings us to the next element, the promises made by parents as the Sacrament of Baptism is celebrated for their children: to keep safe from the poison of sin the divine life God gives to children so that the divine life may grow ever stronger in their hearts.

As Catholics we recognize that God bestows his divine life on us. In baptism we truly become the daughters and sons of the Father, in the Son, Jesus Christ. This divine life is pure gift and allows us to enter into a personal relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We must be conscious and aware of our identity as beloved children of God (1 Jn 3:1-2)!

Good questions to ponder are:

- *Do I know myself as the beloved daughter or beloved son of the Father?*
- *Do I have a personal relationship with the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit?*
- *Am I faithful in that relationship?*
- *Am I prepared to foster the gift of divine life in my children as I have promised at their baptism?*

Parents are then called in the Rite of Baptism to keep this divine life safe from the poison of sin. Sin and evil are real. We have only to look at the world in which we live to see evidence of both. Whether it is

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abortion, war, murder, stealing, living together prior to marriage, contraception, violence, genocide, hunger, the misuse of drugs, etc., all these evils are either sin or consequences of sin. All sin breaks the clear law of God and goes against both reason and the natural law.

Parents must teach their children that there is right and wrong—that there is good and evil. There is objective truth which we are all called to embrace. Pointing sin out is essential for the protection of the divine life within us. We always wound, and we can even lose the gift of divine life, when we choose to break God’s commandments. The Evil One is real and is given the name “father of lies” by Jesus, for he always leads us away from the truth, the good (*Jn 8:44*).

Good questions to ask ourselves are:

- *How do I understand sin and evil?*
- *Who forms my understanding of sin and evil, God or the world? How have I given in to the “father of lies”?*
- *Do I believe in objective truth?*
- *Have I lost my sense of sin and evil?*
- *Do I understand that in order to become good, which is the central core of the moral life, I must both choose the good and cease from all evil?*

Faith within our hearts

Finally, faith and the living out of faith is always a part of the heart. Faith can “grow stronger in the heart” or wither and die. In Scripture, the heart is the place in the depth of one’s being “where the person decides for or against God” (*CCC 368 and 2563*). After baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells in the heart of the person and enables the person to cry out, “Abba! Father!” (*Gal 4:6*). That love can grow and deepen as our hearts are purified and come to know in a most intimate way the living God.

Questions to reflect on are:

- *Have I given my heart to God?*
- *Do I ask God each day to purify my heart?*
- *Do I desire in my heart to know and love God above all things and to love my neighbor as myself?*
- *Do I live my life from the love of God living in my heart?*

- *Do I examine my heart each day to observe my faithfulness or lack of faithfulness to the love of God and neighbor?*

Faith can “grow stronger in the heart” or wither and die.

Divine life in the heart is most fully nourished in the sacramental life of the Church, and most especially in Sunday Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These two sacraments must be loved and lived out by parents if their children are to come to know the love of Jesus for them. The “practice of the faith” is lived out in these two sacraments.

As a child I can remember my parents giving priority to both Sunday Eucharist and Confession. In those days society was much more supportive of keeping the Sabbath holy. Because of the pressures society puts upon families today, it is even more critical that parents not waver in their expectations of their children or themselves when it comes to their faith lives, or in the example they provide to their children.

The only time a member of my family ever missed Mass was if we were seriously ill. Whether we were traveling, visiting relatives on the East coast, or going to a football game, Sunday Eucharist always came first. The time for Sunday Mass was a settled question on Fridays when my parents would tell my sisters and me what time we were going to Mass on Sunday. We would go as an entire family with no questions asked.

Good questions to reflect on are:

- *What priority do I give to Sunday Eucharist?*
- *Do I truly believe that I receive the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ each time I receive Holy Communion?*
- *Do I desire to receive God’s love for me each Sunday in the Eucharist and make myself a total self-gift to the Father with Jesus?*
- *Do I set a good example for my children by making the Eucharist a priority in my life?*

My parents routinely took us to Confession each Saturday. The lines were long. In the lines were grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, all going to celebrate the sacrament. No doubt existed in my mind that the sacrament was important and that my sins would be forgiven. The fact that my parents stood in line with me and my sisters taught us that they too needed God's forgiveness, and that this forgiveness was something I would need my whole life. My parents taught us by their example. The same holds true today.

Questions to ponder are:

- *Do I go to Confession once a month?*
- *Do I, by my example, teach my children the importance of this sacrament and how it helps them to grow in the love of God and neighbor?*

The indispensable role of parents

I pray that all parents will undertake the responsibility of forming the hearts and minds of their children in our Catholic faith. Parents have an indispensable role to play, one that can never be stressed too much, one that cannot be simply handed off to catechists or school teachers. How well children will come to know and receive the love of Jesus for them will depend on how well their parents know and receive the love of Jesus. I pray that parents will come to know and receive that love, and be the best of teachers and examples for their children in the ways of faith!

My parents taught us by their example.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila, D.D.
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