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Nurturing Faith Within the Catholic Home: A Perspective from Catholic Parents
who do not Access Catholic Schools

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Chapter One

Establishing the Research Questions

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Curran 1997, 1980,1979; Dodds 1995; Meehan 1995; Barber 1994; Grienacher and Elzondo 1994; Finley 1993; Roberto 1992; Dunlap 1991; McGinnis and McGinnis 1990; Murphy 1990; Gallagher 1982; De Gidio 1980; Saris 1980). It is through the everyday issues and concerns of life that parents can take the opportunity to foster the spiritual growth of their family. De Gidio (1979, p.17) reasons that if family catechesis is understood as being grounded in the everyday experiences of family life “there are few, if any, family faith sharing experiences which fail [as long as the] focus is in the sharing rather than doctrine.” The simple and natural incidental happenings of family life “are the actions which constitute teachable moments” (De Gidio 1980, p.61). Such moments are valuable for faith sharing as they allow family members to discover God in the everyday moments of life.

The outcomes of the 1997 Consultation with Parents of PREP and the insights from literature crystallized the research interests. In view of this, the question arose how do parents who, for whatever reasons, do not access Catholic schools, nurture the faith of their children within the context of the home, especially when they do not feel skilled to do so? The intention was not to evaluate the religious knowledge of parents, but rather to come to an awareness of their understanding of faith and how this understanding impinges on the way they nurture faith within the every day moments of family life.

The Motivation Behind the Study

This study undertakes to explore how parents share their faith with their children within the context of the home. The driving force was to identify ways parents share faith within family life, particularly when this specific group does not have the added support of the Catholic school environment. One of the main reasons parents feel so inadequate, I believe, is that parents themselves experienced what is termed the ‘delegation model’ of religious education. In this model religious education was seen as the role of the religion teacher, the Catholic school, and the role of the parish catechist. For many parents, religious education is a body of knowledge which prepares children for specific aspects of Church life. Examples of these aspects might be sacramental preparation, teaching of the formal prayers, the parts of the Mass, and the teachings of the Church.

The premise of this study is that the nurturing of faith is not solely the transmission of knowledge. It is also through the affective domain that we recognise the

presence of God in the interactions which happen daily within family life. In other words, faith is an embodied experience, a way of living, a manner of interacting with the world rather than a set of concepts to know or remember. In order for parents to rediscover and reclaim their duty as first educators of faith of their children, they may need to be skilled in recognising ways they can nurture faith within the everyday events of a daily life.

Research Questions

This research examined how the faith of children is nurtured by parents within the context of the home. The central question was: ***How do parents, who do not send their children to Catholic schools, nurture the faith of their children within the home?***

The research question under investigation is particularly Australian. The Australian Church focus on Catholic schools as the principal source of religious education is unique when compared to that of many other countries. The Australian Church is distinctive in the amount of resources it devotes to Catholic school education. In other countries, such as the United States of America, the locus for religious education is in the parish as well as in the Catholic school. In Australia fewer resources are made available for religious education outside the Catholic school system.

In order to understand and discover how faith is nurtured within the home of those who do not access the Catholic school, it was important to establish what parents understand faith to be; why faith is important to family life and thirdly, the concerns that hinder parents from carrying out this task effectively.

The study was guided by the following questions.

1. Does parents' understanding of faith impact on the way faith is nurtured within the home?
2. How do parents nurture the faith of their children within the context of the home?
3. How do parents perceive their role in nurturing the faith of their children?
4. Is there a different perception of this parental role between genders?
5. What factors hinder parents from nurturing the faith of their children?

Family

Within society parents and children within the same unit constitute a family. The official teaching of the Catholic Church, insists that the Christian family must spring from Christian marriage. *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) declares:

Thus the Christian family which springs from marriage is a reflection of the loving covenant uniting Christ with the Church, as a participant in that covenant, will manifest to all [people] the saviours living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church. This the family will do by the mutual love of the spouses, by their generous fruitfulness, their solidarity and faithfulness, and by the loving way in which all members of the family work together. (#48)

While respecting the ideals presented in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) this study recognises the diversity in which contemporary families exist in society. The study acknowledges that some families are not necessarily blood-related. White (1995, pp.207–208) describes a number of types of families that are typical of our society. They include the nuclear family; the extended family; the blended family; the couple family; the single parent family; the single person and the adoptive family.

These types of ‘family’, with few exceptions, exist within the Catholic community. “Rather than judge one form of family as somehow superior to another, religious educators recognise that they all are of God and involve various coping arrangements to make and keep life human” (White 1995, p.209).

Catholic School

Distinct from other types of schools, the main aim of the Catholic school is to “form in the Christian those particular virtues which will enable [the child] to live a new life in Christ and to help him to play faithfully his part in building up the kingdom of God” (Gravissimum Educationis 1965, #2). Such an education is based on a “Christian concept of life centred on Jesus Christ” who is the “foundation of the whole educational enterprise” (The Catholic School 1977, #33–34). The particular task of the Catholic school is:

[F]undamentally a synthesis of culture and faith, and a synthesis of faith and life: the first is reached by integrating all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel; the second in the growth of the virtue characteristic of the Christian.
(The Catholic School 1977, #37)

Faith

In the context of this study, faith refers specifically to Christian faith. Christian faith is a gift from God, a lived reality destined to grow in the hearts of believers (Groome 2002; 1980; General Directory for Catechesis #56, 1997; Fowler 1993; Meissner 1987; Westerhoff 1980; Rahner 1975). This study embraces Groome's (2002; 1980) understanding of Christian faith. Groome (2002, p.178) states that "Christian faith has three aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. Or faith entails believing, trusting and doing." In other words, the wholeness of Christian faith involves the head, the heart and the mind (Groome 2002, p.178).

Faith as believing – Christian faith as engaging the head

Faith as believing, points primarily to a cognitive activity. Christian faith does require a firm understanding and conviction of the truths. Faith as believing is necessary since, "all faith includes a knowing and interpreting of human experience" within the context of a religious tradition. The knowing of and "the assent to, the stated beliefs of the tradition is a way of making meaning of what it is to be a Christian" (Groome 1980, p.74).

However, in the context of this study, Christian faith is much broader than solely an intellectual and cognitive process of beliefs, one that separates the matters of faith from the rest of life (Fowler 1993; Chamberlain 1988; Meissner 1987). Meissner argues that, "the traditional Catholic view had long been concerned with the substance and the content of faith, that is, faith as a body or a system of revealed truths, rather than with phenomenology or psychological analysis of faith as a human process" (1987, p.115). Groome (2002, p.192).explains that "the primary purpose of the mind is not only to clarify ideas, but to empower a lived and living faith."

Groome (2002; 1980) agrees with Meissner (1987) when he remarks that "to see Christian faith only as belief in the sense of rational assent to official doctrine tends to increase the split between faith and daily life" (Groome 1980, p.60). This is not to say that the cognitive act is not important to the dimension of faith, however, it is not the only activity.

Faith as trusting - Christian faith as a way of the heart

The second activity that is important to the lived reality of Christian faith is trust. Groome (2002, p.184) acknowledges, "Christian faith is a profoundly relational affair

–of the heart.” It is the fiducial dimension of being in faith. This fiducial dimension is concerned with relationships, firstly to a God who is always faithful and secondly with others (Groome 1980, p.61). It finds expression in such things as love, loyalty, and commitment. As these are deepened there is a growth in the activity of trust (Meissner 1987).

Faith as doing – Christian faith as a way of the hands

For Christian faith to be a lived reality, it must include also a behavioural dimension. Groome (1980, p.76) names the behavioural dimension of Christian faith as “an activity of doing.” Groome (2002) describes faith as doing as a way of the hands. “Hands represent the lived commitments of Christian faith, the everyday “doings” required of disciples” (2002, p.178). It is an active response that calls for transformation at three levels, the personal, the interpersonal and the social and political. Faith is expressed in the way we respond to God and others, for without the response, there is no faith.

Christian faith needs to include all three activities of faith; believing; trusting and doing. Groome (2002, p.178) believes “Christian faith should engage people’s heads (all one’s mind), hearts (all one’s heart and soul), and hands (all one’s strength).” All are essential to the Christians way of life.

Nurture

This study refers to the notion of ‘nurturing the faith’ as distinctive from transmitting the faith traditions. This distinction is central to the study. Nurturing the faith here is understood as an ongoing process in which parents share faith through recognising the presence of God in the interactions which happen daily within family life as well as through formal instruction.

The task of the religious educator is far more than to teach the “content” of the faith tradition. Our task is to nurture people, with the help of God’s grace, in their ability to be in faith. Being and becoming a person in Christian faith is a process of formation and maturation.

(Groome 1980, p.66)

A Process for Nurturing Faith

The primary assumption of this study is that family is the prime place for the nurturing of faith of children. The approach for this nurturing is through the process of family catechesis. For the purpose of this study, it is crucial that the term family

catechesis is defined and a distinction is made between the terms evangelisation, catechesis and religious education, as these terms have impact on the fundamental underpinnings of this study. These terms will be discussed in light of the understanding declared in recent Church documents and Catholic education writings.

Catechesis

Catechesis is about formation of a believer towards maturity of faith and therefore, is “not a body of conceptual truths, but the mystery of the living God” (Fide et Ratio 1998, #99). Initiatory catechesis, “promotes and matures initial conversion, educates the convert in the faith and incorporates him [the believer] into the Christian community (General Directory for Catechesis 1997, #61). It “lays the foundation for building a life of faith” (Huebsch 2001, p.22). The fundamental tasks of catechesis are:

to promote knowledge of the faith, to promote liturgical participation, to promote moral formation, to teach how to pray, to educate for participation in Church community life and to promote missionary initiation.

(General Directory for Catechesis 1997, #85–87)

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) points “out that all these tasks are necessary for the full growth of the Christian life” (Huebsch 2001, p.33). The two principal means used to accomplish these tasks: transmission of the Gospel message and the experience of the Christian life (General Directory for Catechesis 1997, #87). As a result catechesis is not restricted to traditional formal religious education but rather is an ongoing process which continues within the family and the parish community (Holohan 1999; Purnell 1985; Gallagher 1980).

Family Catechesis

As this study is concerned specifically with the nurturing of faith within the home, the term catechesis needs to be defined within the context of family life. The focus of family catechesis is generally on the family unit. One of the most comprehensive definitions of family catechesis is offered by Purcell and Weithman.

Family catechesis is about the nurturing and maturing in faith that happens formally and informally within a family system at every stage of life. Family catechesis considers both the individual and the family group itself ... It recognises that family members have needs and gifts. ... Family catechesis deals with the conversion process which happens as family members live together in community and move through the family life cycle. The ministry of catechesis can bring light as well as the challenge of the Gospel to the work of the family agenda. The

family agenda can illumine the significance of the Gospel message in different ways through the various stages of the family life cycle.

(Purcell and Weithman cited in Roberto 1990, p.20).

Family catechesis is therefore concerned with the maturing of faith within the context of the home. It focuses on the growth in faith within the family as a unit as well as each individual (Purcell and Weithman in Roberto 1990; Saris 1980; Hill and Hill 1980; Gallagher 1980; Iannone and Iannone 1980). “Family catechesis works on the principle ‘first practise, then talk’” (Saris 1980, p.141). The task is formative.

[It helps] (1) the family to grow in faith by providing opportunities for a family to understand and live the message of the Gospel; (2) to help strengthen the bonds within the family and with other families; (3) to enable families to pray and worship together; and (4) to motivate families to serve, care for and nurture others.

(Gallagher 1982, p.165)

Family catechesis provides, for Christian parents, a way of nurturing the faith of their children through the whole ethos of family life.

Evangelisation

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) “designates evangelization as the umbrella description of the Church’s whole mission in the world and situates catechesis as one function within it” (Groome 2001, p.20). Paul VI wrote:

For the Church, evangelisation means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity, and through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new.

(Evangelii Nuntiandi 1975, #18)

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) claims that evangelisation is the process through which the Church carries forth the Good News throughout the entire world (1997, #46–49). It distinguishes two basic elements of the evangelisation process; Christian witness and ministry of the Word. Christian witness involves relating with others, being involved in their lives and needs. “Good witness, therefore, cannot be achieved from a distance or by conveying some sense of religious or moral superiority” (Holohan 1999, p.18). Ministry of the Word refers to the human words used to speak of the works of God. One way baptised people exercise the ministry of the Word is through catechesis (*General Directory for Catechesis* 1997, #50 and #142). Essentially evangelisation, in the understanding promoted in the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997) is “about Christians ever

renewing themselves to live their faith as credible witnesses of the world (Groome 2001, p.19).

Religious Education

Religious Education, on the other hand, is about the knowledge of faith beliefs and practices and thus follows an educational process. Religious education is concerned with meaning (Holohan 1999; Purnell 1995; Groome 1980). Its aim is to help students understand the religious meaning of their own experiences. Its contribution is to hand on the Christian faith by seeking to help students to learn the teachings of the Gospel and “to develop ‘a sense of the nature of Christianity’ and of ‘how Christians are trying to live their lives’ ” (The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School 1988, #69). The difference between catechesis and religious education is an important distinction to the understanding of this study.

This study is contextualised by the Catholic faith. While Catholicism is not the only Christian tradition, it is my tradition. As such I choose to work within it, since the diversity of Catholic religious thought and expression is sufficient diversity for any one study.