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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 Eight

Conclusion and Recommendations

This Chapter attempts to bring together the findings and analysis of the previous three Chapters. To achieve this aim, this Chapter will first evaluate the research methods employed before summarising the main findings of the study. The Chapter will conclude with recommendations based, within the limits of the study, on the research findings, before offering a final conclusion.

The research question which directed the research was: How parents who do not send their children to Catholic schools nurture the faith of their children within the context of the home? The sub-questions used as the framework in the discussion included.

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?
6. What resources do parents desire to assist them in the nurturing of faith within the home?
7. What differences are experienced in the nurturing of faith between parents in the metropolitan area and rural areas?

A total of 36 parents (n=36) participated in the research, the majority (n= 31) were mothers. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling procedure because it wanted to target a specific group of parents within the Catholic community, that is, parents who did not access Catholic schools for the education of their children. The sample was drawn from two Regional Zones within the Archdiocese of Perth; a rural zone and a metropolitan zone.

Evaluation of the Research Methods

It is important to qualify the generalisability of the results. The aim of this qualitative study was not to produce a generalisable conclusion in a statistical sense: the sample was purposively selected rather than randomly selected. A characteristic of the sample was that participants were recruited from Catholic families who have an active connection with parish, either through Mass attendance, through PREP or both. The researcher is aware that this makes this group of participants a distinctive sub group of the Catholic population and might not be representative of the whole group who call themselves Catholic. However, the study does make a unique contribution to the understanding of how faith is nurtured with contemporary Catholic homes. This study is the first major Australian qualitative study conducted with parents who do not access the Catholic school. As has already been acknowledged, this group of parents often feel themselves at the edge of Church life and most have low involvement in the parish. In the Australian context, most studies in the area of faith development and religious education have been conducted with the parents of children who access the Catholic school system. The study aimed to give Catholic parents outside the Catholic school system a voice so that they too could share in the faith story of how parents nurture faith.

This study was conducted by sampling a number of parishes with diverse demographics, including parishes in rural areas. This allowed for the opportunity to gather data from a range of people with varied experiences. The data was collected over two and a half years as parents were not as forthcoming to participate in the study as was initially anticipated. The reluctance to volunteer for the study may be indicative of the marginal Catholic parents who do not send their children to Catholic schools but do try to nurture faith in their children.

The study rigorously followed the methods described in Chapter Three (pp.50–88). The main methods employed to collect the data for this study were interviews, observations of the environment and notes gathered in the field (Ch. 3 pp.77–79). The strength of the face-to-face interview method is that it allowed the researcher to unravel at a grass-roots level the many realities faced by parents in this task of nurturing faith within the home (Ch. 3 pp.78–79). The interview method gave the researcher scope to access what was at the heart of the concerns and feelings of the parents in relation to

the faith development of their children. The interviews were conducted mainly in the homes of parents. This allowed the researcher to enter into discussions on faith and parental nurture roles in an environment of familiarity and safety. Such discussion is seen by many as a private and delicate conversation and was possible in an environment in which parents felt they were in control (Ch. 3 pp.78–79).

The study was to gather descriptive data that would reveal a picture of how parents nurture the faith of their children within the context of the home. An ethnographic approach was chosen to achieve the aim of the study because it allowed the researcher to obtain first hand the 'big picture' about how this particular group of parents who do not send their children to Catholic schools nurture the faith of their children (Ch. 3 pp.51–52). The main aim of this study was to hear, understand, and narrate how this particular group of parents nurtured the faith of their children; in the difficulties, confusions and successes that these parents could report.

The results are, at the very least, informative of the understandings of faith held by a group of Catholic parents who do not access Catholic schools for the education of their children and the nurturing styles and strategies used to nurture faith within the context of the Australian Catholic home. The results are important as guidelines to be addressed as parishes respond to the needs of the parents in the area of family catechesis. Parishes need to be mindful of those parents within their community who do not have the support or resources offered to parents in the Catholic school system. The study highlighted that the many parents and their children do not access Catholic school education because they cannot access them. With the expanding populations in suburban areas, Catholic school access, especially in Western Australia, is not likely to become more accessible due to the financial limitation of providing new school buildings. The high demand for admission into Catholic schools means that Catholic parents rely on parish resources for the support needed in the area of faith development of their children. According to Church documents (General Directory for Catechesis 1997), parishes have a responsibility to identify who their marginalised members are and put into place support structures that will enable them to feel part of the community as well as educate them for the task at hand.

The following points are a summary of the key findings of the study:

1. The most significant revelation which emerged from the study is that parents are not a single 'type' when it comes to an understanding of faith. Three individual 'types' or voices were evident in this study. By identifying that parents are not a single 'type' the research was able to identify a number of characteristics which allows differences to be discussed between the nurturing strategies and nurturing styles used by parents of the sample within the Catholic home (Ch. 4 pp. 91–130).
2. The nurturing strategies used by parents in this study reflected the Church's call to families of sharing in the life and mission of the Church (Familiaris Consortio 1981, #49–64). The main strategies which parents use as tools for nurturing faith include: prayer, Mass attendance, attending the Parish Religious Education Program (PREP) and being mindful of seizing teachable faith moments that occur within the events of family life (Ch. 5 pp.132–164).
3. The understanding of faith strongly influenced the nurturing style adopted by parents and the nurturing strategies implemented within the context of their homes (Ch. 5 pp.164–171).
4. The findings did not resolve the question whether there were different perceptions of the role of nurturing faith between genders. However, the study supported previous studies which have revealed that the responsibility for nurturing faith within the household is carried out mainly by the mother (Ch. 7 pp.227-228).
5. Parents are aware of their task as nurturers of faith. While there are societal influences which parents feel impact on nurturing faith within the home, the study reveals that one of the greatest hindrances faced by parents to nurturing faith is their own sense of inadequacy. The sense of inadequacy acknowledged by parents stems from what they recognise as their own lack of faith knowledge. This led parents to experience a lack of confidence in carrying out their nurturing task effectively (Ch. 6 pp.178–199).
6. The desire for a Catholic school education rated high among parents in this study. The researcher recognises that the study was carried in a region of the

Archdiocese of Perth where the demand for Catholic school education far exceeds the places available (Ch. 6 pp. 180–184).

7. Parents are anxious for support at the parish level to assist them in their task of nurturing the faith of their children (Ch. 6 pp.191–193).
8. Few parents are aware of resources to support the nurture of faith in the home already available within the Archdiocese of Perth (Ch. 6 pp.206–207).
9. This study accessed a proportion of parents who consider themselves on the fringe of the mainstream parish life. The study gave opportunity for these parents, the voiceless in the parish, to speak their desire for inclusion.

The data presented in this study are suggesting that even though parents do try to nurture the faith of their children within the context of the home, there is a crisis when it comes to supporting parents in the task. The crisis centres on parishes within the Archdiocese of Perth being slow to promote ongoing faith formation with regard to nurturing faith within family life. Bishops and Priests need to confront this crisis as the Church in Western Australia, and indeed Australia, embrace the 3rd millennium. The Church needs to support parents at a parish level by first offering opportunities for them to grow in their own understanding of the faith and then to recommend ways of sharing this faith with their children within the home.

Recommendations

In light of what has emerged through the responses of parents who do not access Catholic school for the education of their children it is possible to present a number of recommendations which can be considered in assisting parents in the task of nurturing the faith of their children within the context of the home. The following five recommendations are based on the experience and outcomes of this research. While these recommendations might be seen to relate directly to the Archdiocese of Perth, there is evidence that similar conditions may pertain elsewhere in Australia. These recommendations are grounded in the conversations and findings of this research. They are an endeavour to address how the Archdiocese of Perth can assist parents, in

a more effective manner, in their task of nurturing the faith of their children within the context of the home.

The first recommendation from this study is that a common understanding of family catechesis be formulated for the Archdiocese. A common vision of family catechesis would aim to help parishes formulate strategies that could assist families to grow in faith and grow in awareness of what it means to live the message of the Gospel within the domestic Church. It is reasonable to conclude that if a shared vision of family catechesis is established across the Archdiocese then a process to support parents within the parish structures can be designed and implemented. The understanding of family catechesis needs to consider both theological and empirical data.

A second recommendation that emerges from the study is that an agency funded by the Archdiocese of Perth be established specifically tasked to assist parishes to develop support structures to aid parents in their task of nurturing faith within the context of the home. Such an agency would assume responsibility for developing a parish-based program that would aim to educate, train and sustain leaders of family catechesis within parishes. The training program could include: awareness of theology on Church and family; skills in helping parishes becoming aware of the specific needs of their parents; knowledge of existing resources and contacts to facilitate family ministers to provide education and oversee services to parishes; and awareness of ways to integrate family ministry into existing parish programs and initiatives.

A third recommendation to support families in their responsibilities is that the parish must become "the prime mover and pre-eminent place for catechesis" (General Directory for Catechesis 1997, #257). The Archdiocese of Perth can address the needs of parents by promoting within parishes meetings and parish-based courses and providing ongoing adult catechesis directed towards parents (General Directory for Catechesis 1997, #227). It is reasonable to conclude that parents would become better equipped and more confident in their task of nurturing the faith of their children if support is offered at a parish level.

The fourth recommendation is that a set of strategies be formulated which can assist parishes to identify families who consider themselves marginalised, and implement ways of making them feel genuinely welcome in the worshipping community.

A final recommendation is that the Catholic Church in Australia looks at alternative models of religious education which do not rely solely on the Catholic school as the major educator of the faith.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations are recognised by the researcher in relation to this study.

1. The study was confined to a specific target group of parents whose children do not attend a Catholic school. To confirm the outcome of this study it would be beneficial if further studies were conducted to include all groups of Catholic parents. These studies would give further insight to how faith is nurtured in Catholic homes and describe how different support structures have an impact on the nurturing of faith within the home.
2. A second limitation was that the study was conducted in one diocese only. A recommendation would be to conduct the study in a representative group of dioceses in Australia to ascertain if these results are consistent across the Church in Australia. The Archdiocese of Perth did encompass diverse socio economic and geographic factors and these were represented in the sample of parents in the research.
3. The methodology used in this study was limited to a single face-to-face interview of between 30 to 45 minutes duration with each parent. If this study is replicated, it is suggested that the study be carried out using a number of research methods.

Conclusion

This research was useful and worthwhile for a number of reasons. As already stated at the beginning, little study has been conducted with parents of children outside the Catholic school system in Australia. This research has given voice to a group of parents whom the researcher recognises as living on the fringes of the parish life of the Catholic Church. The participants themselves confirmed this sense of marginalisation.

The study enabled this group of parents who do not access the Catholic school system to make a significant contribution to the story of how faith is nurtured within the context of the Catholic home. The findings are the results of careful application of the interview method and a detailed, rigorous and transparent analysis of the data collected.

From the findings presented in this research it is reasonable to conclude that Catholic parents who do not access the Catholic school system do try to nurture the faith of their children within the home. This task is not an easy one, but one that they take seriously. The challenge is how to support these parents to carry out the task as the first and foremost educators of faith within the context of the home. Support for parents can be assured if the Archdiocese of Perth recognises the importance of the role of family catechesis and sets up structures with parishes to educate and support parents in their task.

This study grew out of the work and professional experiences and the role of the researcher. This study confirms that despite years of genuine effort this pastoral and catechetical area still remains inadequately addressed within the context of the Australian Catholic Church. The data is offered to the Archdiocesan authorities so their pastoral concerns can be better informed, and their efforts to support the faith education of parents can be better facilitated. It is hoped that this work will contribute to the faith of families in the Archdiocese of Perth and in Australia in general.