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who do not Access Catholic Schools

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Publication Details

Suart, C. G. (2007). Nurturing Faith Within the Catholic Home: A Perspective from Catholic Parents who do not Access Catholic
Schools (Doctor of Education (EDD)). University of Notre Dame Australia. <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/11>

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

by

Carmela Giovanna Suart, Dip. Teach., B. Ed., M. Ed.

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the School of Education,
Doctor of Education, the University of Notre Dame Australia.

March 2007

Abstract

Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has regarded the family as the most influential factor in shaping and nurturing the faith of each generation. Within the family, parents are considered to be the first and primary educators of the faith of their children. Irrespective of years of genuine effort by the Catholic Church in Australia to support parents in their task of nurturing the faith of their children, the area of family catechesis still remains inadequately addressed, hence the significance of the study. The aim of this research was to investigate how Catholic parents, who do not send their children to Catholic schools, nurture the faith of their children within the context of the home.

A review of the literature indicated that this specific target group has largely been understudied with only fragmentary research. The purpose of this study was to give this group of Catholic parents, who consider themselves a marginalised group within the Catholic Church, a voice in sharing their experiences and concerns of the task of nurturing the faith of their children. The study sought to make a contribution to remedying this marginalisation.

A total of 36 parents (n=36) participated in the research. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling procedure. The parishes were drawn from two Regional Zones of Priests within the Archdiocese of Perth; a rural zone and a metropolitan zone. A total of eleven Catholic parishes participated in the study; each parish having distinctive demographics.

The research was qualitative in nature. The primary means for gathering data was face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured guiding questions were used during the interviews. The interview data was coded and analysed using three coding methods; open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Transcriptions of the interviews were set up within the qualitative data analysis computer program QRS NUD*IST [Non-numerical, Unstructured Data, Indexing, Searching and Theorizing Tool] (N6).

The study identified three distinctive understandings of faith. The metaphor “voices” was used to distinguish between the understandings. These three interpretive voices were identified as the voice of orthodoxy, the voice of faith as a lived

experience and the voice of faith as an active struggle. These voices are archetypes, or descriptions of distinctive styles. The understanding of faith identified in each voice became the basis to describe the link between the understanding of faith held by the parents and the way faith is nurtured within the context of their homes.

The results indicated that a number of nurturing strategies have been implemented within the homes of this group of parents. The most common nurturing strategies included: Mass attendance; prayer; reading the Bible; conversations and discussions about faith issues; through witness and example; and attending the Perth Archdiocesan Parish Religious Education Program (PREP). The way in which such strategies are implemented, that is, the nurturing style, is what set the three archetypal voices apart.

From the results a conclusion was drawn that parents within the Archdiocese of Perth who do not send their children to a Catholic school, are aware of their responsibility as the nurturers of faith of their children. For this group of Catholic parents, faith is an essential part of family life. There is a strong parallel between the understanding of faith held by parents and the nurturing style adopted to nurture faith within the context of the home. The results also revealed that most parents in this group are clearly not confident in their task of nurturing the faith of their children within the home. They perceive their own religious knowledge to be inadequate and thus depend on Parish Religious Education Program (PREP) for support.

This study has been valuable as it has given voice to a group of parents whom have been largely understudied. The study enabled this group of parents who do not access the Catholic school system to make noteworthy input to the story of how faith is nurtured within the context of the Catholic home.

Declaration of Authorship

This thesis is the candidate's own work and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other institution.

To the best of the candidate's knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Carmela G. Suart

Date

Acknowledgements

In submitting this thesis I wish to express my gratitude to the people who have assisted, encouraged, and supported me in this study. Without them this dream would not have become a reality.

Firstly, I am particularly indebted to my supervisor, Professor Roger Vallance, who has been a constant source of intellectual challenge, prudent guidance, and gracious persistence. His encouragement made the journey easier especially when I could not see the light at the end of the tunnel. Thanks also to Sr Margaret Beech for critically reading this work and offering her advice. I am deeply grateful.

I wish to express my gratitude to the Priests of the Archdiocese of Perth, especially those in the South Central Zone and the Merriden Zone, for granting me permission to carry out my research in their parishes. Also I express my gratefulness to the parents who participated in the study. Without their invaluable contribution this study would not have been possible.

My appreciation goes also to my family and friends. My deep gratitude to my dear husband, David, and three children Amy, Sarah and Joel for understanding and respecting the time I needed to dedicate to this study over the years. I wish to thank my Mum and my late Dad for teaching me the value of persevering; a skill which I called upon many times on this journey. To my brothers Joe, John and Justin, my sister Anna and my sister-in-law Jenny I wish to thank them for their support and encouragement. Thanks to the many friends who took an active interest in the study.

Finally, thanks to my colleagues at the Catholic Education Office of WA, in particular my co-workers in the Catechist Service Team, for their support and their interest in this study.

I dedicate this thesis to my father and my sister Anna; both passed away before its completion.

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List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACS	Archdiocesan Catechist Service
AC	Catechist Service
CEOWA	Catholic Education Office of Western Australia
PREP	Parish Religious Education Program
SRE	Special Religious Education
SRI	Special Religious Instruction

List of Catholic Church Documents

AA	<i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i> (The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity) 1965
CT	<i>Catechesi Tradendae</i> (Catechesis in Our Time) 1979
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> 1994
CF	<i>Christifideles Laici</i> (The Vocation of the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World) 1988
EN	<i>Evangelii Nuntiandi</i> (Evangelisation in the Modern World) 1975
FC	<i>Familiaris Consortio</i> (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World) 1981
FR	<i>Fides et Ratio</i> (The Relationship between Faith and Reason) 1998
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i> (Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World) 1965
GDC	<i>General Directory for Catechesis</i> 1997
GE	<i>Gravissimum Educationis</i> (The Declaration on Christian Education) 1965
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i> (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) 1964
RD	<i>The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School</i> 1988

Introduction

The purpose of this introduction is to give an outline of the organisation and scope of the research project.

This study has examined and described how faith is nurtured within the home of contemporary Catholic families who do not access the Catholic school system. The study has focused on both the perceptions of faith as viewed by the participants and how they put their understanding of faith into practice within the context of the home. The methods employed to investigate how faith is nurtured within the context of the home of this group of parents include face-to-face interviews held mainly in the homes of the participants.

The thesis comes from a Catholic perspective within the lived experience of Catholic family life. It is not a treatment of Catholic theology but an investigation of one aspect of faith education.

This thesis consists of eight Chapters. A brief outline of each Chapter is presented.

Chapter One sets the context for the study. Chapter One first gives a brief background to the personal history of the author and states the motivation for the study. Second, the research questions are made explicit and then an explanation of the terms used within the study are offered to establish their definition within the context of the study.

Chapter Two explores the literature relevant to this research study. The literature is approached from four perspectives: historical, theological, sociological, and pastoral. The literature explored include relevant Church documents both pre and post Second Vatican Council. The response of the Catholic Church in Australian to the role of parents as the primary nurturers of faith is examined within the discussion of the four perspectives.

Chapter Three introduces the methods employed in the research and it establishes the context for the study. Chapter Three describes the research methods used to answer the research questions; the research setting is made explicit; and the

Chapter describes the procedure for selecting the sample. Data collection methods are described and the procedures used in analysing the data discussed.

Chapter Four is the first of three independent but related Chapters that focus on the data gathered. This Chapter presents the findings on the perceptions of faith held by the participants in the study and establishes three archetypal understandings of faith that become the framework for discussion within the following two Chapters.

Chapter Five describes how the perceptions of faith which emerged from the three voices established in Chapter Four, are practised within the homes of the participants. This Chapter identifies the nurturing style and strategies employed by participants to nurture faith within the home.

Chapter Six continues to make use of the metaphor of voices established in Chapter Four. The analytical metaphors are used to describe the diversity of challenges faced by parents in their task to nurture the faith of their children. This Chapter then presents the support for which parents desire to assist them in their task of nurturing the faith of their children.

Chapter Seven discusses and summarises the findings of the study in relation to the research question.

Chapter Eight presents the conclusions and names some recommendations for further research. Suggestions to improve current practice in the area of family catechesis are also offered.

Glossary of Documents

***Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) 1964.**

This Vatican II document treats several key aspects of Catholic theology. It holds a central place among the documents of the Second Vatican Council as it is looked upon as the document from which all the remaining Council documents flow (Huebsch and Thurnes 1997, p.17).

***Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World) 1965.**

This Vatican II document is unique as it speaks to the Church and to all people of the world about the hopes and dreams of the human family. “The document seeks to befriend and engage people of goodwill everywhere to make human life on this planet more dignified and, hence, closer to God’s plan for us humans” (Huebsch and Thurnes 1997, p.121).

***Apostolicam Actuositatem* (The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity) 1965.**

This Vatican document addresses the place of lay people in the Church. “This ... document details how the apostolic work of the laity is to proceed and how lay persons are to be prepared for this work” (Huebsch and Thurnes 1997, p.222).

***Gravissimum Educationis* (The Declaration on Christian Education) 1965.**

This Vatican II document deals with formal Catholic education, especially within the school setting. It discusses the major principles of what constitutes a Catholic school and Catholic religious education.

***Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Evangelisation in the Modern World) 1975.**

This document develops the concept of evangelisation as understood after the Second Vatican Council. “This document emphasised the concept of liberation through the acceptance of Christ and his teaching and described the role [of all] as witnessing to what they taught by their lives” (Malone 1992, p.7).

***Catechesi Tradendae* (Catechesis in Our Time) 1979.**

Catechesi Tradendae addresses the need for a systematic approach to catechesis. “It stressed ... the need to link teaching with the real needs of the group concerned,

and stated that prepared material 'must try to speak a language comprehensible to the task in question' " (Malone 1992, p.7).

Familiaris Consortio (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World) 1981.

Familiaris Consortio speaks of the role and mission of the family in the modern world. This document is fundamentally important to Catholic families. It comprehensively addresses issues most affecting families in the modern world.

Christifideles Laici (The Vocation of the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World) 1988.

This document speaks of the role and mission of the lay members of the modern Church.

Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994.

This document presents the official teachings of the Catholic Church. "The Catechism is given ... that it may be a sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine and particularly for preparing local catechisms" (John Paul II 1997, p.5).

General Directory for Catechesis 1997.

This document outlines the process for proclaiming the Christian message. It seeks to arrive at a balance between two principal requirements. The first is to "place catechetical work in the context of evangelisation, as envisioned by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975)" (Huebsch 2003, p.2). The second principal requirement is "to be sure the content of the faith is fully treated in catechetical work, as presented in the Catechism of the Catholic Church" (Huebsch 2003, p.2).