

Equipping Parents and Guardians to be the Primary Heralds of the Faith

Colleen Gerke



Equipping parents and guardians to be primary heralds of the faith challenges us as catechetical leaders to be familiar with the parents we serve. Let me begin with a story.

Recently I had the opportunity to meet a courageous, good woman, and a mom. A single parent of four children, she came to the church so her son could celebrate first Communion with his peers. I began my meeting with her by asking what her dreams were for her children. She said that she desired to raise her children to be adults with good morals, with an education to be productive citizens. She said that she hoped that her children would not struggle in life as she has. I shared with her the statistics that show “faith is good for kids.” Research demonstrates that families who pray together in the home, attend church services together, and have relationships with other members of their church community usually become adults with faith. These adults with an active faith generally have a higher level of education, a higher level of income, and a healthier state of mind than those young adults who do not have faith. I also shared that parents are key to passing on faith to children through celebrating Mass, praying at home, and leading the children in practicing faith in day-to-day living. I said, “It sounds like you are on the right track seeking membership in the church for your child. Do you want this for all of your children?” She said, “Yes.” I asked, “What about you?” She looked at me and said, “I am not worthy.” My immediate response was, “You are worthy!” She replied, “You do not know what I have done.” I then told her, “I do not care. You are here today. There is forgiveness in the church.” She began to sob; my heart ached with her. We continued our conversation and ended with a commitment from her to participate with her children in the church’s Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults process.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONVERSION

This is a mom of a second grade student in one of our Catholic schools, a parent wanting the best for her children. She contacted the parish to seek baptism for her seven-year-old son. We could have easily made the decision to prepare the son for baptism with the mother’s consent but without her direct involvement. However, taking the time to listen to the family story and the mother’s dreams for her children allowed us to

offer an opportunity that has the potential for a conversion of faith for the entire family.

Changing how we reach out to parents will provide potential for transformative change and assist in breaking the cycle of “to do list” or “check lists” for sacramental preparation. Our default approach of using programs for religious formation, as we have for so many years, falls short of meeting the needs of families today. A key to empowering parents to pass on the faith to the next generation is meeting the parents where they are, and giving them tools to be “heralds of the faith.” Another key factor is having a faith community that is accessible to parents who may feel “unworthy” and a community that desires to reach young families and invite them into the community of faith. After all, we are a church for all families, not just those who “have their acts together.”

A GRADUAL CATECHESIS

Church documents support meeting parents “where they are.” The documents invite us to provide gradual and suitable catechesis, as well as document the need for the support and guidance of the community of faith. Data show that young adults are fairly inarticulate about the Catholic faith and these inarticulate young adults are exactly the new parents we will serve. Yet our “go to” methods for faith formation are programs with set beginnings and endings that tend to be one size fits all. If we are going to “equip parents to be heralds of the faith” effectively, then we must listen to their stories and meet their needs. We must not only read the documents of our church, but we must wrestle with the implications of putting the instructions into action.

The catechumenate is an extended period during which the candidates are given suitable pastoral formation and guidance, aimed at training them in the Christian life. (RCIA 75)

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (*Lineamenta Instrumentum laboris* for the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization 18)

Such a world-wide mission will respond to the action of the Holy Spirit, as in a new Pentecost, through a call issued by the

Roman Pontiff, who invites all faithful to visit all families and bring the life of Christ to all human situations. (Proposition 7)

Discipleship is rooted in human experience. It is through human experience that one enters into a dialogue with modern culture. The human experience provides the “sensible signs” that help us come to know ourselves, one another, and God. (Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization 49)

It is through common human experiences that the Word of God is revealed to us. These sensible signs are not abstract metaphysical signs but the concrete actions of the Holy Spirit present in the Christian’s everyday life. (Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization 13)

Initiatory catechesis, being comprehensive and systematic, cannot be reduced to the circumstantial or the occasional. As it is formation for the Christian life it comprises but surpasses mere instruction... This inherent richness in the Catechumenate of non-baptized adults should serve to inspire other forms of catechesis. (GDC 66)

The baptismal catechumenate is the source of inspiration for all catechesis... While a distinction is made between catechumens and those already baptized who are being catechized, some elements of the baptismal catechumenate are instructive for the post-baptismal catechesis. In that sense, the baptismal catechumenate inspires a continuing catechesis. It reminds the Church that her catechesis accompanies a continued conversion to Christ and an ongoing initiation in to the celebration of the sacraments and the life of the Church. (NDC 116)

Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. For it devolves on parents to create a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God and others that a well-rounded personal and social development will be fostered among children. Hence, the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs. (Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum educationis* 3)

No plan for organized pastoral work, at any level, must ever fail to take into consideration the pastoral care of the family. (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, *Familiaris consortio* 17)

This is a small sampling of quotes that invite us to serve God’s people in new ways.

In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, we are committed to approaching parish leaders through new lenses, with an initiative we call “Christ at the Center.” Mindful of the current research showing a decline in Mass attendance (CARA, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate), the inability of youth to articulate what makes a person Catholic (National Study of Youth and Religion), the Gallup research on church engagement, and the research on transformative change (the work of Ron Heifetz and John Kotter), we as an Archdiocesan staff are working differently. We are using consultation models in our efforts to respond to Pope Benedict’s instruction, “No more business as usual.” We are reaching out to parishes in joint office efforts as a team. We are beginning with conversations between Archdiocesan teams and parish teams.

The Archdiocesan teams usually represent multiple offices such as The Office of Evangelization and Catechesis with the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry, or the Worship Office with the Family and Respect Life Office and other combinations and offices. The parish team may include the pastor and Director of Religious Education, Pastoral Council and key volunteers as well as many other combinations and parish leaders. Conversations usually strive to create a clear vision of a desired outcome that all involved want to make happen. The teams look at what is already happening in the parish and resources available.

HAS EVERYONE BEEN INCLUDED?

An important step is seeing who is missing in the conversation. Is there “buy in” from key staff, parents, or others that are key to making goals happen? There is discernment about what needs to change, what training and/or resources are needed to make it happen, how success will be evaluated. This is an effort for Archdiocesan staff and parish staff to journey together in collaborative efforts to minister to the people we are called to

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serve. It is a process that is just beginning. It is a process that will evolve over time. It is about letting go of past practices that have not worked. It is a grassroots process that begins with Christ and the people the church serves. It is not about having the answers. It is about finding answers together.

One of the pilot efforts that has been an outgrowth of *Christ at the Center* is *Revitalizing Sacramental Ministry: A Framework for Parishes*. This framework outlines an approach to sacramental ministry that is designed to engage those seeking the sacraments in a process inspired by the new evangelization and by our approach to those who come to the church through the RCIA. This approach strives to welcome and invite Catholics seeking the sacraments into a deeper relationship with Christ and the worshiping community, forming them as disciples of Christ, ultimately sending them back into the world to give witness to Christ Jesus. This framework recognizes and honors the needs of the family to follow Christ in their home and daily living as the domestic church. It responds to the cultural realities of our time and is meant to inspire new approaches to sacramental ministry in our local church today. This is a process that will look different at each parish according to their needs and resources. The process will also vary in the development time frame according to the parish resources and staff needs and strengths. It is not only individualized according to

the needs of the family, but also according to the needs of the parish staff and faith community.

HERALDS OF JOY

Are we saying programs are not important? No. Information gives us a common language that is useful in sharing who we are, what we do, and how we do it as Catholics. We are making being heralds [missionaries] of the joy of Jesus's presence in our day-to-day living a priority. We are inviting others — especially parents — to join us in being heralds of joy. The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus and many Samaritans came to believe in him “because of the woman’s testimony” (Jn 4:39). So too, St. Paul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, “immediately proclaimed Jesus” (Acts 9:20; cf. 22:6-21). So what are we waiting for? (*Evangelii Gaudium* 120)

For more information on these efforts go to ChristattheCenter.org and catholiccincinnati.org/ministries-offices/worship/sacramental-ministry-framework/. ■

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