

# Evangelizing Parent Formation: Invitation to Conversion, Not Exercise in Hoop-Jumping

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The more I have the chance to work with parents in sacrament preparation processes, the more certain I am that many are ripe for conversion. A tremendous evangelizing opportunity lies directly before us with these parents during proximate sacrament preparation and beyond. However, this implies a few things:

1. We, as catechetical leaders, need to be desirous of inviting our parents to a conversion to Jesus and meaningful participation in Catholic life. We must recognize catechetical leadership today requires the evangelization of households, not just the catechesis of children.
2. We must create interface opportunities with our parents that are designed with careful intentionality to foster conversion. The opportunities can be parent-only and family gatherings, along with personal mentorship and electronic/paper resourcing.
3. There should be some manner of accountability established for parents by which their participation is expected and required. With fortitude, charity, and patience, a culture of parent involvement can become embraced and valued over time.
4. The parent formation and family formation provided must be done very well — *dynamically* well. Participants should experience a hospitality, joy, and passion that reflects our faith and models discipleship. Everything about the experience should point toward encounter with and conversion to Jesus Christ and a resultant transformative living in the Christ's Body.

Often, parish sacrament preparation feels like hoop-jumping. There is little that speaks to the lived experience of parents that encourages them to look at their lives, search their hearts, and frame their life journey within the context of grace, mercy, and salvation. In what is increasingly a post-Christian era, there is remarkably little in the way of introducing parents to Jesus Christ in a primary, kerygmatic way.

Rather, in many instances, the focus remains almost entirely on their children. Sound formation of our children for sacraments is vital. However, our focus on children, to the near-exclusion of parents, is tacit sanction for the vast majority of our parents to remain in a state of faith sleep-walking... and the endemic downward spiral we are experiencing.

Here are a few suggestions for next year:

1. Find faith-filled people from your parish to provide witness to the place of God and Catholic faith in their lives.

Involve them in your parent and family formation. Our parents need to hear authentic peer voices encouraging them and modeling for them.

2. Find ways to use Scripture to bring people into an encounter with Jesus Christ that seems real and relevant for their lives today.
3. Weave in consideration of real issues of the day and their lived experience today. In evenings of formation with parents, I invite reflection upon our false gods and struggles, the great human hungers for love, community, and meaning, and how Jesus desperately desires to heal us and feed us. We talk about our God being greater than sin and more powerful than death. We've entered into *evangelizing* catechesis, into the *heart* of the matter. (Evangelizing catechesis can be challenging, but always with a tone that is inviting, hopeful, and joyful.)
4. Get them talking — to one another and in large group. Get them talking about their lives. This changes the dynamic from *meeting* to *formation*, from hoop-jumping to meaning-filled! (By the way, get away from *meeting* language. Try "*evening of formation*" or such.)
5. Provide a meaningful experience of prayer. It should invite introspection. Don't be afraid of silence and don't rush. Give it a liturgical feel.
6. Resource them in pursuit of a renewed prayer life and practice of Catholic faith. Doing so helps to empower them to grow in their own faith and better fulfill their role as primary catechist. In particular, parents are hungry for spirituality, Scripture, and distinctive elements of Catholic faith. We are in the golden era of quality Catholic resources, including digital. Make those connections!

There's so much more to this topic for us to explore. But these are primary thoughts from my work with parents today.

I almost feel that if we're not touching hearts in our formation today, we're wasting our time. If we're not heavily focusing our efforts on parents (and in an evangelizing way) we are failing as parishes and as leaders.

May God bless your efforts to develop both parent and family formation that is designed to open hearts and invite people into a renewed (or new) Catholic life in Jesus Christ. It is at the heart of new evangelization, indeed, the very mission of the church, that we are all called to passionately serve today. ■

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