

We can let our young people drift away from the faith of the apostles and the saints, or we can redouble our efforts to teach our children, first by our own example, that living the faith in Christ is the sure path to heaven. –Bishop John T. Folda

“Let the children come to me:” Handing on the gift of faith

With the end of summer comes the start of school and the ongoing work of religious education—passing along our Catholic faith to our children and youth. Many of our families have the opportunity to send their children to Catholic schools, where they will learn about our Catholic faith on a daily basis. And some parents choose to teach the faith themselves to their children through homeschooling. But most of our families depend on the religious education programs sponsored by our parishes and run by fellow parishioners who generously give of their time and talent out of love for God and his Church.

Catholic parents have an obligation to see that their children are raised and educated in the faith, and that doesn't just happen automatically without determination and effort. It takes commitment and even sacrifice to make sure our children get to their religious education classes each week, or to enroll our children in a Catholic school. But the purpose is clear: it's up to us to share the gift of faith with our children so that they can know the love of God in their lives and live the faith that was handed on to us.

Research tells us again and again that parents have a paramount influence on the faith lives of their children. The most important factor in handing on the faith to our sons and daughters is to live that faith at home. In homes where the faith is lived and cherished, children will absorb the faith and bring it with them into adulthood. But if we fail to live out our faith at home and neglect to teach this faith to our children, it is naïve to think that they will still be believing Catholics when they reach adulthood.

Essential for any experience of religious education is attending Sunday Mass. What our children learn in their classrooms is solidified by their experience of worshiping God at Mass with their families and the whole parish community. There they hear the Word of God proclaimed, and they see the sacrifice of Christ celebrated at the altar. Those who are old enough can then come forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist, which is the source and summit of the life of the Church. The very act of joining with others in prayer at Mass is a learning experience, a formation in faith. As our Lord told the apostles, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.”

To be formed in faith, one must participate in the life of the Church, which Jesus established as his Mystical Body here on earth. Every time we bring our children to Mass, we are making it possible for them to enter more deeply into the life of Christ. But if we fail to bring our children to Mass, we are depriving them of the food of life that Jesus himself offers his people. We are telling our children loudly and clearly that other things are more important than God. We are teaching them that faith and the Eucharist and the Church are less important than whatever it is we happen to be doing that day. But when we make a weekly decision to attend Mass, no matter what sacrifice that entails, we are sending a clear message to our children that nothing matters more than God, and he is the center of our lives.

I often read and hear about the declining number of young people who call themselves Catholic or who participate actively in the life of the Church. Certainly the forces of our culture and the wiles of the Evil One are at work, drawing our young people away from Christ and the Church and the sacraments. We can shrug our shoulders and complacently watch this decline, or we can recommit ourselves to doing everything in our power to assure that our children grow up with a full and joyful knowledge of God in their lives. We can let our young people drift away from the faith of the apostles and the saints, or we can redouble our efforts to teach our children, first by our own example, that living the faith in Christ is the sure path to heaven.

Dear parents, thank you for all you do to pass on the gift of our Catholic faith to your children. Nothing is more important than their eternal salvation, and nothing else you do for them will come close to helping them know Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth, and the life.” Your vocation as mothers and fathers is beautiful, and your love for your children is inspiring. You have my prayers and my admiration, as well as my encouragement to be good teachers of the faith.

Dear teachers and catechists, thank you for saying yes to the call to pass along the gift of our Catholic faith to our young people. Your dedication is a blessing to the children and families who depend on you, and our diocesan Church would be crippled without your zeal and generosity.

Dear pastors, thank you for shepherding and teaching the young people who are entrusted to your pastoral care. Teaching the faith is central to our identity and ministry as priests, and I am grateful for your zeal and hard work in sharing this gift with the young sons and daughters of our Lord.

As your bishop, I am the chief catechist of our diocese, but of course, I cannot carry out this work by myself. So I happily share this responsibility with all of you—the baptized faithful of the Diocese of Fargo. All of us share in the prophetic mission of Jesus and the Church to proclaim the Gospel and hand on the faith. Our children are depending on us!