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Families at the Centre: The Spirituality of the Home²³

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This is the *second* in a series of three articles outlining the findings of the first phase of a small-scale research project on baptism conducted in 2021 by academics in St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth and Dublin City University. The purpose of the project was to explore how parents who present their children for baptism can be encouraged and empowered to foster the spirituality of their family. In the first article published in *The Furrow* last month, the experience of, the preparation for, and celebration of baptism was presented from the perspective of baptism team members. The article highlighted the need for parishes to have an increased recognition of the role of the home and the agency of parents in the spiritual lives of their children. This article will primarily address the nature of spirituality of the home. It will show how parents are powerful educators and that it is from our families that we acquire our values, attitudes, beliefs and practices. It will also explore the responses made by baptism team members who took part in the research and the opinions of parents involved with the project. Some views expressed by parents who participated in the *Listening-to-Parents Exercise* of the Archdiocese of Dublin will also be considered.

PARENTS ARE SPIRITUAL

Donal Dorr states that most people, whether they acknowledge it or not, have at their deep core a spirituality that informs most of their actions and their desire for a deeper meaning and purpose to

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life.¹ Nowadays, many people describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. Dorr applies the term *spiritual* to a number of human experiences which most people will encounter at least once in their lifetime. He selects these experiences because they are universal, unconditioned by gender, age, race or religion. They include being loved unconditionally by another human being, being forgiven by someone, devoting one's life to the care of someone or being an activist on any social issue. Jack Finnegan views spirituality as "a question of real activity in real situations" which "draws us into an engagement with all of reality."² Moving into the domain of parenting as a spiritual practice, Gloria Furman advocates for the word "mother" to be thought of as a verb because mothering or nurturing involves "disciplining, serving, caregiving, showing hospitality, and more."³ Sue Delaney suggests that "motherhood is itself a spiritual path" and that "selfless service given to family" is an example of the practice of surrender which is considered by all religious traditions "as essential in the path to the Divine."⁴

Using the criteria above, it is clear that the parents interviewed for this project, as well as the parents interviewed in the *Listening-to-Parents Exercise*, are spiritual people. Some baptism team members acknowledged this spirituality although they felt that it was being expressed in a somewhat alien manner. They also suspected that their image of God was not quite the same as the image of God held by the parents. Consequently, they believe that the church has "huge learning to do." Other baptism team members *assumed* that parents had a negative attitude towards religion or that they were not interested in it. They based these assumptions on the lack of subsequent involvement with parish activities following the baptism of their child, but Donal Harrington argues that living a Christian life in the ordinariness of everyday life *is* involvement and he maintains that parents, by doing this, are among the most involved people in the parish.⁵ He points out, however, that this involvement appears to be below the awareness level of the parish and consequently it goes unrecognised and unvalidated.

As part of the research project, the parents of recently baptised children were asked in an anonymous survey about their willingness to engage in the spiritual nurture of their children post baptism.

- 1 Donal Dorr, *Spirituality: Our Deepest Heart's Desire*, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2008).
- 2 Jack Finnegan, *The Audacity of Spirit: The Meaning and Shaping of Spirituality Today* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2008).
- 3 Gloria Furman, *Missional Motherhood: The Everyday Ministry of Motherhood in the Grand Plan of God* (Illinois: Crossway, 2016).
- 4 Sue Delaney, "Motherhood As A Spiritual Path", *The Way* 42/4 (2003). <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/424Delaney.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2022).
- 5 Donal Harrington, *Tomorrow's Parish: A Vision and A Path*, Revised Edition (Dublin: Columba Press, 2018).

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Eighty six percent of respondents stated that it was important for them to continue to help support their children's spiritual lives and one in two parents felt confident that they possessed the necessary capacities to do this. When presented with these findings, most members of the baptism teams expressed surprise by this degree of positivity in the responses given by the parents. It seems that the baptism team members *underestimated* the willingness and capacity of parents. This appears to confirm the points made by Harrington that the spiritual capacity of parents is generally unappreciated and largely ignored by parishes. Contrary to this pessimistic view of parents, it is important to recognise that parents play an active role in the ongoing process of preparing their children to be disciples of Jesus by unconditionally loving their children; self-sacrificing in the interests of their children; allowing the curiosity of their children to challenge their assumptions; letting the playful spirituality of children introduce them to the amazing things that are present in ordinary, everyday life; and re-discovering through their children that the world is a good place and above all, that it is fun.

The parents of young children today want their children to be happy, healthy, confident, independent and open-minded. Any pastoral programme aimed at involving them will need to be based on a holistic approach to the child which includes the child's physical, mental and emotional well-being and not limited to faith formation alone. Pope Francis' vision of pastoral care of families extends well beyond sacramental preparation. He advocates the involvement of professionals from many disciplines with contributions from "psychology, sociology, marital therapy and counseling" to "help keep pastoral initiatives grounded in the real situations and concrete concerns of families."⁶

Young parents of this generation also have a strong tendency towards a postmodern worldview where the views and values of all are tolerated and they perceive the actions of the Church to be at odds with this worldview. For example, some parents in the *Listening-to-Parents Exercise* of the Diocese of Dublin expressed regret that compassion and tolerance were not always obvious in the language used by the Church. This makes it difficult for them to reconcile their views with positions taken by the Church. These parents are not hostile to the Church; they simply feel no connection with it. The Church in its present form does not meet their spiritual needs. The *challenge* for parishes is to develop innovative ways in which to help this generation to think through their personal truths and values.

6 Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: The Joy of Love*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family, par. 204 (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2016).

HOMES ARE HOLY PLACES

Homes are more than just ordinary spaces. Homes are holy places. Stepping across the threshold of a family home brings us into a liminal space which marks the transition between arriving and departing. Thresholds are what brides are carried across, where new babies are introduced to their home and once-absent members are reunited with family. It is the place where the wholeness of the family is broken as members go their separate ways, perhaps for the last time. It is also the place where the family opens itself to the stranger and responds with love to their presence. The hallway is where some families display photographs of special family events, many of which feature Church ceremonies. These recorded occasions remind the family that their deepest identity as Christians spans generations. The living-room and kitchen are sacred spaces where guests can experience the ancient Christian tradition of hospitality. The dinner table, when most, if not all of the family are present, creates a ritual space and the relationality of a meal implies more than a transaction about food. *Church*, Harrington maintains, happens within families through their table fellowship and reconciliation. He argues that there is a parallel between the parish community gathering for Eucharist and a family gathering for dinner. He also discerns a parallel between the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the family, with the stages of contrition, confession, restitution and absolution present in the dynamic of family life: “failing and feeling sorry, apologising and being forgiven, reconciling and making good.”⁷ The presence of God in the home needs to be recognised and celebrated by families and by parishes. Parents who may be ‘shaky’ about their faith need to realise that their family is a living cell of the Church. Playing games together, making discoveries together, having family get-togethers, creating new traditions that give happiness, engaging in family-generated activities that help the family to bond in the present and create cherished memories for the future, are all ways of promoting the well-being of every member of the family and of nurturing spirituality within the family.

The spirituality of the home contributes to the development of a personal relationship with God and the language of that relationship is prayer. Nothing is automatically prayer but everything can be prayer if offered to God in faith and with openness.⁸ For children, talking to God can mean painting a picture, singing a song or blowing bubbles. Children are sensitive to the beauty of

7 Harrington, *Tomorrow's Parish: A Vision and A Path*, Revised Edition, 179.

8 David G. Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer* (Downes Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010)

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creation and respond with awe to the *feeling* of the presence of God in nature: as one child remarked, “nature is like God’s heart.” Participants in the *Listening-to-Parents Exercise* reported having mystical experiences of God through their children. Today’s parents want authentic experiences of God. Parishes may find it helpful to reflect on the words of Saint Pope Paul VI. In 1975, he wrote that “Modern man (*sic*) listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁹ He continued: “Modern man (*sic*) is sated by talk; he is obviously often tired of listening and, what is worse, impervious to words.”¹⁰

Prayer does not need to be limited to words and parents are praying when they allow their spirit to be drawn to God through everyday activities like cooking, lighting a candle or playing with their children. To see three generations – grandmother, mother and daughter – playing together in the snow, making a snowman and throwing snowballs at each other amid howls of laughter, will require awareness of everyday spirituality before this scene can be recognised as possible prayer. Prayer is also about listening and Noel Keating maintains that even young children can achieve deep states of spiritual consciousness.¹¹ He argues that through meditation children can experience reduced stress, have their general wellbeing enhanced and experience a positive impact on basic brain function. The experience of being touched is a powerful way to silently communicate welcome, love, compassion, empathy and concern for others and the touch of a loved one has a deep connection to family spirituality and prayer.

There is no strong tradition in Irish Catholic homes of praying with the Bible. The best way to introduce the Bible to children is for parent and child to share a Bible story as equals. Through an open discussion, both parties wonder, ask questions and draw the other’s attention to things that caught their interest. Everyday experiences can be drawn on to connect the family story with the story in the Bible. Listening non-judgementally gives parents the opportunity to learn fresh insights from their children. Parishes can promote the Bible among children by introducing them to *Godly Play*, which is an approach to religious education that is influenced by the traditions and educational methods of Maria Montessori and Sofia Cavalletti. Jerome W. Berryman, the creator

9 Pope Paul VI, EVANGELII NUNTIANDI: Apostolic Exhortation, par. 41, December 8, 1975. https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html accessed 11 Jan 2022.

10 Ibid., par. 42.

11 Noel Keating, *Meditation with Children: A Resource for Teachers and Parents*, Foreword by Laurence Freeman OSB (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2017).

of *Godly Play*, explains that the emphasis is on telling and showing the parables, sacred stories and liturgical action, not on reading about them in books.¹²

CHOOSING BAPTISM

Share the Good News: National Directory of Catechesis in Ireland states that the decision to baptise a baby is a significant decision.¹³ While a request to baptise a baby has to be treated with respect and encouragement, the final decision to baptise the child should be made through prayer and reflection following a full discussion taking place between the parents, the wider family and senior parish personnel. It is essential that parents fully understand the commitment involved and the pledge that they are giving prior to making their decision. The *Listening-to-Parents Exercise* highlighted the fact that in general, parents regarded Baptism as the continuation of a family tradition with family heirlooms playing a significant role. The story of a baptism is an important event in the family memory. However, the church also has a story, with ecclesial symbols, about the Sacrament of Baptism which marks the initiation of the baby into a lifelong journey of *discipleship*. Parents need to hear and understand this story before they can fully commit themselves to the decision to have their child baptised.

Most parishes appear to limit baptism preparation to a once-off, hour-long meeting during the week leading up to the baptism. The responses from the baptism team members indicate that more time spent with families would be beneficial. They identified that connecting with families in their *own homes* was more convenient for the families and it allowed other family members to be present. A respondent to the *Listening-to-Parents Exercise* highlighted how much she appreciated the priest visiting the family at home on a couple of occasions prior to the baptism and how this resulted in an increase in family attendance at church. Another respondent was delighted with the Baptism Welcome Mass and she felt that support was available from the community because of this Mass. This raises the issue concerning the nature and level of support that parents can realistically expect from their parish. According to the baptism team members, neither of these initiatives is common practice. A small number of baptism team members reported that in their parish, an annual Mass was offered to which families of

12 Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995).

13 Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2010).

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children baptised during that year were invited. Again, this is not common practice.

A shift in perspective on the part of parishes which recognises and affirms the activities of the *home* as spiritual will help parents to authenticate their spiritual lives and perhaps begin a new partnership on their spiritual journey together with parishes. The challenge, and opportunity, is to bring the very real spiritual work that happens in the home into creative and lifegiving *dialogue* with what happens when a child is received into the family of God through baptism and beyond. The *final* article in this series will discern if the principles of *Godly Play* can offer some fruitful propositions and what this might look like in practice.

Receiving Communion. That there are alternative ways of receiving Communion is not always accepted with equanimity among Catholics. It would be best for all if those who differ on this issue, instead of condemning one another, tried to think out and explain the values of faith and devotion they find in their favoured practice. This kind of thoughtfulness is particularly valuable about receiving in the hand. People who receive in this way can profit from reflecting on why it is such a good thing to do. People who object to the practice might be helped by such reflection to overcome their fears about it.

– LIAM G. WALSH, OP. *The Mass: Yesterday, Today, and Forever.* (Dublin: Dominican Publications). p.93.