
A PEERLESS, LASTING GIFT



At this time, a momentous decision has to be taken by parents whether or not to register their child(ren) for the 2001-2002 family- or parish-based religious education programme, or for sacramental preparation. This registration has a two-fold implication: freedom and commitment. No one can oblige another to follow a religious programme or to receive a sacrament: this must come from a deep conviction on the part of parent and child. And I know that all parents want to pass on to their children the values they, the parents, hold the most dear. It is because of their belief in the marvellous gift of life that they created life; it is because they believe in love that they want to live in love.

SERIOUS RESPONSIBILITY

To register a child for religious education is to make a commitment not only on the child's behalf; it is also a commitment of parent and religious educator. Parents commit themselves to helping their child(dren) grow in the faith through supporting their learning process at different stages. Resource persons are available to help parents in this wonderful mission of theirs, which is to lead their children to Christ. It is not primarily a matter of knowledge that this is about, but rather of leading the child to an experience of God... a simple and wonderful experience! Nevertheless, this experience of God first challenges the parents themselves: "What kind of faith do I have? What kind of relationship do I have with Jesus? How do I live the Gospel of Jesus today? What is my attitude towards the Church, and how am I a committed member of the Church?" It would be difficult and well-nigh impossible to have any kind of worthwhile religious education without the witness and faithful support of parents. Before talking about manuals and teaching tools, programmes and meetings, the primary element is the parents themselves. I thank God and those parents implicated in their children's religious education: your witness is the foundation on which religious education is built.

VITAL LINKS

A second element I want to point out is the intimate link between catechetics and sacraments. Every celebration of a sacrament - whether of baptism, reconciliation, Eucharist, or confirmation - requires some preparation, and this preparation is closely tied to family- and parish-based religious education. The child who desires to undergo his first reconciliation, her first communion or even confirmation is given a corresponding religious education. The child who has not followed this usual course will not be refused the sacrament but will have to wait for another time, when s/he is adequately prepared to live the Church's faith life in the given sacrament. This is why registering a child for religious education is so important for both child and parent: it is in complete freedom that they opt for religious education or sacramental preparation, and the Christian community is there with them with its witness and prayerful support of the children who have decided to journey along this path with the Lord.

FOLLOW-UP, PLEASE!

Much time and energy are required on the part of parents and child(ren), pastors and religious educators. The sad thing about this is that very often, once the sacrament has been celebrated and received, several young people stop their religious practice altogether, and no longer join the Church gathering. Rare are the young

people who receive the sacrament of reconciliation a second time; rare are those who take part in the Sunday celebration; rarer still are those who join the celebrating Church community once they have received Confirmation. All of this raises serious questions. We know that peer pressure is very strong. As much as in days gone by this pressure was in the sense of driving young people to church, it now works in the opposite direction, keeping them from attending. This can be a decision of the child himself, but it can sometimes come from the parents themselves. How have we come to this? Was there ever an encounter with Jesus, to begin with? Was Jesus' message really understood? Have we fully grasped the vital link between Gospel and Church, religious education and celebration? It seems to me that if these had been better grasped, there would have been continuity and coherence between knowledge and deed.

HOLD FAST!

Family- and parish-based religious education form a vast enterprise, greater and more demanding than we had ever foreseen. It is truly a wonderful invitation to discover our faith, and to enter as a family into an extraordinary relationship with Jesus Christ and with his Church. Difficulties will continue to arise from all sides, and we must not be surprised at this. The disciples at Emmaus who were walking along in disappointment and sorrow encountered a marvellous catechist who took the time to explain the Scriptures to them, to warm their hearts, and to finally reveal himself to them in the breaking of the bread; he blessed them, and rekindled their hope: "Stay with us, for it is late," the transformed travellers exclaimed. An extraordinary catechesis, while earlier in the day all seemed to have brought them to the brink of despair. Pastors, hold fast! Parents, hold fast! Resource people, hold fast! Families and communities, hold fast! Children, hold fast! Yours will be the joy of encountering the Risen One. Yours will be the joy of receiving his forgiveness, and you will have the joy of receiving his most precious gifts, his Eucharist and his Holy Spirit! And you will have the pleasure of having a better understanding of his gift, the Church!

TAKE ME ON BOARD!

The priest-poet Robert Lebel has a wonderful song, an invitation to youth to live a new experience: *Take me on board your ship! I want to go with you! Take me on board! Yes, Jesus, I am going with you! My heart beats with the excitement of happiness! I want to follow you, Lord. I am no longer afraid, Jesus. I am coming aboard! I know that you once told me, "Come with me!" Yes, I know that it is you, and that is why I am coming on board, Jesus. Your life is my song and my refrain is your name. With these I will paint the sky, O Jesus. I am coming on board! I am aboard!*

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