

Accompanying Children on the Journey of Prayer

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An elderly gentleman passed his granddaughter's room one night and overheard her repeating the alphabet in an oddly reverent way.

“What on earth are you up to?” he asked.

“I’m saying my prayers,” explained the little girl. “But I can’t think of exactly the right words tonight, so I’m just saying all the letters. God will put them together for me, because he knows what I’m thinking.”

The trust of children!

And we have the privilege of accompanying them on the journey of prayer in their faith life. There is much for us to reflect on about that mystery; just a few in this short article.

Some Pre-requisite for us:

- Be pray-ers ourselves.

Prayer, of course, has to be part of our lives. We can't accompany others in an experience that isn't a part of us.

We also need to know what we believe and value if we are going to be witnesses and have an influence on others.

Many times young people will say, “I don't believe in going to

church; I can pray at home just as well." I think what they're really saying is, "Tell me why you go to church."

- We need to constantly remind ourselves we don't "teach" children to pray.

Prayer is like the common cold. It's caught, not really taught. In reality, prayer is a gift from God. As catechists (and parents), we prepare the soil, we set the environment, but prayer happens because of the relationship between the child and God.

Characteristics of Children:

In many ways, it's easy to accompany children on the journey of prayer. They are natural pray-ers. They have a unique relationship with God.

- *They love to pray.* Once when three of my nieces were spending the night, they said, "Can we do the fun prayer we did the last time?" (Saying thank you for things for each letter of their name) But then they asked me to come up with a new prayer because they said that they now did that one a lot at home.
- *They are capable of deep prayer.* During a faith formation session, an 11-year old boy asked, "How do I know if it's God talking to me or my own brain talking to itself?" After thinking about it for two

weeks, he answered his own question, "When I get quiet after playing ball or watching TV, then it's me talking to myself. When I get empty; you know, like an empty piece of paper, then it is God.

- *They know that God is real, a friend, always there.* During a health test in school, a young friend of mine, had this question: "Beth's mother is in the hospital and Beth feels scared. What can she do?" My friend's answer was: "She can pray for her or she can do something to get her mind off of it." It was marked wrong because the right answer was "talk to someone." Anne went to her teacher and said, "I think you should give me at least half credit. God is Someone and I talk to God all the time."

Some attitudes to develop about prayer (because that is our goal – to lead our youngsters to be prayerful people all of their lives):

- *Prayer is about relationship/friendship with God.*

Sometimes children (adults!) think of prayer either in the same category as politeness (you have to say grace before you can eat) or as a last resort means of trying to get something we want. Rather, prayer is natural to life. It's who we are. We pray because we want to; we pray because we're connected to God. We can't not pray.

- *There are many ways to pray.* Prayer can be adoration, thanksgiving, sorrow or petition. Within those four categories, there are myriad forms that prayer can take. As catechists, we have such a privilege (and responsibility) to share many different kinds of prayer with children.
- *God is always with us; we just need to be aware.* Sometimes our prayers ask God to “come and be with us.” When we pray in that manner, I always wonder: what are we teaching one another, especially our youngsters? Don’t we believe that God is always with us? Perhaps our prayers need to pray, “Loving God, we know you are with us. Please slow us down so we can be more aware of all the ways your love is around us today.”
- *Do everything you can to make prayer more personal.*
 - Simplify the language of prayer. Even inviting children to pray by asking the question, “what are you thankful for?” might bring blank stares. You might begin by asking, “What made you happy today?” After their answers, turn those responses into a prayer of thanks.
 - Assure children/youth that they can always tell God exactly how they feel. No feeling is beyond the realm of prayer.

- *Help children/youth to see that God and everyday happenings go together. God is not “out there.” God is part of all life. Involve God in everything that happens (we usually do a good job with sad things; why do we have a harder job with the ordinary and the happy things?).*
- *Lead them to understand that prayer changes us. One day, a young girl stood at the street corner begging for food, money or whatever she could get. She was wearing very tattered clothes; she was dirty and quite disheveled.*

A well-to-do young man passed by without giving the girl a second look. But when he returned to his expensive home, his happy family, and his bountiful table, his thoughts returned to the young girl and he prayed to God, “How can you let this happen? Why don’t you do something to help this girl?” Then he heard God respond by saying, “I did. I created you.”

If we’re faithful to prayer, God gives us the strength to be what we’re praying for; to make the difference in the world.

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