

Catechizing Parents through their Children's Sacraments

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Hopefully, we have long ago moved beyond sacramental parent meetings which told parents all the “stuff” they need to know to “get through” the year, e.g. dates, times, Baptismal certificates to turn in, etc. (things they can read on their own).

Perhaps, though, we are still in the phase that parent meetings at sacramental times are focused on the children approaching the sacrament for the first time; catechesis is given to parents about what is happening to their child. For all practical purposes, we prepare the child for the “holy thing” and explain to the parents the meaning of it for the child. The end result of this approach is that often a child's experience of the sacrament is his/her last participation in the community until another event arises, such as preparation for another sacrament.

We need to look at new ways. Our old ways have too often perpetuated a cultural Catholicism oriented toward the acquiring of holy things but doing little to prepare people for sacraments as experiences of being missioned to be disciples, apprentices of Jesus, to bring about the Kingdom of God.

Sacramental catechesis is not religious education. The goal is much more than instruction. Pope John Paul II, in *On Catechesis in our Time*,¹ said, “The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ.” (#5) This is uniquely true for sacramental catechesis. The primary goal is the formation and transformation of the person. The Church

desires to lead people into the sacramental mystery which they are about to celebrate so that they are formed, shaped, and transformed by that mystery.

There are many ways to do this; each community needs to take the best from the Church's tradition, the vision from our recent documents, and the lived experience from our rites and rituals and mold all that into a process which touches the hearts and lives of their people.

What are some beliefs which will guide us – and some things to do -- which follow from these beliefs?

WE BELIEVE: PARENTS ARE THE PRIMARY CATECHISTS OF THEIR CHILDREN.

This belief was emphatically affirmed by the Second Vatican Council. It is so basic that we need to continually strive to honor it and minister out of a strong conviction of it. As catechetical leaders, it might be helpful once in a while to ask ourselves how we are doing it. Do we want families involved because someone told us it was a nice thing to do? Or do we honor the role of the family because we are convinced that the real living of Christianity takes place in the home? The attitudes we hold are communicated to the families in our correspondence, programming, and personal interactions. They respond to the underlying messages as well as to the overt ones. If we let them know, not just that we want their involvement, but that they are the primary catechist and we are in catechetical ministry to assist them, then both the quantity and quality of family involvement will deepen.

This belief can lend itself to two actions:

1) In sacramental catechesis, schedule family days rather than parent meetings. Don't provide children's sacramental catechesis without incorporating opportunities for adults at the same time. Then, provide time for the family to come together for sharing and reflection upon what each experienced in their peer groupings.. In one sense, the whole family is the candidate for the sacrament. Our theology reminds us that sacraments affect the whole community, not just the individual who is celebrating it for the first time. This has to be especially true for the immediate family surrounding the child.

2) Continually help parents see how they catechize; affirm them in what they are already doing. Their catechesis at home is not setting up a mini-classroom. They catechize by the way they live a loving, forgiving, and caring community life as a family. They catechize by the way they recognize and celebrate God in their midst – the extraordinarily sacred in the ordinary. How do they celebrate the reality of the sacraments in their everyday lives? In the unconditional love which accompanies the caring through the hard times; in the sharing of meals; in the reaching out to the needy in their midst, etc.

Parents might easily connect with how we are leading them through these sacramental years to see the God in everyday life. We also need to give them the tools and helps to continue to become even more aware of the God moments (which are always) in their lives.

WE BELIEVE: SACRAMENTAL CATECHESIS – AND ALL GROWTH IN FAITH – BEGINS WITH HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

This is true beyond any doubt because that is where God is revealed – within our human experience. Even though we have said - and believe strongly - that catechesis is much more than information, the beginning of the “content” of sacramental catechesis is the experience of the people who are present. Throughout the process, this present, lived experience is linked with the stories, tradition, and rites and rituals of our Church.

Three things to do which flow from this belief:

1) Invite and empower parents to tell their story, their experience. In the beginning, this isn't done by asking “churchy” questions, but by asking questions about their human experiences. Rather than immediately asking them about their experience of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, ask them about their experience of forgiveness. This begins with an experience (which hopefully is a very recent one) that touches the reality of the sacrament – as well as their everyday lives. Questions – for reflection or small group sharing – can help them to reflect on their experiences and tell their stories, such as:

- When was the last time you were struck by the beauty of nature?**
- When was the last time you were gifted by a new friendship?**
- When was the last time you felt respected and good about yourself?**

2) Part of their story as parents is their hopes and dreams for their children. Help them to slow down – during these times with you – and verbalize these dreams for the future:

- What do you hope for your child about this sacrament?
- What do you want the Eucharist to be for your child twenty years from now?
- When was the last time you worried about the faith of your children?

1) Acknowledging the human experience of each participant within your group of parents can also mean that if someone in the group can tell the group something, it is best for them to do it rather than for you as the catechetical leader. What a sign of leadership!

WE BELIEVE: THE LITURGY CATECHIZES.

Liturgy should be the clearest moment for the faith community in which the Gospel is made manifest. Good liturgy deepens our faith.

It is also true of human nature that many things pass us by since – in such busy lives – we do not take time for reflection on our experiences. (“The unexamined life is not worth living.”) The Church’s practice of mystagogical reflection after the celebration of liturgy and sacraments is a jewel we need to use to the fullest. This holy activity strives to lead people to make connections between

their liturgical experience, the experience and tradition of the Church, and their actions in daily life.

Therefore, a “to do” which follows from this belief: engage parents in this mystagogical reflection of their past prayer and liturgical experiences. This reflection will deepen their previous experiences and open the way for greater participation and faith growth in the future. This might be done – at parent gatherings -- in a number of steps:

- 1) Remembering: Recall the celebration. If necessary or appropriate, use images, music, color, sounds, etc.
- 2) Describing the experience: What did you experience? What touched you? What did you hear, see, smell, taste, feel? What didn't you hear, see, smell, taste, feel that you had expected to happen?
- 3) Searching for the meaning: Were you aware of God's presence? How? When? What kind of God? Did you feel the presence of the Church? If the symbols could have used words, what would they have said? What lasting feeling do you have in your heart?
- 4) Sharing the Christian Story: What did this event tell you about who we are as Catholic Christians?
- 5) Led to discipleship: Because of this celebration, what difference has it made for me? Where is God leading me? What am I called to do?

WE BELIEVE: RITUALS, SYMBOLS AND SIGNS ARE POWERFUL.

Symbols and rituals abound in our tradition: water, oil, bread and wine, blessing, anointing, Sign of the Cross, candle, fire, etc. We need to recapture our wonder and awe of their power and meaning. During our celebrations we need to decrease our words, and let the rituals and symbols speak for themselves.

This belief also suggests things to do during parent sacramental gatherings:

- 1) Break open the symbols with them. Use the symbols: blessing with water; feeling oil, etc. With a prayerful and reflective tone, ask questions to discover the everyday meanings, the faith meanings: how does fire make you feel? what does it do? Why do you think the Spirit is represented by fire? How do you feel when you share a meal with your immediate family?
- 2) Teach parents how to pray with symbols and rituals at home to unfold their meaning – now and in the years to come -- so that the reality and meaning of the sacrament stays alive and grows. (For several years, we focused on a different symbol of our heritage each year with the children and their families. During the year with water, we gave each family a bottle of holy water and suggestions of ways and times to bless each other at home. I have never heard more positive comments from parents and children than those about that ritual which became a part of many family lives. I believe that happened because it was not just about words – but was a powerful, touching ritual.

WE BELIEVE: THE “CONTENT” FOR SACRAMENTAL CATECHESIS COMES DIRECTLY FROM THE PRAYERS AND SCRIPTURES OF THE RITES AND SACRAMENTAL CELEBRATIONS.

Even though there are many things written about sacraments – and they can certainly provide excellent background for us – the real “content” is the sacrament itself. The best way to prepare ourselves for the mysteries we are about to celebrate is to reflect on/break open the words which the Church uses.

Therefore, -- for instance at the time of Confirmation -- spend time during the parent gatherings (as well as the children’s sessions):

- 1) Breaking open the Scripture readings which are provided in the Rite of Confirmation. What do these tell us about the power of the Spirit in our lives?
- 2) Reflecting on the various prayers of the Confirmation Rite. Why has the Church chosen to use these words to pray about this sacrament? What does it mean to adults celebrating the sacrament? What does it mean to youth?

WE BELIEVE: PARTICIPATION IN LITURGY IS COMMUNAL AND ALWAYS CALLS US TO DISCIPLESHIP.

Our liturgical life is never about individual piety. We are a community; that is the way we have been created from the very beginning; we go to God together or not at all. That core reality of interdependent community calls us to be disciples – to be apprentices of Jesus who are committed to bringing about the Kingdom.

Two “to dos” never to lose sight of:

- 1) A practical one: every catechetical program in our parishes should contain four equal parts: prayer, conversation/sharing of experience, “presentation,” and social. Community is built by being together and sharing life.
- 2) So what? The key question for each and everyone of us challenges us to ask: what difference does this make? what will I do - who will I be - when I leave here because I am called to bring about the Kingdom?