

# Handing on the Faith

## A Newsletter for families

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### **Amoris Laetitia (Part IV)**

My final commentary on Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation covers the sections in Chapter 7 (*Towards a better education of children*) dealing with passing on the Faith (numbers 287 to 290).

The Pope starts this section pointing out that the orderly handing on of the Faith is part and parcel of raising children, in spite of the difficulties occasioned by *current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today's world*. Children need to learn, at home, *to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour*. Parents are the first heralds of the Gospel for their children.

It all starts with Baptism which should not be delayed. The Code of Canon Law (n. 867) states that *"Parents are obliged to see that their infants are baptised within the first few weeks. As soon as possible after birth, indeed even before it, they are to approach the parish priest to ask for the sacrament for their child and to be themselves duly prepared for it."* As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says (n. 1250) *"Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and parents would deny a child the priceless gift of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth."*

Parents, in bringing their newborn child to Baptism are taking one of the first steps in their partnership with God in helping their child to grow in the Faith. Faith is a gift of God but *parents are the means that God uses for it to grow and develop*. Parents cannot though give what they don't have. To pass on the Faith, to be instruments in this transmission, they have to be men and women of faith and trust in God be themselves seeking him and sense their need for him. Parents therefore need to keep developing their own spiritual life with regular reception of the sacraments (Eucharist and Confession), attending recollections and retreats and receiving regular spiritual direction. In this way they will cooperate in a creative way with God's plans for their children. Thus

the small mustard seed of Faith sown at baptism will become a great tree. Parents have to rely a lot on prayer, praying that God acts in the hearts of their children, in places where they cannot reach.

The Synod had concluded that *"couples and parents should be properly appreciated as active agents in catechesis... Family catechesis is of great assistance as an effective method in training young parents to be aware of their mission as the evangelizers of their own family"*. Family catechesis precedes, accompanies and enriches other forms of instruction in the Faith. This includes teaching their children to pray, starting with simple prayers and gestures. As the Pope says: *"it is beautiful when mothers teach their little children to blow a kiss to Jesus or to Our Lady. How much love there is in that! At that moment the child's heart becomes a place of prayer."*

Educating children in the Faith has to take into account the character, age and aptitude of each child. Parents know that *spiritual experience is not imposed but freely proposed*. One child likes to hear stories while another prefers to read. One can't sit still for 5 minutes while another, typical of adolescents, has issues with authority and rules. In the case of teenagers the Pope says that *it is best to encourage their own experience of faith and to provide them with attractive testimonies that win them over by their sheer beauty*. They are also influenced by their friends and the culture around them so they have to be helped to overcome temptations to abandon the Faith in order to "fit in".

The parents' own life of piety is important not only so that they have the necessary strength for the task of passing on the Faith, which no one says is easy, but also so that their children see that prayer is important for their parents. How good it is to make the effort to get to Mass a few minutes early so that you can be recollected before Mass starts and to stay afterwards for 5 to 10 minutes to give thanks to God who is really inside of you.

The Pope points out *that moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon*.

The Pope also praises those mothers who pray, like St Monica, for their wayward children. A writer

describing St Augustine said that “Whatever treasures of virtue and worth that the life of faith, even of a soul not trained by scientific culture, can bestow, were set before him in the example of his pious mother.”

Raising one’s own children in the Faith has consequences outside of the family. *The work of handing on the faith to children, in the sense of facilitating its expression and growth, helps the whole family in its evangelizing mission. It naturally begins to spread the faith to all around them, even outside of the family circle. Children who grew up in missionary families often become missionaries themselves; growing up in warm and friendly families, they learn to relate to the world in this way, without giving up their faith or their convictions.*

Children brought up with a great love for the Jesus, his Mother, the Pope and the Church along with a deep grounding in the doctrine of the Faith will be able to move confidently in society without compromising their Faith, just as our Lord and the apostles did. As the Pope comments: *the same was true of his apostles, who did not look down on others, or cluster together in small and elite groups, cut off from the life of their people. Although the authorities harassed them, they nonetheless enjoyed the favour “of all the people”.*

The Synod and the Pope encourage families to practice the corporal works of mercy as part of their evangelizing mission: *The family is thus an agent of pastoral activity through its explicit proclamation of the Gospel and its legacy of varied forms of witness, namely solidarity with the poor, openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, including those most in need, commitment to the promotion of the common good and the transformation of unjust social structures, beginning in the territory in which the family lives,*

The Pope places a lot of hope in the response that families will make to the need for them to become missionary: *Only on the basis of this experience (namely that through our life in our families “We come to believe in the love that God has for us”) will the Church’s pastoral care for families enable them to be both domestic churches and a leaven of evangelization in society.* He hopes that *in all families the Good News will resound, in good times and in bad, as a source of light along the way.*

The Catechism of the Catholic Church has a number of things to say about the role and responsibilities of parents in handing on the Faith, mainly in the section dealing with the fourth commandment (2221 to 2233). The Catechism reminds parents that they cannot be satisfied with simply bringing children into the world but they also have to take responsibility for their moral and spiritual education. If they do not do this then it is almost impossible to find a substitute. Their right and duty to educate their children are ‘primordial and inalienable’, something that parents need to remind those in authority about from time to time.

Parents, the Catechism says, bear witness to their responsibility to raise their children in the Faith by first of all creating a home where *“tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity and disinterested services are the rule.”* Parent should aim to educate their children in virtues including self-denial, sound judgement and self-mastery which will help them to be truly free. They should teach them to put the spiritual dimension of their lives before the material ones. Parents will obviously need to give good example in all of this including knowing how to acknowledge their own failings to their children.

Parents need to regard their children as first and foremost *children of God* and that family ties are not absolute. As the child grows to maturity and human and spiritual autonomy so their unique divine vocation tends to show itself, perhaps dramatically or perhaps less so. Parents need to be alert to the signs of the vocation that their child is receiving (which can include the vocation to marriage) and encourage them to freely follow it. The first vocation of all Christians is to follow Jesus: ‘He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.’ Parents should particularly welcome with joy and thanksgiving the Lord’s call to one or more of their children to follow him more closely through a call to celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. St Josemaria wrote in Furrow (n 22) *I would like to speak into the ear of so many men and women: giving up one’s children to the service of God is not a sacrifice: it is an honour and a joy.*

A wholesome family life can foster interior dispositions that are a genuine preparation for a living faith and remain a support for it for the whole of one’s life.