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Education in Faith

Bishop John T. Folda

“Whoever wants the next generation the most, will get them.”

I heard these words at a recent conference of the priests of the Diocese of Fargo on marriage and family life, and it occurred to me that they certainly apply to the way we pass along the Catholic faith to our young people.

In other words, whoever is willing to fight hardest for the next generation, will win them over.

We are already well into the new school year, and therefore a new year of religious education. In parishes across our diocese, hundreds of catechists and thousands of children and young people are meeting every week for religious education, and the mandate of our Lord to proclaim the Gospel is being fulfilled.

Education in faith is at the heart of the Church’s mission received from Jesus himself. At the end of his earthly ministry, he told the apostles to “go, and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...” (Mt. 28:19-20).

And, this mandate applies in a special way to parents, who have the first responsibility for the education of their children.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that “the Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith” (1666). So, not only do parents have an irreplaceable role in the secular education of their own children, but they must also be their children’s first teachers of faith.

The faith that we have received as a gift must be passed on to our sons and daughters, so that they too might know Jesus Christ and his saving Gospel.

Dedicate resources to the faith

We go to great lengths to assure the education of children, and it has been said that this is the most highly educated generation in history. Immense resources are dedicated to education, and rightly so.

Even more so, then, must families and the Church dedicate their resources to the Christian education and formation of children. Responsible parents wouldn’t dream of depriving their children of an adequate education, nor should they neglect to assure the fullest possible education and formation in faith and virtue for those same sons and daughters.

More than ever, though, religious education must compete with a multitude of other activities and pursuits. Children and young people are often so involved with extracurricular activities that little time is given to faith formation. But, the simple fact is that nothing should take precedence over the time and effort we dedicate to teaching the faith to our children.

In most cases, religious education is allocated barely an hour a week. Next to our participation in Sunday Mass, that hour is arguably the most important of the entire week. Just as parents would never consider exempting their children from the requirements of ordinary schooling, so should they be just as determined in assuring the complete and life-giving formation in our Catholic faith.

This mission is especially urgent in our times because the surrounding culture works very hard to inculcate its own secular values and priorities in young people.

Children are extremely receptive, and if we do not teach them, someone else will.

There are some who are eager to educate and form our young people with a sort of anti-Gospel that would lure them away from the eternal truths that Jesus entrusted to his Church.

Once again, “whoever wants the next generation the most, will get them.”

If we want our children to know Christ and his Gospel, if we want them to be active and joyful disciples of Jesus, if we want them to be full participants in the life of the Church, then we must also want to do everything possible and necessary to lovingly form them and share our Catholic faith with them.

Teamwork needed

And, while parents are the first educators of their children in the faith, the pastors and all the faithful share in that responsibility. In fact, parents can depend on the Church to assist them in this important work of teaching the faith to their children, and the pastors and catechists of the Church are privileged to participate in this parental duty.

It might be said that parents, pastors, and catechists form a team that can work jointly in this sacred endeavor. This is a solemn and noble calling, and it would be no exaggeration to say that parents, pastors and catechists are in the business of forming saints.

Our children were made for holiness and for heaven, and it is up to us to help them get there. They were made to live holy lives here on earth so that they might rejoice as saints forever in heaven.

What we do for them here and now, what we teach them by word and example, will have a profound effect on their eternal destinies, so we must take very seriously our responsibilities to them.

Thank you, catechists

And, here I must offer a word of heartfelt gratitude to the many catechists who work in our parishes to share the treasure of faith with our young people.

I have the greatest admiration for their commitment and the deep faith that they model for our children. The vast majority of our catechists are volunteers who generously give their time and energy to this joyful work of sharing the faith. Our pastors could never do this work by themselves, so they depend on the dedicated catechists who step forward to participate in the teaching mission of the Church.

At times pastors struggle to find sufficient volunteers who are willing to take on this demanding service, so I exhort all the faithful to be generous in assisting with the religious education of young people in your own parishes.

Pope Francis reminds us that all the baptized have a role in the evangelizing mission of the Church, and participating in the faith formation of our children is a critical part of that mission.

“Whoever wants the next generation the most, will get them.” If that is true, then we will give our best and spare no effort in order to share with our children the greatest treasure of all: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.