

Our Adult Children and Their Practice of the Faith.

One of the first questions I am asked when I am meeting with parishioners and fellow Catholics is... “What can I do to bring my children back to the faith?” This question is always difficult to answer because, in my own family, most of my kids are far from the practice of the faith. There are no easy answers here, and everyone seems to have an opinion or a program that they think will solve this problem. The Scripture readings from the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time offer some things to reflect on surrounding this heartbreaking issue.

When it comes to passing on the faith some of our work as Catholic parents is uncomplicated: we baptize our children, teach them traditional prayers, make sure they receive their sacraments, and take them to Mass. As our children grow, we involve them in parish activities, and teach them about social justice and fairness. We instill in our children the values that are important to us without necessarily being aware of it. We do this through our example and by the things we tell them that they need to be successful in the world. These exchanges typically occur at our dinner tables and during our time spent together on car rides to various activities. Theological parenting, like following any sacred call, is enlivening, humbling, confusing, and best done with the most selfless love we can muster. And we hope and pray we have given them enough to successfully navigate the chaos of the world. However, when our kids reject or stop practicing the faith, it is easy to feel that we must have done something wrong, that we have somehow failed in our duties as Catholic parents. For most of us, our children have grown up to be kind, compassionate, generous, and mindful of others and they exhibit a strong sense of justice. They make us proud, and they are good people, but they are not faithful.

This hit home when I read St. Paul’s letter to the Romans. St. Paul knows something of our heartache. His heart broke at his own people’s difficulty in seeing the Messiah in the person of Jesus. Israel had been given these tremendous gifts by God, gifts that they could not see fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is much like the heartache of parents who have witnessed their own children’s rejection of the faith. This heartache causes us to worry for the souls of our children and our grandchildren.

There are many reasons offered by surveys, theologians, and commentators for why our children are rejecting the faith. Reasons which I believe have had some influence on the disaffection our children feel with the church. However, I also think that in many cases, the things we think are the root causes become easy excuses to not practice of the faith.

The experiences of Elijah and the disciples in today's readings offer an insight as to why our children struggle to incorporate the faith into their life. There is a connection between these experiences that is worth our reflection. The descriptions of natural power in these readings, the raging sea, an earthquake, the howling wind, and fire, are meant to get our attention. I was reminded of this recently when our area was experiencing some severe weather alerts. My wife gets pretty worked up about stormy weather, and she is terrified if there is the possibility that something severe could occur. What was interesting about this particular experience was that in the midst of these watches and warnings, my wife was outside on the porch looking at the sky. Powerful things tend to do that... they attract our attention. Where our attention lies speaks to that with which we are concerned. Career success, notoriety, control, and the search for comfort are our culture's attention grabbers; because they offer the promise of power, control, and comfort, they attract and almost demand our attention. Because they have our attention, they also have our concern. This is what we talk about with our kids at the dinner table and on those long car rides.

We have unwittingly made our careers, education, success, and personal comfort, into gods. These are the things we have encouraged our children to achieve, and we have told them they need these things to successfully navigate the world. They reinforce the idea that being a good person is good enough.

Elijah was not distracted by the power of the world because he knew that an all-powerful God has to be heard with ears that are very finely attuned, attuned to tiny whispers. This makes Elijah a powerful example for our time, a time when a faith life is not considered a priority or a necessity for successfully making one's way in the world. And because of this focus of our culture, it has held captive the capacity of our children to hear that tiny whispering voice. Our greatest fear and biggest disappointment is that our children have found the powerful things of this world, more valuable than the faith we gave them.

Faith is about focus, it is about where our minds and hearts should be! Today's Gospel describes Christ approaching the boat as it is tossed about on the sea. He has to reassure the disciples because they think they are seeing a ghost. Peter asks to come and meet Jesus, and the Lord invites him to "come." As long as Peter keeps his gaze fixed on Christ, he is able to share in his divine power. But sadly, he looks away. He notices the waves and begins to sink; his heart and mind were not completely committed. Peter sees all that is around him and loses his focus and his faith. I think this is what has happened to many of our kids; they see all that is around them in the world and they don't know where, on what, or on whom to focus.

So here is something to think about; perhaps we should pray for the courage and the words to remind our children why the faith is so important to us. We may have to think and pray about this, but a quick review of our lives will reveal times when the only way we were able to make it through was with the aid of supernatural help. That supernatural help was God's grace. It is safe bet that we never have given witness to these moments because they are the kinds of situations that unsettle children and families. As spouses and parents, we tend to endure these quietly together with God. We should share these moments with our children. It would also help to remind our children of the reason we brought them to the Baptismal font. Let them know that their Baptism was and is a gift we have given them to a life of privilege. It is a gift that has given them a share in the sacramental life of the Church. A Sacramental life that gives them a share in Christ's very own divine power. This is a power that will help them to better deal with the chaos of this world, much as it has helped us through our struggles. It is a power that will not just make them good people, but holy people.

We need to encourage them to keep their eyes on Christ: to focus and to listen for the tiny whisper of his voice, to trust entirely in the goodness of God for all things, and to run to God with humility for all that they need. When difficulties and temptations come, we need to encourage them to ask for His assistance.

St. Jane Frances de Chantal, whom we celebrated on August 12th, had this to say about living an inspiring life of faith, "We are not to live according to our feelings, but according to faith and reason. We must cast our confidence on God." We must remember, "He has encouraged us, to ask, and it will be given to us, to knock and it shall be opened."