

Parents' Role Crucial in Religious Training

A child's religious education, whether in parochial school or in the CCD program, requires the cooperation of parents. In this third of a series investigating the goals of the newly-structured Religious Education—CCD department of the diocese, parental involvement is shown to be crucial to the success of every parish program.

By CECELIA VIGGO

"The Child is father of the Man" a poet once wrote. But when Wordsworth composed this line, he was toying with the theory of existence before birth. But today, what with the new math, sex education, and computer science in grade school, this passage seems more literally applicable than ever.

Children seem to be our elders in terms of the modern knowledge they've amassed. And it's a learned parent, indeed, who feels at ease with his youngster's homework. The situation has spread to even the oldest and most stable of topics: religion.

Parents are confused by the new religion books, full of pictures but lacking catechism definitions. They are baffled by the new teaching methods which stress emotional participation over mechanical memorization.

And the "new religion" itself, with its marked emphasis on conduct towards others, and daily living, and its seeming inattention to the rigorous schemas of the past, like the Ten Commandments, is disturbingly strange.

In the case of the new math or "post moon shot" science, the parent usually gracefully bows out of his role of teacher aide. But this solution is not tenable in the case of religious education.

Religious educators are unanimous in their agreement that parental involvement is crucial to the religious development of the child.

Sister Helene Garvin, SSJ., parent education coordinator for the diocesan Department of Religious Education-CCD, reflects the feelings of all teachers whom we interviewed when she observes that since today's religion stresses the importance of living our faith, it is in the home, not the classroom that Christianity is really demonstrated.

"If there isn't any talking about religion at home," she insists, "the child gets the feeling that religion is just for school or CCD class."

Educators, however, are not unaware of the difficulties parents face.

"I agree that they (the parents) are prime educators but we've put them in a terrible position," comments Sister Marie Brown, SSJ., religious education coordinator at St. Jerome's in East Rochester. She observed that "if you haven't taken religion in ten years, you're really not prepared" to teach it to your children.

Sister Helene feels that educators must communicate with parents. "I think that parents need a great deal of reassurance that the basic truths are being taught," she affirms.

In order to further parent-teacher communication, Sister Helene initiated a pilot project in which the diocesan CCD office sent out a newsletter to parents in 14 parishes in the diocese. The newsletter explained some of the aims and doctrines behind the children's religion lessons.

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Parental response in most parishes was so favorable, the CCD office now plans to offer the newsletter, published several times a year, to all parishes.

Teachers can begin communication through offering newsletters to parents, but religious educators whom we interviewed also emphasized the importance of parents' presence at parent-teacher meetings and open house.

They all recommended that parents should come to the teachers with their questions and misgivings.

Parents can inform themselves simply by reading their children's religion books. Sister Mary Elizabeth Brewer, SSJ., religious education coordinator at Sacred Heart Cathedral comments that the "Come to the Father" series (one most used by diocesan CCD and parochial school religion programs) "offers texts in which parents must participate. The books are geared to the carrying out of theme by the child with the

assistance of parents throughout the week."

Parents who are actively involved in their children's religious education also had suggestions for the parent who wishes to "catch up to" his child in religion.

Mrs. George Bauer, CCD teacher at St. Ambrose and mother of six, strongly advocates the CCD course in Christian doctrine for parents.

"I recommend the CCD course for every single Catholic living today, whether they plan to teach or not," she declared.

Other parents urged that adults take advantage of their parish's educational resources by attending any adult education classes in theology, parish discussion groups, and retreats that their church offers.

After the parent has adjusted himself to the new directions in religion today, what, specifically, can he do to foster his child's religious development?

All the involved parents with whom we spoke stressed the importance of family discussion.

Mrs. Richard Kitchen, a volunteer CCD teacher at St. Jerome's and mother of three, expressed the consensus when she observed that "parents have to take an interest in what the child learns each week. They must bring in their own opinions on religion and take time to discuss them with the children."

To facilitate family discussion, Mrs. Bauer says that her family sometimes replaces formal prayers before meals and at bedtime with readings from one of the children's religion books.

She reflects that this nightly custom gives the parent an indication of what the child is learning, and also gives the child a sense of family participation in his religious education.

"They loved it because we were doing something of theirs," she relates.

The Gilbert Morelle family tries to attend the monthly dialogue-homily Mass celebrated at St. Ambrose, their parish church.

In this type of service, the sermon is replaced by discussion among members of the congregation.

Mrs. Morelle found this experience enlightening. "The children have insights I never thought of," she observed.

Family confession, going to Mass together, observing the children's feasts are some other ways parents try to extend religion into family life.

Eugene Mietelski, of St. Cecilia's parish, summed up the rewards of his involvement as "a very comfortable feeling. I know that I am doing the best for them that I possibly can. Fifteen years from now, I know I won't have any regrets" about their religious development.

(Next week: Parish programs which are improving and drawing youth-attention.)

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