

Adult education seen as key to teaching children about faith



By Teresa A. Parsons

As a generation of children grow up oblivious to the words "Baltimore Catechism," religious educators — parents, catechists, program directors and coordinators — still search for a balance between facts and feelings, between knowledge and lived experiences of faith, and between their roles in the nurturing of a child's faith.

Finding and maintaining the perfect balance may be an impossible dream, but what has become apparent along the way is that religious education must be a life-long process.

"We all recognize that it's by having well-informed parents and catechists that we can best educate children," said Virginia Stanton, diocesan consultant for the Southern Tier.

In the past, adults were "off the hook" in regard to continued growth. "We created a monster — that religious education ends either with Confirmation, graduation from eighth grade or high school," said Liz Maurer, director of religious education at Blessed Sacrament Church.

Years ago, the role of the family in faith development was taken for granted. With changes in the Church's external forms of worship, less emphasis on memorization and more on emotions and feelings, parents got the message that "this new religion" — like the new math — could only be taught by an expert catechist. As a result, many parents lost confidence in their ability to supervise their children's religious education.

Some parents gave up even the responsibility of teaching their children prayers. "If you don't pray with your children, and if you don't pray yourself, what good are prayers learned by rote? ... what kind of model is that? You're saying it's important for you, but not for me," Maurer said. "If all the parents are doing is sending kids to religious education on Sunday, they're not fulfilling their responsibility," she added.

Likewise, if all religious educators offer is an hour of Sunday morning classes, they don't meet their responsibility either.

"We have got to enable people ... in a parish to help others develop," said Sister Mary Ann Binsack, diocesan director of the Department of Religious Education. In response, Sister Mary Ann is shifting the focus away from direct concern with children's programs to adult-centered programs, especially the training and enrichment of catechists and coordinators.

Adults are being challenged by as many programs as there are parishes, but within several categories. They include sacramental programs, family education, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and Continuing Education for Religion Teachers (CERT).

Deacon Claude Lester introduced family education to St. John's on Humboldt Street three years ago after parents asked for more involvement in their children's religious formation. Using a family cluster model developed by Margaret Sawin, he offered a supplement to Sunday classes. Once a month, 25 to 40 families met in clusters for two hours, shared a meal, discussed a topic, and ended with a prayer service. Families with children of similar ages were grouped together as were a mixture of single-parent and two-parent families.

Mary Matteson, religious education coordinator at St. John's, has taken over the program this year and said that the model works with a combination of adults and children because of shared responsibility.

"Parents take responsibility for helping teach the children — not just their own, but everyone's," she said, adding that while the process challenges parents, it also supports what they already know. "It helps parents re-evaluate what they learned back in the days of the Baltimore Catechism. They realize some things are not so simple any more ... but they can also feel good about what they do know."

At the Church of the Assumption in Fairport, family education is handled comprehensively, but separately at each age level. With the departure of the Mission Helpers of



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
The Perelli family, from left to right, Ken, 7, John, 9, Joyce and Elizabeth, 3, review one of their many CCD projects, in this case a Lenten commitment tree.

My dear brothers and sisters:

This Sunday, September 15, we will observe Catechetical Sunday in our diocese. The theme of this year, "Listen and Follow with an Open Heart," comes from that Sunday's readings and calls us to be open to God acting in our lives and to respond to Him in love and joy.

In Isaiah, James and Mark, we see the various aspects of openness, attentiveness and responsiveness to God's call. The readings make it quite clear that the experience of faith is a dynamic one. Hearing and believing have implications for living. It is the task of our catechists — those who proclaim the word of God to children, adolescents and adults — to amplify His call and guide the steps of the ones who would follow.

Please join with me in a prayer of thanksgiving for the many people throughout our diocese who dedicate their lives to this ministry. We ask God's blessings on them and pray that all of us will listen to the Lord and follow in His footsteps with compassionate and forgiving hearts.

Your brother in Christ,

Matthew H. Clark

+ Matthew H. Clark
Bishop of Rochester

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