

Engaging with Parents

The experience of piloting the Partners in a Shared Task process, not only generated these four points of convergence among the home school parish partnership around the role of parents and grandparents but also alerted the pilot teams to three further insights that ought now to inform further work to support the role of the home in passing on faith in God:

- A: Expectations of parents
- B: The need to 'tell it how it is'
- C: The challenges of language

A: Parental expectations

As already noted the pilots highlighted four different aspects of the parental role and the degrees to which each of the partners were able to articulate these. However, in working over a period of weeks with small groups of parents, one of the pilots noted two particular impressions that gave cause for concern:

1. The extent to which parents themselves judged their success, or lack of it, in passing on faith in God, in terms of the Mass attendance of their children;
2. The extent to which parents imagine that there is a 'fool-proof' recipe for passing on faith in God which the Church knows and can give them access to.

The concern around using Sunday Mass-attendance as a benchmark of successful faith-transmission was not new to the Working Group having been expressed repeatedly during the Listening 2004 process. However, the expectation of parents that the Church can offer them a fail-safe method of producing 'good Catholic children' who grow into 'good Catholic adults' was disconcerting for the pilot lead, who felt the additional pressure placed on her as a representative of the Church. Moreover she felt that these expectations implied a reductionist approach to matters of faith, which ultimately is a gift of the Holy Spirit: if we do x or y then Jenny and Joe will 'get' 'it'. An alternative approach would acknowledge that we do our best to support parents to pass on faith to their children, through as many means as are at our disposal, but that we do so *in hope, with faith in God's spirit, always alive and at work within each one of us, always in love for each other*, no matter what the apparent outcomes may be.

B: The need to 'tell it how it is'

In the course of the same pilot, the project lead discovered that the parents she worked with usually felt freer, more comfortable and more willing, to share honestly on this issue, once she had herself admitted doubts and to her own perceived failings as a faith-parent. The ability to 'tell it how it is' in an open and honest way, without guile, seems essential if parents are to be put at ease and their fears of judgment allayed. The Working Group discussed the ambiguity around the term 'authentic' and decided that for family work, *telling it how it is*, especially in matters of passing on faith is both necessary and essential. It opens up a conversation that with skilled facilitation has the potential for healing, reconciliation, and renewed vigour. Listening is the key skill here. The gift of inviting parents to tell it as it is and then listening well is of inestimable value. We also want to reaffirm here one of the findings of Listening 2004, that is, that many older parents and grandparents are carrying tremendous burdens of guilt and grief resulting from their sense of having failed to pass on faith in God effectively. These burdens need

a safe space in which to be set down, re-examined and placed into God's hands.

C: The challenges of language

In the course of reflecting on the pilots, the question was mooted: how can parents evangelise their children when they are not already evangelised themselves? Whilst each one of us, parents included, undoubtedly need continuing opportunities to develop our relationship with God and to progress in our own faith journey, we felt this question pointed to a deeper challenge. The language that we use in Church to describe faith, values, spirituality and relationship with God can be opaque at times, so that those who don't participate regularly, as well as some of those who do, fail to see how the long and unusual words used apply in their day to day lives. Similarly, many of the transcendent experiences described by parents and grandparents may be overlooked and therefore unappreciated by the Church because they appear ordinary, mundane or overly familiar. These points were made in the report *Not Easy But Full of Meaning* (2005) and again in *Introducing Home is a Holy Place* (2007).

This description of the family as essentially a community created for love, is an example of the way that church language can be difficult to penetrate:

"The family, which is founded and given life by love, is a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives. Its first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons. The inner principle of that task, its permanent power and its final goal is love: without love the family is not a community of persons and, in the same way, without love the family cannot live, grow and perfect itself as a community of persons." *Familiaris Consortio* #18

By contrast, the language that families use to express the way they live out this mission to love is simpler to comprehend, yet not apparently theological:

- A mum, sitting feeding her baby in the dark of the night, quietly feeling caught up in wonder, something far bigger than herself and the child... Impossible to put into words, the language she uses is 'deeply peaceful', 'I feel as if this is what I am here for', 'I feel love that I cannot describe'.
- A dad playing football with his child on his only free afternoon of the week...moving from selfish frustration to real joy of being close, caught up in the child-like enthusiasm for life: 'no-one ever told me how amazing being a dad is', 'it's a real sense of fun and freedom'.
- A daughter sitting with her demented mum, unable to 'do' anything, but be there, holding a hand, feeding her, reading a story, talking about the present moment. In spite of the lack of recognition, the agonizing slowness of living, the questions, being there is all part of loving, and she senses that, again beyond words. 'I know I can't DO anything or make it better, but I know I just want to be there until the end.'
- A sister walking alongside her troubled brother... unable to change the situation, but just sticking with it.... 'He is my brother!'

In terms of judging a parent's faith or lack of it, surely it is enough to consider 'how they love one another'.

"When true love – real love – is present at home, God is there. And the more real that love becomes in marriage and family life, the clearer it is that God is present."

For those of us who work for the Church, the responsibility must surely be to listen well and to translate these seemingly ordinary experiences into the sacred truths of our faith.