

## The role of parents and grandparents as clarified in the Partners in a Shared Task pilots (extract from a draft report)

On conclusion of the pilot process, the team leaders met with the Working Group to reflect on what had been learned, both as a result of engaging with the Partners in a Shared Task process and regarding the role and support needs of parents and grandparents in passing on faith in God.

In reporting here on those reflections, the Working Group acknowledge that these conclusions should be read as indicative of the role of the home rather than as an absolute or exhaustive description or definition. Passing on faith in God is, after all, fundamentally a mysterious process that cannot be guaranteed or controlled by humankind. The role of parents and grandparents formulated here springs from the points of convergence in conversations involving 10 groups of parents and grandparents, 11 schools groups and 12 parish groups gathered during the pilot which was able to supply the working group with a complete set of feedback. These points of convergence were however ratified by the more limited amounts of primary data available from the other two pilots and from the small number of respondents (13) to the online survey.

Although we indicate areas where school and parish partners appeared less aware of a particular element of the parental role, no untoward conclusions should necessarily be drawn from this. Each partner reflected first on their own role rather than that of their colleagues and some groups simply ran out of time. Furthermore, as the pilot team pointed out the recording of primary data was sometimes abbreviated and lacking in detail.

With that proviso, the Working Group nevertheless wish to alert home, school and parish partners to the probability that those working in school and parish settings, while expert and well formed in their own role in passing on the faith, might possibly be insufficiently aware of and responsive to the role of parents and grandparents in passing on faith in God. Again, this ought not to be read as a criticism of those in school and parish settings. These pilots were undertaken because the Working Group had been unable to locate anywhere any evidence that the role of parents and grandparents in passing on faith in God had been explored or described, despite the need to do so having been identified in 1987.

The understanding of the role of parents and grandparents in passing on faith derived from the findings of the Partners in a Shared Task pilots, mentioned by all three partners, points to four critical activities:

- **Giving good example (witness)**
- **Living according to what we believe (witness and practice)**
- **Explicit religious practice in the home**
- **Initiation of children into the life of the wider Christian community**

Undoubtedly, parents and grandparents engage in many other activities in the course of passing on faith but **these are the elements on which home, school and parish personnel are in agreement** and are therefore the areas where further work in support of these activities might be especially fruitful.

Seven of the 10 parents' groups talked about passing on faith in God to their children through "how we live our lives", "setting an example in life", being "a good role model" and by witnessing: "go to Church yourself." Parish groups also talked, though not so frequently, about parents setting an example: "children copy their parents". One parish group mentioned that parents are the first and best teachers of their children. Just one of the schools' groups mentioned parental example.

In another pilot, most of the parents consulted in one deanery also mentioned good example: "Give example, do rather than say", "quiet example", "by example". Many of the online respondents also mentioned giving good example as the best way to pass on the faith: "First of all witness. That speaks more to me than words." "Being as good a person as you can be and showing a good example to others."

In Catechesi Tradendae we read of the importance of parental good example in passing on faith:

*Education in the faith by parents, which should begin from the children's tenderest age,(119) is already being given when the members of a family help each other to grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words but which perseveres throughout a day-to-day life lived in accordance with the Gospel. CT 68*

We want to stress here the importance of parents and grandparents themselves having a strong and maturing personal faith in God. The role of setting a good example, or being a good role model confirms that parents themselves need to have faith in God and to be in a relationship with God. This does not necessarily equate to having a vast knowledge of The Faith, though that certainly can play its part in supporting the parent's faith journey. But it does imply that parents and grandparents need support in developing their own personal relationship with God, especially perhaps through coming to know God more fully through scripture and through growing in awareness of God's presence in their everyday lives. This respondent to the online survey makes those points quite clearly:

*"My understanding of passing on the faith is to live the Faith as I have understood it, through being taught the Scriptures; Old and New Testament. By living the Faith I mean following the teachings of Jesus, understanding the love of God, understanding that what I do for the people I can reach, in the name of Jesus, will be a witness to Jesus's teachings and his death and resurrection. This is my Faith which in turn is supported by the teachings of the Church in allowing me to come to the knowledge of God who is a God of Mercy and Forgiveness, full of Loving Kindness. I understand 'passing on the Faith' can only be done by my being seen to be truly and honestly trying to do the Will of God. I may not always succeed but keep on trying with humility in the face of all difficulties and/or temptation."*

Giving good example is very much about *being* a committed Christian. A simple way to think of this core role of parents and grandparents is to set it alongside the first of the two great commandments:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind..." Luke 10: 27

### **B: Living according to what we believe**

Closely aligned with being a good role model, four of the parents' groups talked about the importance of the values practised at home. It is hard to avoid the sense that they meant specifically Christian values but worth sharing are the words they used in their conversations to describe the kinds of values that are important to parents as ministers of the home: *talking, loving, providing continuity, encouragement – no matter what, welcoming, being non-judgemental, working at relationships, meeting people where they are, creating a safe place for every kind of conversation, adhering to what is right regardless of what children do, apologising, forgiving.*

Parish groups too talked at length about the importance of parental values, such as *encouragement, tolerance, forgiveness, communicating love, allowing for open discussion, respect, talking and sharing and the discipline of right and wrong.* For school groups, the values parents live by, especially *caring for, nurturing and talking with their children at home* was recognised. School groups also mentioned *family meals and story-telling* as important.

In another pilot, parents again described their role in terms of transmitting values: *'Try to live it (hypocrisy will be spotted by the young)', 'be good, kind, empathise, help', 'do the right thing if possible, support the family and friends'.*

The link between 'giving good example' and 'living according to what we believe' in terms of the values practised at home is of course profound. So profound that it is almost impossible to separate the two aspects. One way to think of it though is that:

- ‘giving good example’ is primarily about who the parent is in terms of their own faith in God and the integrity of their values as seen as influencing her/his personal decisions in their own life
- ‘living according to what we believe’ relates to the ways that a parent more explicitly influences the lives of their family as a result of those values: their decisions as impactful on their nearest neighbour.

For example, a parent might value honesty and practise it consistently in every area of their life, thus setting a good example for their children. However, they might also adopt it as a virtue for the entire home and thus encounter more complex challenges than when it is solely their own choice of how best to live as an individual. The practice of being truthful can be especially challenging when different perspectives and sensitivities come into play. So while ‘giving good example’ needs the support of adult faith formation opportunities to grow in faith in God, ‘living according to what we believe’ needs the support of opportunities to acquire or hone the relational skills that equip parents to communicate, negotiate and reconcile differences more confidently, set boundaries and love their children more fully in both firm and soft ways.

Living according to what we believe is very much about *doing* or practicing Christian life in the community of the family. A simple way to think about this core role of parents and grandparents is to set it alongside the second of the two great commandments:

“You shall love... your neighbour as yourself.” (Luke 10: 27)

### **C: Explicit faith practices at home**

Whilst *giving good example* and *living according to what we believe* are critical ways in which parents witness to and practice faith at home, parents’ groups also described more explicit faith practices of the home such as prayer, visual reminders (images, statues) and explicit conversations about God and faith: ‘saying prayers with children at home’, ‘setting up a crib at Christmas or a statue in the corner,’ ‘setting time aside to pray together’, ‘Bible, statues, prayer, images, crucifixes’, ‘keeping Sunday special’. Parish groups also mentioned the practice of displaying holy pictures and crosses at home.

In the second pilot, parents described this aspect using the following words ‘observing Advent/Lent/Christmas and Easter’, ‘emphasising that religion involves a personal relationship with God’, ‘our prayers and liturgy’, ‘encourage discussion’, ‘facilitate opportunity for God to act/plant seed of faith’, ‘talking openly about it’, ‘I answer their questions giving a religious context to their lives’.

This area of explicit faith practices in the home is one that the Working Group feels is already and increasingly well-resourced. However, it cannot be stressed too strongly that the efficacy of this area depends heavily on the quality of relationships at home, whether parents feel confident enough to raise matters of faith and able to respond effectively when differences of faith arise with their children. With increasing interest in encouraging and equipping parents to take on more responsibility for the religious education of their children, particularly in terms of communicating knowledge, we envisage an increasing need to equip parents with the tools to do this more effectively and confidently. Parenting skills are the pedagogy of family catechesis.

### **D: Initiating children into the life of the Church**

The introduction to the wider Christian community afforded to children by their parents is the fourth most significant way in which groups described the role of parents and grandparents in passing on faith in God. This included links with school and attending Mass, both on Sundays and at other times in school. One group pointed out that in taking children to church parents were giving the church a seal of approval: ‘parents wouldn’t take you anywhere bad’. Yet other groups mentioned the difficulties encountered here: ‘difficulty when evangelical churches so vibrant’, ‘too much emphasis on going to Mass’. Among the school groups, the most frequently mentioned role of parents in passing on faith in God was their decision to send their children to a Catholic school.

In another pilot, parents talked about 'going to church', 'bring children and even very young to mass. Get involved in parish life,' 'take children to church. Children's liturgy is a good way of passing on faith.' 'I take my children to church. I do children's liturgy.' 'Send to a Catholic school. Take to Mass'. However some parents in this area noted their particular challenges in this respect: 'It would be nice to be able to send the children to a Catholic school. We take them to Mass when we can.'