

## REFLECTING ON THE SYNOD RECOMMENDATIONS (9)



### Children and Young People's Faith Formation

#### Working alongside young parents

We have come to understand as inescapable that, unless the parents of our children are deeply and fully involved in both the formal religious education and a daily lifestyle of faith, we cannot succeed with their children. Parental involvement is one of our most significant challenges in handing on the faith to the next generation. For a long time—at least for two generations—we've been replacing parents with school teachers or parish volunteers to teach their children about religion. The parents often don't even know what their child is learning, although some enlightened teachers have already begun to send this home. One of the lessons we have learned from the pandemic is how well it works to have at-home faith formation. The teachers in our schools have rallied to support parents and the parents have responded.

We speak today about forming faith in someone's life through prayer and liturgy, through actions on behalf of the poor and vulnerable, through sharing faith, through learning how to live with personal discipline, and yes, also by studying the Church. The primary forming influence, however, is at home in the way the family lives: how they pray—or not, how they treat the poor—or not, how they share faith—or not, how they make Sunday Mass central—or not and how they speak of religion. We take this very seriously. We know from our research that most active adult Catholics today are with the Church because their parents formed them in faith at home.

#### Here's a short test

Since we're talking about faith formation and education I have a little quiz for you.

Who does the Catechism of the Catholic Church say should provide religious formation for children?

That's right: "Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children (CCC #2223)."

Who does Vatican II say has the responsibility for educating children in the faith?

That's right: "The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an

adequate substitute (Declaration on Christian Education, #3)."

Who does the General Directory for Catechesis say has the task of educating children?

That's right: "Parents are the primary educators in the faith (GDC, #255)."

The Rite of Marriage says this, and the Rite of Baptism does, too. But, here's the rub.

Who do most parents believe is responsible for the complete formation and education of their children? That's right: The parish or school! And we leaders taught parents to think this because we've asked so little of them for so many years. Honestly, in most parishes and schools, if the parents did show up some day, we wouldn't know what to do with them!

In reality, parents already are the real forming agents of their children. No matter how well we may do in religious education with that ten-year-old child, if he or she goes home to a house where the faith is not cherished or understood, our best efforts can't produce formation that will last a lifetime. Remember what we just read from Vatican II "that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute" for parents. Like it or not, the parents by their actions, words, and household habits form their children for life, either with faith or without it.

#### Don't send home a textbook

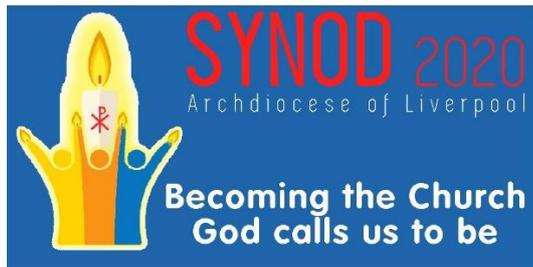
But it will never be enough for parish or school leaders to simply hand the parents a textbook, send them home, and say, "Good-bye and good luck. Keep warm and well-fed!" (James 2:16). Instead, we should gather them at the parish with their children and work alongside them to provide the formation, in the context of a parish and school joint event, using a resource designed for this purpose, at a time of day when parents can attend. Working alongside parents makes the parish-school-home connection come to life! We know this means yet another parish gathering but—and trust us on this—you can do this with eight or ten gatherings through the school year.

We have a lot of experience on how to do this well. We don't have to re-invent the wheel here. It turns out that parents want to do this and are delighted to find out they can! They're able because we work alongside them. Once we invite parents into faith formation, we must stand by their sides and work with them to be successful! They might not have all the terminology just right. They might not have enthusiasm for their faith. They might not even be coming to Mass regularly. But once they begin to form their children, and we help them to do this well, the parents themselves become more informed, faithful, prayerful, and present. The response of parents to being helped in this way is overwhelmingly positive!

Working with parents in this way takes the burden off the school teacher or parish catechist. Parents experience growth in their faith simultaneously with their children. But mainly, it results in formation that lasts a lifetime!

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## REFLECTING ON THE SYNOD RECOMMENDATIONS (10)



### Spiritual Formation

#### Opportunities for Prayer

Many people feel a thirst for more spirituality: more prayer and meditation, more chances to share faith, and more assurance that God is listening. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us in article 27 that we all have an inborn hunger for God. God invites us to draw near to him. God is present. This simple truth is at the heart of prayer. Emmanuel, God is with us. If we but turn our hearts to the divine heart, we find ourselves in prayer. The old catechism said that prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God. It advises us to be always ready to surrender our hearts. Such willingness to give away our hearts to Jesus is to “pray always” as St Paul suggested. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul advised the community: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (5:16-18). The Joy of the Gospel #3 includes this promise: “The Lord does not disappoint those who [pray]; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we realise that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.”

And as the Church, we share prayer. We do this at Mass but there is also the desire to pray outside of Mass and Synod members made this clear. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II explains this in articles 12 and 13 and here is a paraphrase of that section. “We do realise that participating in the liturgy is not all that we need for the spiritual life. There is also the need for private prayer and witness to the life-giving death of Jesus. Therefore, we encourage the use of popular devotions and all practices which help to foster a richer and more authentic faith life. Such devotions, however, should be in harmony with the liturgical season and always draw people more deeply into the celebration of the sacred liturgy.”

The challenge we have today is to restore ancient sacred devotions and to connect them to the liturgy so that everyone will grow in authentic faith. We must always remember that we are Catholic, which means we’re “a big tent” with many different people each on their journey of faith. We have room for many kinds of prayer and devotion and we should provide whatever people find most helpful. Having said this, however, the Church emphasises that all the baptised should pray the Divine Office, The Council urges us to pray at least morning and evening prayer and in article 100 of the Constitution, says this: “Lay people, too, are encouraged to pray the divine office with local priests, among themselves, or even individually.” The Liturgy of the

Hours is an excellent way to gather for prayer outside of Sunday Mass.

#### The Domestic Church

Beyond richer prayer lives, the Synod also responded to people’s desire to cultivate a more robust “domestic church.” This makes sense because people have their primary contact with faith mainly in their home lives. Faith is not a mere abstract idea. It’s rooted in family life, the soil of personal well-being, so that homemaking becomes an act of love. Homemaking is an ancient human activity. It’s far more than providing food, firewood, and other essentials. It’s creating a particular atmosphere within a house, set by those things which bring about a sense of belonging, welcoming, and love. It sounds a lot like what we said about the parish, doesn’t it? That’s because home life and parish life support one another. Even in homes where poverty dominates the economics of the family, they can create such an atmosphere. It doesn’t take a lot of money to make a home. It takes heart, and especially a Christian heart fired by the grace of Christ.

Authentic faith expresses itself in daily life marked by forgiveness among family members, generosity with each other, hospitality for guests, a heart for the poor of the world, nourishment of the inborn hunger for God, and the acceptance of grace. Again, this sounds a lot like what we’ve said here about the elements of rich parish life. Again, just to make this point clear: the parish community is a gathering of household communities. The Council Fathers at Vatican II declared with one voice that the Church is indeed the People of God, a People at once on a journey and at home together. The People of God don’t live at the parish church. This seems obvious, but we must mention it because we often forget. The People of God live in the flats and houses, the cottages, farms, and homeless shelters of our communities. The purpose of the parish is to foster and support the life of that domestic church and this includes gathering it together for liturgy, faith formation, and pastoral care. We must, therefore, take the domestic church seriously.

The household about which we speak is messy. It has aches and pains. It messes up and tries to make up—all at once. It does its best within its very human limits but it doesn’t always meet the Church’s ideals. Some members of our parish households are busy as they: care for ageing or ill parents, tend to sick family members, and work at one or two jobs to support the family. They also include family members who are divorced, suffering loneliness, realizing they’re gay, caring for children, growing old, celebrating key moments in their lives, getting ready for the holidays, or suffering loss in the death of loved ones. Our task as a parish may once have seemed to be clarifying the theology or rules and teaching the doctrine and, of course, that remains a task. But the enormous task named by this Synod is to embrace the daily domestic life we described here and, with mercy and compassion, accompany our households to grow in faith through these same experiences.

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