

Sustaining the Christian faith in the family

By Fr. Callistus Isara, MSP

Preamble

Parents have an indispensable role in sustaining the Christian faith in the family. Since the family is the *Domestic Church*, it provides children with their first education in the faith and morals. Undoubtedly, the *onus* rests on parents and guardians to help their children in the process of strengthening and deepening their faith. This will ensure that the faith is passed on from one generation to the other.

A. The *Shema* (Hear) Prayer

- **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6: 4-10).**

The call to “hear” is the command to love God alone. Over a period of time, the *shema* prayer became the principal confession of faith of the Jewish people; it became their creed. The people of Israel must not look to other gods. The Lord their God is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5; Deut 5:9). The *shema* prayer is a profession of faith in the one God, the foundation of Jewish monotheism. Because of the importance of the *shema*, the devout Jew wore phylacteries, that is, little leather boxes which contained the *shema* prayer, in their forehead and wrists. The *shema* was also contained in a cylinder box which the Jews attached to the doorpost of their houses and their rooms to remind them of this great commandment of God. Every Jewish service begins with the *shema* prayer. It is the first text in the Bible that every Jewish child memorized. The Jewish people obeyed the text to the letter.

Apart from the total and undivided love of God, which is the heart of the *shema* prayer, what also stands out is the command **to teach the commandment to their children**. They must nurture and help their children to hold on to the *shema* faith. The intent of this passage is clear: parents have the responsibility of handing down their faith, religious beliefs, and values to their children. The family is the first and primary place to nurture children in the faith and pass religious and moral values to them. The family is the first school for the religious education of children.

When Jesus was asked by a scribe in the Gospels: what is the greatest commandment? He answered by quoting a part (Deut 6:5) of the *shema* prayer (Mt 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34) about loving God with “all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt 22:37). Jesus told them that the love of God is the greatest commandment followed by the love of neighbour.

B. Paul and Timothy

Timothy was a disciple and companion of Paul. Paul enlisted him as his companion after the brothers at Lystra and Iconium had spoken well of him (Acts 16:2). Timothy’s mother was

Jewish while his father was Greek (Acts 16:1). Evidently, Timothy was a man of solid faith and character; hence Paul recruited him to be his companion. Paul referred to him as “true child of mine in the faith” (1 Tim 1:1), and “dear son of mine” (2 Tim 1:1). Apparently, Timothy had an outstanding upbringing in the faith by his parents especially his mother. This endeared him to Paul who praised Timothy’s sound faith which reached him through his mother and grandmother:

“I remember you in my prayers constantly night and day; I remember your tears and long to see you again to complete my joy. I also remember your sincere faith, a faith which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and I am sure dwells in you” (2 Tim 1:4-5).

For their part, parents, guardians, catechists, religious and priests, must do their best to ensure that the faith is strengthened in the family, so that the faith is handed on from one generation to the next. I have been deeply touched by the pains and anguish of many good and outstanding Catholics whose children have deviated from the faith. This has caused them enormous sorrow and emotional distress. I appeal to such parents not to lose hope, because scripture tells us that hope will not disappoint us (Rom 5:5). They must persevere in loving and praying for those children so that they can return to the true faith in which they were raised.

C. Religious Upbringing of Children

One way of sustaining the faith in the family is to ensure the religious upbringing of children so that the family can truly become a *Domestic Church*. The *Domestic Church* is a place where all members live in love of each other. It is a place to cultivate a school of love. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They have to bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule” (CCC #2223). Similarly, parents or guardians should be glowing example to their children: “Parents have a grave responsibility to give good example to their children” (CCC # 2223). Parents have the responsibility to teach their children how to pray since “the Christian family is the first place for education in prayer” (CCC #2685).

Pope Paul VI in his General Audience on August 11, 1976, spoke on the responsibility of parents towards the spiritual upbringing of their children:

“Mothers, do you teach your children the Christian prayers? Do you prepare them, in conjunction with the priests, for the sacraments that they receive when they are young: confession, communion and confirmation? Do you encourage them when they are sick to think of Christ suffering, to invoke the aid of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints? Do you say the family rosary together? And you, fathers, do you pray with your children, with the whole domestic community, at least sometimes? Your example of honesty in thought and action, joined to some common prayer, is a lesson for life, an act of worship of singular value. In this way you bring peace to your homes.... Remember, it is thus that you build up the church. (Familiaris Consortio 60).”

i) The Role of Prayer in the Religious Upbringing of Children

As it is often said, “the family that prays together stays together.” Parents must be examples of prayer for their children. As Christians, prayer must be a way of life for us; prayer is inseparable from the Christian life. Hence prayer must be promoted in family life. It is incumbent on parents that through them their children will not only learn how to pray, but to love to pray, and thus develop a pattern of prayer in their lives. My first experience of prayer was watching my father pray in the early hours of morning. Even before I was taught in the catechism class about prayer, I had observed prayer in my father as a little boy growing up. I saw my father kneeling down to pray in the early hours of the morning. The mark on his knees attested to his long period of kneeling down in prayer. The Christian home must be a home of prayer. Prayer should be accorded the same importance as food, clothing and shelter. While parents admirably work hard and struggle to provide the best for the upbringing of their children by way of education, food, clothing, and shelter, parents must not deprive their children of the spiritual heritage of a Christian life and a healthy life of prayer. A situation where a spouse refuses to participate in family prayer is not a good witness to the upbringing of children.

D. The Challenge of Parents and Guardians in sustaining the faith

Undoubtedly, there is a great challenge today for parents and guardians to transmit the faith, Christian values and morals, to their children. Parents and adult Catholics must do this primarily by example and then by word. Parents should not surrender the religious upbringing of their children to catechists and leave the moral formation of their children solely to school teachers. Oftentimes, parents abdicate their responsibility to transmit the faith and Christian values to their children because they are busy pursuing wealth and other material things. Parents must complement the religious education that their children receive from the Church. One of the ways parents can transmit religious education and values to their children is to begin by taking an inventory of their own religious and moral values. Parents should ask themselves:

- **What are my priorities?**
- **What do I value most in life?**
- **How is my faith integrated with my way of life?**
- **How seriously do I practice my faith?**

The answers to the above questions will help parents to work on themselves to grow in the spiritual and moral life, and then transmit them to their children first, by their way of life and then, by instruction. For example, the best way to teach our children the importance of prayer is for them to see us pray regularly. Christ’s disciples watched him pray over a period of time before they asked him to teach them how to pray. Jesus replied to their request by teaching them the Our Father (Luke 11:1-4).

Furthermore, parents and guardians must make their home a conducive place for transmitting the faith to their children through a regular and sustained family prayer pattern, open discussion of moral issues, acquainting their children with the Bible so that they can have love for sacred scripture, teaching children the value of sacrifice and service of others, teaching them

in kindness and generosity, teaching them in giving and not only in receiving, and reaching out to the poor and the less privileged in society, etc.

Most parents have problem with their children when they leave home for school: secondary and university education. What do parents need to do to address this problem? I believe that our collective reflection and sharing during the questions and answers session will be helpful to all of us.

Conclusion

The Jewish people took very seriously the command to teach the *shema* prayer to their children. Hence they were largely successful in imparting the Jewish faith from generation to generation. In order to sustain the Christian faith in the family as Catholics, we must courageously strive to practice the faith with utmost commitment and in turn hand it on to our children and our children's children. The lukewarm tendency that is often present in many Catholics must be replaced with zeal and vigour for the faith. If adult Catholics are not fervent in the practice of their faith, it becomes terribly difficult for them to pass the faith to their children since no one gives what one does not have. Just as the Jewish people took the *shema* injunction seriously, we must likewise take the practice of our faith seriously. May God give us the grace and the courage to truly practice our faith! Amen!

Thank you for listening and God bless you.