



Innovations with Parents

Coaching Parents to Form their Own Children

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There's a powerful and innovative new approach available this year for the faith formation and sacramental preparation of children and their parents. It has the potential to change the way we do business in all dimensions of faith formation.

Coach the Parents

What's new is the method for doing the formation itself. Very simply, it helps parish leaders *coach parents to form their own children*, rather than doing it for them. Early results show, to no one's surprise, and that doing so results in sacramental and faith formation that lasts a lifetime!

We know from our research that most active adult Catholics today are with the church because they were formed in faith *by their parents or guardians*. When you ask adults about this, people never say that they have faith as adults because they had a "great textbook in third grade." Of course, some adults come to faith *as adults*. But for the majority, formation by their parents when they were children is the key element.

And in reality, parents *are* the real forming agents of their children. No matter how well we may do in religious education with that third grade 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. The parents—by their actions, words, and household habits—form their children for life, either with faith or without it.

Therefore, we simply *must include the parents*. But it will never be enough for us parish leaders to simply hand the parents a textbook, send them home, and say, "Good by and good luck. Keep warm and well fed!" Instead, we must gather parents with their children and then *coach them* to provide the formation themselves, using a resource designed for this purpose.

Once we invite parents into the process of faith formation, we must stand by their sides and help them to be successful! They might not have all the terminology just right. They might not be totally enthused in their own faith. They might not even be worshipping with the church on a regular basis. But once they begin to form their own children, and we coach them to do this well, they quickly become more confident, more informed, and more prayerful.

It also turns out that when we coach parents, many find a new priority in living their own faith, as examples for their children. They see themselves as role models and begin taking a more active role in the parish, including more regular attendance at Sunday Mass. By coaching them to help their children, we wind up evangelizing the parishioners who are in their 20s and 30s.

Development of the Idea

Over the past twenty years, there has been a lot of talk in faith formation circles about offering faith formation to a larger group in the parish than merely children. Sometimes it's called "whole community catechesis" and other times "lifelong faith formation" or "intergenerational catechesis."

For many of us, this was a really new idea when we first heard it. For as long as most of us could remember, we had been busy running parish religious education programs. For the most part, parents were not in the picture. We hoped if we educated the kids, they'd bring their parents along. Sometimes that worked. Sometimes it did not.

Some of us even felt a little threatened by "whole community catechesis" as though including the adults would somehow eliminate the children. Others of us simply felt overwhelmed. We were barely treading water in our parish jobs as it was—without adding another entire huge group to our responsibilities. And besides, there are just too many adult Catholics who haven't had much formation since their grade school years.

In the United States the movement for lifelong formation was empowered by the Catholic Bishops, with their now-ten-year-old pastoral plan, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*. This pastoral plan was based on the prophetic vision laid out in the *General Directory for Catechesis*. Add to that, we also had the very important work done by the staff at the Center for Ministry Development, which modeled how to gather the whole community.

Parents Sharing Faith

Again, the single most important idea in all of this is that unless the parents of our children are deeply and fully involved in both the formal education and a daily lifestyle of faith, we cannot succeed with their children. This is one of our greatest challenges.

As long as we keep “doing it for them,” parents will never step up and become the persons primarily responsible for the faith of their children. We are in the habit of replacing parents with parish volunteers for this purpose. The volunteers are well meaning and faithful. They want to succeed with the children. But, by continually replacing parents with teachers at the church, we have unfortunately taught the parents that their role is minor. In fact, though, their role is *irreplaceable*. Here’s what the document on Christian education from Vatican II said about that: “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).

Turning the Next Corner

This year, we are turning a new corner in regard to the role of parents. In the whole progress toward lifelong faith formation, this is an innovation that will have lasting effects. It is a sure-fire method *for coaching parents to form their own children*. The team that wrote and produced this resource knows that growing up Catholic doesn’t start at first grade, and certainly not at sacrament preparation. It begins at baptism when the child is entrusted to the care of his or her parents. So this new resource, called *Growing Up Catholic*, begins there.

The first element of it, called appropriately *Entrusted To Your Care*, is a method for coaching young parents between baptism and elementary school. Using modern methods for this (such as the Internet and email) added to traditional methods (such as the telephone and parish gatherings), *Entrusted* offers three points of contact each year between parish volunteers or staff and those parents.

Then, when their child is ready to prepare more formally for the sacraments, *Growing Up Catholic* provides a carefully tested and well-crafted formation

process designed for use within the parish or in home schooling. It provides the immediate preparation for First Reconciliation, Confirmation-in-restored-order, and First Communion. But it does far more than merely prepare a child for these sacraments. It also prepares children and their parents for a lifelong journey of faith as Catholics. *Growing Up Catholic* has three key elements:

1. A fully reproducible learning guide designed for the parents and children. Parents are literally coached on how to form children for the sacraments. *Growing Up Catholic* uses a loose leaf style, because when a parent misses a session (and some always will!), or when parents who don’t live together in marriage any longer are both involved, the loose leaf style allows you to send it home, or to multiple homes, or even to post it on the parish web site. And this also allows the children to consume and “make their own” the learning resource which they use.
2. A web site loaded with parent information: www.GrowingUpCatholic.com. *Growing up Catholic* depends on the parents or guardians of the child. Remember, no matter how well we do as a parish, the children still learn at home by watching and listening to their parents. Many parents really aren’t deeply enough connected to their own faith to guide a child. So on this web site, *Growing Up Catholic* reaches past the parish directly to the parents providing them with a roadmap on how to raise a child in the Catholic faith:
 - What prayers should a child know by heart?
 - What is the meaning of the symbols, in plain English?
 - What signs of faith, sacramentals, and other Catholic things do we need in our home?
 - What if one of the parents is not Catholic? How do we bridge multiple faiths and cultures?
 - Using plain English, what is the background from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the various things a child should learn?
 - And much more.
3. A full package of tools designed for the parish leader. This includes a guide for both catechists and leaders, plus one for the pastor and parish musicians. Every other possible leader need is also met, and the team behind

Growing Up Catholic provides unlimited, free support to any parish via the phone. (Y, será disponible en español pronto.)

Conclusion

We said earlier here that the key to this is those parents, those busy, distracted, under-formed, unengaged-with-the-church parents. Because we've used our present model for so long (replacing parents with other teachers) we may have grown to believe that parents don't *want* to take part. But it turns out that they really *do want to have a role in the formation of their children*. They aren't taking part, they often tell us, only because we have not *coached* them to do this, and unless we do that, they just don't know how to become involved.

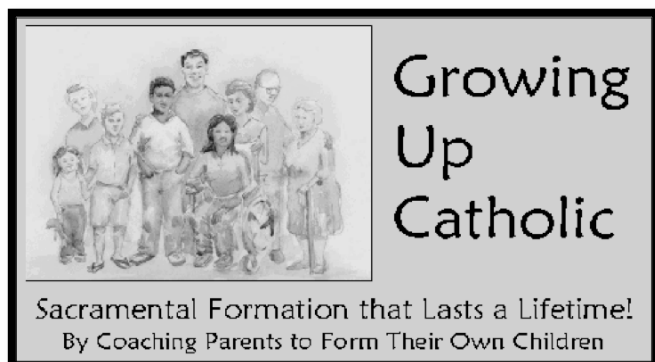
Let the parents speak for themselves about this. Here is what a group of parents wrote in their evaluations after just the first 3 sessions of *Growing Up Catholic* for First Reconciliation:

- Every answer I needed was there. I felt very comfortable.
- I love the website! It's given me access to everything I need for my child. We're going to memorize our prayers this weekend.
- I wish I [had] had this for my older children.
- No one told us forming our own kids was this important. Now I feel I'm learning alongside [Ryan].
- I really prefer this over having someone else teach my child.
- You're kidding! I hope you have more of this for my child as she grows up. This is wonderful!
- Do you have a program like this on the Bible?
- Thank you for helping me with my child.

Web Site

Growing Up Catholic

www.GrowingUpCatholic.com



The Catholic Church on the Importance of Parents

The Declaration on Christian Education from Vatican II:

Parents are, in fact, the first and foremost educators of their children
within a family atmosphere
animated with love
providing a well-rounded formation.

The family can be called the first school of those social virtues which every society needs.

The Christian family is enriched by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony and is the place where children are first taught to know and love God and to know and love their neighbor.

Here they come to understand human companionship, here they're introduced into civic life, and here initiated into the parish community. (From article 3 *Vatican II in Plain English*)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by *creating a home* where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule... (From article 2223, italics theirs)

Family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith... (From article 2226)

The General Directory for Catechesis:

The family is defined by Vatican II as a domestic church...

The family passes on human values in the Christian tradition, and it awakens a sense of God in its youngest members.

It teaches the first tentative steps of prayer, it forms the moral conscience, and it teaches human love as a reflection of divine love.

Indeed, the catechetics of the home are more witness than teaching, more occasional than systematic, and more daily than structured into periods. (From article 255, *The GDC in Plain English*)