

# Faith and Life

by Leon J. Suprenant, Jr.



**M**y wife Maureen and I do what we can to pass on the ABC's of the Catholic faith to our children. We require them to learn their catechism, memorize Scripture verses, and participate in the sacred liturgy and family devotions. It gives me great joy to see my children fulfill these requirements enthusiastically and well.

All the same, I wonder sometimes how much of all of this is really sinking in. What will they do when they are older, when Mommy and Daddy aren't watching, when catechism class is no longer in session?

My family lives just off the road that connects the major highway to the main street in Steubenville. For this reason, ambulances frequently pass by our house en route to the nearby hospital. I don't even notice them most of the time. However, every time an ambulance passes by, my children—sometimes together, sometimes individually—will stop what they're doing and offer a prayer for the person in the ambulance.

I realize this is a small matter, perhaps not a big deal in the grand scheme of things. However, I find such episodes very encouraging. They tell me that the faith is "breaking through" into the whole of my children's lives.

Christian "formation" is more than merely getting high marks in

religion class. Rather, the goal of all Catholic parents, and the reason for Catholic education and all the accompanying sacrifices and activities, is to form the next generation of God's beloved children. No task is more important or more fulfilling (not to mention challenging). Christianity is not simply a body of knowledge or moral code, but an all-encompassing way of life rooted in the person of Christ.

### Faith Department

We home school our children. We have one daughter in particular who struggles with laziness. We really have to stay on top of her. Left to her own devices, she will frequently rush through the "boring stuff" (i.e., schoolwork and chores), doing a less-than-adequate job in the process, so as to maximize her play time. We try to instill in her the virtue of diligence and at the same time help her to view her day in a less fragmented, compartmentalized way.

In a sense I can't blame my daughter for thinking this way. This is, after all, the "Miller time" generation. We can't wait to finish our labors, grab a cold one, put our feet up, and turn on the TV—as though *that's* real living, the "good life," and all the work that preceded it was some sort of necessary evil. If that's

what we communicate with our actions, we can't fault our children for developing similar habits.

Even as we become more serious about our spiritual lives we still tend to compartmentalize our day. If we're not careful, we end up assessing our spiritual development based solely or at least excessively on explicit religious observance. In other words, we might look to whether we "got in" our Rosary, chaplet, holy hour, or whatever other devotion(s) we set out to do each day. These things are very important, but they're means, not ends. And in Christ, everything about us is caught up in our spiritual life.

I used to listen to a talk radio host who would say, "In the department store of life, sports is, after all, the toy department." Surely that's a useful message for us "weekend warriors." But let's take that comment a step further. In the department store of life, is our faith merely a department—and a "boring" one at that, such as housewares or women's clothing? If so, then what about the rest of the store? Are there parts of our life that our faith doesn't affect?

We need to understand our faith as being more fundamental than the air we breathe throughout the department store, making the entire store a good and meaningful place to be.

## Disciple-Making 101

Before ascending to His Father, Our Lord instructed His apostles to go “make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). This call goes in a special way to bishops as the legitimate successors of the apostles. Yet the call goes out to all of us. And when it comes to the family, parents are, in the words of Pope Pius XI, “vicars of Christ” within the home, the “domestic Church.” The various duties of parents described in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 2221-31) all point to the vocation of Catholic parents to make disciples of their children.

“Disciple” comes from the Latin word *discipulus*, which means “learner.” But just as being a disciple is more than mere “learning,” making disciples is more than mere “teaching.” As Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II have emphasized in recent decades, we need teachers who are first and foremost witnesses. In other words, they must already be disciples themselves.

But what are the hallmarks of a disciple, a true follower of Christ? One concise response was given by Our Lord Himself when He said: “Anyone who wishes to be my disciple must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Lk. 9:23).

What kind of disciples are we raising if we spoil our children, deny them nothing, and soften the daily requirements of Christian living when they seem inconvenient or burdensome? As far as that goes, what kind of disciples are we?

The word “discipline” comes from the same root as disciple. Discipline is not limited to correcting inappropriate behavior. It’s more about instilling virtue, self-control, and a sense of order in our children’s lives as well as our own. As Scripture says, “At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it” (Heb. 12:11).

Discipline is hard work even in the intellectual realm, as sound catechesis requires some memorization. At times it’s easier to give in and let the child do what he or she wants, but such myopic solutions in the long run lead to ruin.

But we don’t merely discipline—we “disciple” our children as we draw them around Jesus in the Family of God (Catechism, no. 542). Our children are watching us like hawks. Sure, they watch

me when I’m praying with them or explaining Church teaching to them. But they’re also watching to see how I respond to conflict or disappointment, how I treat strangers, how I use “free time,” and where I turn for refreshment and meaning in life. What do they see?

## Praying Child Support

Scripture says that faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:26). One way of looking at this biblical truth is to recognize the necessary continuity between our faith and how we live. In other words, our faith changes us, it transforms us. It also changes how we see things. And so only through the eyes of faith do we have an authentic Catholic worldview, cognizant of the spiritual drama playing out beneath the surface of our physical lives. Through faith we are able to “think with the Church,” and through the celebration of our faith in the sacred liturgy we are able to breathe with truly Catholic lungs.

Not to paint with an overly broad brush, but in general Catholic parents today have less support than in past generations. We all know that the media, schools, other families, and society at large, despite many good elements, often do not nurture the Christian faith. A Catholic family that doesn’t consciously swim upstream will gradually be assimilated into the larger culture. Therefore, Catholic parents, perhaps even more so than in the past, must be the dominant influence shaping our children’s beliefs and values.

Catholic families must be safe incubators where the faith is protected and nourished, and at the same time they need to serve as a leaven for Christ in the world. It’s a difficult balance—families have to find their own way without succumbing to timidity or foolhardiness. This takes discernment and courage.

In this issue of *Lay Witness*, we hope to equip our readers to form their children in keeping with the mind of the Church. The key in all this is passing on the unsurpassable riches of Christ to the next generation. Our children are God’s, not ours. Yet He entrusts these treasures to us for a short time. Therefore, the religious education of our children must always be the top priority. We need to bring our “A” game when it comes to evangelization and catechesis. What excuse could we possibly have for doing less? ■

## From Our Founder

It follows that the Catholic youth of today has a mission very different from that of establishing, more or less leisurely, all things in Christ. His is the far more urgent task of retaining the savor of his own salt, of intensifying it, and of guarding it against the day when he will be called upon to employ it generously against the corrupting powers which would cause all flesh to rot. If the young Catholic generation now in the schools should end up faithless—an all-too-likely event—we may be sure that a new and terrible paganism will everywhere flourish. And this will not be rooted out except by bloody witness, arduous trials, and centuries of effort.

H. Lyman Stebbins  
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