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An Invitation from God

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“This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer.” (CCC n.2558).

Prayer as relationship

Prayer for all of us is a relationship we grow into, like all other relationships. We come into this world with a total dependence on our mothers. If life is kind to us we grow into a relationship with our mother that may well continue into old age as mutual friends. It takes a life time of communication, at many levels, to become in the truest sense a friend of one's mother or child. It takes a lifetime to grow into the relationship with God that God wants for us.

What we are, and what we do with and for children, is very important in their journey of prayer. What do I mean by prayer? The old catechism definition of prayer, “raising one's mind and heart to God” still carries a depth of meaning. Young people, through the gift of television and contemporary media have imaginations richly stimulated by the world of people and the world of creation. What we lack perhaps is the well defined capacity to go beyond the creation to the creator.

Teaching prayer is a profound challenge. To affirm, validate and articulate young people's search for goodness and for God is the great challenge for all religious educators. Our task is to lead young people to lift their hearts and minds to God, to support children in coming to recognize the invitation from God to be in relationship with God.

Children's innate prayerfulness

There is a considerable body of knowledge that suggests young people, as the truly wise among us have always known, do have a sense of the sacred, an openness to the spiritual that cries out to be nurtured. In this article I am reflecting on prayer with young children. It has been suggested that the crisis of faith for older young people is really a crisis of spirituality (Vardy, 2003) and in part that is because in our post-modern, post religious practice world we have not fought to provide spiritual pathways that are satisfying and appropriate for adolescents and young people.



Prayer is not to be found in a special hermetically sealed place or space in our life. Prayer and our relationship to God and God's people are found in, and within, our loving interaction with them. We do need celebrations of love to know that it is real. From a very early age parents communicate their love to their children by smile and touch and word. God is present in these moments and parents are at times acutely aware of the mystery of life, of the mysterious presence of God in this new life. Our prayer is a way of "speaking" this "knowing", of articulating these deep things of life. When we pray in gratitude or in desperate fear for our children's future life we are articulating our deepest spirituality, our real knowing of life.

It is in these early experiences that children begin to form their own attitude to life and in deeply mysterious ways begin to be in contact with God. We often see children in moments of awe, delight and discovery. From these and other experiences children construct their own unique view of life and of God. We are all natural mystics and we all depend on the people and world around us for the means to give expression to these inner knowings.

Finding God in stillness

When we work with small children to enable them to be still and silent, initially perhaps for only a few moments, and hopefully, by the time they leave high school, for quite considerable lengths of time, we are preparing them for prayer. In the stillness of silence, even if it is a hard won place, we come to appreciate the place and space of God within. This takes time and patience. It begins with small steps and is a skill as important as any other learnt at school or in the home.

Words for prayer

When we teach a small child the words of a simple prayer we are doing at least two things. We are introducing them to the world of Christian faith and we are even more importantly giving the means to think about, to give form to, their own experience of transcendence, dare we say of God, who in this life is always there to be found in glimpses and shadows and traces. God is found by young people. Sometimes if we are sensitive enough, and properly respect their dignity and privacy, they will share with us something of their understanding of this with us. (Hay & Nye, 1998)

How do we pray with children? Some things need to be kept in mind. To see an adult deeply immersed in prayer is a profound lesson for any child. The language we use in prayer ought to match the language of conversation. Formal prayers are important and informal prayers ought to reflect the language competency of the children. Schools rightly have high expectations of children's language skills and this ought to be reflected in the prayers we pray with them. The language of prayer is the language of the people. Formal prayer and formal ways of praying raise many questions for children and their teachers.

Children praying at Mass

The Directory for Masses with Children (Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, 1973) very specifically requires children's needs to be incorporated into the celebration. There are many ways this can be done without seeking to entertain, or to reduce the celebration to a childish oversimplicity. Some elements of our formal Church and sacramental celebrations are beyond appreciation of children. This does not automatically rule out children's participation; it does demand of us that we incorporate children into our celebrations in ways that engage and deepen their faith. This is not particularly difficult. (Abbott & Callanan, 2003)

Consistent with the principles of the *Directory* children may be taken out of the church for their own Liturgy of the Word. (Abbott, 2003) Children may be invited to take part in the Offertory procession. The priest, if he has the skills to speak to children, may offer a short homily directed to their level of interest and comprehension. Children in some Churches are invited to the front of the church to join

in the sign of peace. At Communion time little children may be blessed and welcomed with a smile from priest or minister. The time after Mass is important too as young children meet and play together as parents converse for a few minutes. All these elements add up to form a welcoming community that acknowledges the needs of all of its members.

In these formal and informal ways we, the Christian people, may support and encourage our children to consciously deepen their relationship with God and express it for themselves in various forms of prayer.

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