

27 December 2020

Writings: Passing on the Faith

Mary and Joseph brought the child Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the Law of the Lord (Luke 2:22-23).

Every once in a while, parents will ask me how they can successfully pass on their faith to their children. I begin by warning them there is no guaranteed way of insuring their kids will keep their faith after they become adults. I know of many parents who did everything right in teaching and practicing their faith and their children still rejected it. I then share what my parents did for me and my brother which I think was the best way to approach the subject: do the little things well.

In today's Gospel, Mary and Joseph went up to the Jerusalem Temple where Mary underwent a purification rite and Jesus was presented and a sacrifice offered to fulfill the requirements of the Jewish Law. According to that Law, having a child made a woman ritually impure and she had to undergo a purification ritual forty days after the birth of a son (Lev. 12:2-6). Every first born son had to be consecrated to the Lord which included an animal sacrifice (Exod. 13:2). It may seem strange a woman born without Original Sin and a child who was the Son of God chose to observe these sections of the Jewish Law. Yet, faith must be expressed publicly regardless of the circumstances. Mary and Joseph were pious Jews who wanted their son to experience and understand his faith in a human way. They did this by doing the little things well. Later on, Jesus was brought to the Temple at the age of twelve (where he stayed behind and conversed with the teachers) and as an adult attended Synagogue as was his custom.

As people with little formal education, my parents had a limited knowledge of their faith but their belief in God and the Church's teachings was rock solid. This became apparent in how they passed the faith on to my brother and myself. We went to Mass every Sunday (or Saturday night). Bad weather or sickness was never an excuse to miss Mass. If we were out of town for a hockey tournament or family vacation my parents hunted down the location of the nearest Catholic Church. We went to Confession monthly. Every Friday we ate fish and chips for supper. We always said Grace before meals in a restaurant even when people looked at us funny. When my brother and I were getting prepared for First Confession, First Communion and Confirmation my parents were at every meeting and made sure we knew the material we were taught. We always made the Sign of the Cross whenever we passed in front of a Church or cemetery. Our faith was woven into every fibre of our daily life because they did the little things well.

Today parents face great challenges in passing their faith along to their children. They are so many other voices competing for their child's attention. There is the pressure to place team sports ahead of religious practice. The media ridicule and undermine religious beliefs. There are countless public figures (including Catholics) who provide a bad example to impressionable minds about what is right and true. I have a lot of respect for any parent who resists the urge not to throw in the towel.

Perhaps this Covid 19 Crisis may provide a lesson for them in this regard. Medical officials tell us stopping the spread of the virus is done by doing the little things well: wash your hands often; stand six feet from other people; wear a mask; stay home. These actions do not require people to make extraordinary sacrifices or impose great burdens upon them. In the same way, small actions like: not making a sarcastic response to an unkind remark; giving way in traffic to another driver; respecting people with whom you disagree; or offering a mask to someone not wearing one; give a credible witness to the Christian beliefs we claim to uphold. In a world full of selfishness, cynicism and hatred being other-centered, authentic and caring stands out. Children watch everything. They learn quickly how to spot a phoney. In small ways, we can teach them why faith is real.

There is no guarantee doing the little things well will keep you from getting Covid 19 or ensure your children will keep their faith. But, I can't think of a better alternative.

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