

Christian Formation Begins Again—So What?

The Rev. Dr. Patrick Murray

The coming of Fall is an exhilarating time of year. There is excitement in the air as people return from travel, schools reopen, and various social, cultural, and sports activities resume. In most churches, a new season of Christian formation begins with the familiar Rally Day. Parents may find themselves thinking about the role of the Church's learning programs for their children.

In recent years one of the most influential Christian educators was Dr. John Westerhoff, an Episcopal priest who formerly taught at Duke University. One of his many books carries the provocative title, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* The answer to that is easy: Of course they will. Our children certainly will have faith—in something! Every human being does. We are so made that we have to find meaning by committing our lives to something beyond ourselves. But what will it be?

Obviously, the answer depends a great deal on parents and care-givers. If anything has been established in the modern social sciences, it is the life-long impact of the first five or six years on a child's development, during which the influence of the parent or primary care-giver is almost exclusive. If we do not involve our children in Christian training, the message is instilled loud and clear: "This doesn't really matter."

It does not take children long to figure out how Christian education compares in importance with family outings, recreation, watching TV, reading the Sunday paper, or whatever. So we can be certain that our children are going to put their trust in something, and that something is probably going to look a lot like whatever we parents put our time and energy into.

It turns out that there is an even more basic question than the one posed by Dr. Westerhoff's book title. It is much older, goes much deeper, and has to be answered first. Jesus gathered the disciples one day and

asked, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples told him that folks were speculating about him in various ways, many saying that he was just another prophet like those from Israel’s past. But then came the zinger: “And who do *you* say that I am?”

This question belongs to us just as much as to those early disciples. We might like to wriggle out of it, but in fact we are in the process of answering it each day of our lives: Who is he? Does he matter? Is he to be the center of my life, or will it be something else? Obviously, our answer to these questions will greatly affect the answer to the other one, Will our children have faith?

Dare we deny that the question is an urgent one? Our children and young people face tremendous pressures – the drug epidemic, the breakdown of core values like honesty and integrity, the erosion of civility and morality, the rampant greed and materialism in government and society, and the incessant violence in the media. Does the Church's message, which seems so easily drowned out amidst these powerful forces, have any chance of getting through to our young people today?

What has been verified repeatedly is that our children will probably take the process of Christian formation about as seriously as their adult models do. If we are willing to make a commitment to our own spiritual growth, this will probably be the single greatest influence on their lives. This is not meant to lay an unfair burden of guilt on ourselves as parents. Our children will not always follow our lead, because they are increasingly free to make their own choices as they grow up. Finally we do not control what they do with their lives. But if we show them that Christian faith is at the center of our lives, then it is far more likely that it will be for them also.

The widely-used Christian formation program, Catechesis, is shaped around one primary image: Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who cares for each one of his sheep and goes out to find even one that wanders from the fold.

Can you think of a better image for our children to carry with them as they go forth one day into a very complex and often confusing world? Do we want anything less than an awareness that God loves them with a love that will go to any lengths to find them and heal them after life has hurt them, exploited them, rejected them, or broken their hearts? Do we have a better lifestyle to offer than the one based on the good news in Jesus Christ?

One way or another, we all develop some kind of spirituality, healthy or not, and the children in our charge are no exception. And so we come back to our original question: Will our children develop Christian faith? We cannot know for sure, because partly that is up to them. What we can do is to open ourselves to Christ's invitation to discipleship in our own lives and offer our gifts for the ministry of Christian formation. Then we will have done all that we can do, and we will offer up the next generation to God's love and care, knowing that they were God's before they were ours.