

THE VOCATION OF CHILDREN AND PARENTS: SACRED VISION AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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I. THE NEED TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AND PARENTS AND TO STRENGTHEN FAITH FORMATION

- A. Even though we recognize the importance of good parenting for children, support for children and parents is undermined in a number of ways in contemporary cultures.
- B. Although the church certainly upholds the importance of parenting and does offer a variety of programs for children and families, there are elements in the Church that also undermine support for children and parents.
- C. Some specific concerns:
 - 1. Many congregations inadequately fund or offer weak religious education or youth and family programs.
 - 2. Many congregations fail to emphasize the importance of parents in the faith development of children. Religious education programs tend to operate in isolation from the home, not as an extension of the home.
 - 3. Thus, many parents within the church are neglecting to speak with their children about moral and spiritual matters and neglecting to integrate practices into their everyday lives that nurture faith.
 - 4. Children and young people, even those who attend church regularly, know little about their faith traditions and have difficulty perceiving or articulating the relation between faith and their daily lives. (Smith Study)
 - 5. Many denominations have not offered serious theological reflection or strong teachings about parenting or children.
 - a. Seen as “beneath” the serious theologian
 - b. Just now see the development of:
 - 1) Theologies of Childhood (provide sophisticated theological understandings of children and our obligations to them);
 - 2) Child Theologies (rethink fundamental Christian doctrines and practices as a whole using the “lens” of the child)

II. PARENTS, CHILDREN, AND THEIR SACRED CALLINGS

- A. We can help children and parents and strengthen faith formation by:
 - 1. Supporting parents in their role as the primary agents of a child’s moral and spiritual formation**
 - 2. Keeping in mind the dignity and complexity of children.**
- B. The Christian tradition emphasizes the importance of parenting in various ways:
 - 1. Parents and children have a divine calling or vocation (Luther)
 - a. The vocation of parents is “Adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels.”
 - b. Parents are “apostles, bishops, and priests to their children.”
 - c. Parents are to nurture the faith of their children; and to help them develop their gifts to serve others.
 - d. Children and students have a calling here and now.
 - 2. Parents are to lead children to “godliness”: help children grow in faith, empowering them to use their gifts and talents to love and serve God and the neighbor and to contribute to the common good (Francke)

3. The family is a “little church” (Chrysostom)
 4. “Religion never thoroughly penetrates life until it becomes domestic” (Bushnell)
- C. The importance of parents in the spiritual formation of children is also emphasized today in:
1. Creative intergenerational and family religious education programs
 2. Studies of the Search Institute and Youth and Family Institute

D. Any strong Christian vision of parenting or adult-child relationships must be integrally connected to a vibrant and complex theological understanding of children and childhood.

1. Children are orphans, “neighbors,” and strangers in need of compassion and justice
(Ex: Exodus, Deuteronomy);
Adults are to protect them and provide them with their basic needs.
 2. Children are gifts of God and sources of joy who are fully human and made in the image of God
(Ex: Genesis, Psalms, Jeremiah, John 16, Matthew);
Adults are to respect, enjoy, and being grateful for them.
 3. Children are developing beings, sinful creatures, and moral agents in need of instruction and guidance
(Ex: Genesis, Proverbs, Deuteronomy, Ephesians);
Adults are to nurture the faith of children and help them use their gifts and talents to love and
serve others and contribute to the common good.
 4. Children are models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation, and representatives of Jesus
(Ex: Gospels);
Adults are to listen to and learn from children.
- E. Although Christian understandings of childhood and parenting will vary, they would all benefit by incorporating a range of resources from the tradition and developing conceptions of children that acknowledge:
1. Their full humanity as well as their need for guidance.
 2. Their spiritual wisdom as well as growing moral capacities.
 3. Their strengths and gifts as well as their vulnerabilities and needs.

III. SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN

- A. Parents: “Best practices” and responsibilities for nurturing the moral and spiritual lives of children
1. Reading and discussing the Bible and interpretations of it with children
 2. Worshipping with a community; and carrying out family rituals and traditions of worship and prayer
 3. Introducing children to good examples, mentors, and stories of service and compassion
 4. Participating in service projects with parents or other caring adults and teaching financial responsibility
 5. Singing together and exposing children to the spiritual gifts of music and the arts
 6. Appreciating the natural world and cultivating a reverence for creation; attending a “family camp”
 7. Educating children; and helping them discern their vocations
 8. Fostering life-giving attitudes toward the body, sexuality, and marriage
 9. Listening to and learning from children
 10. Taking up a Christ-centered approach to discipline, authority, and obedience; recognizing that, in the tradition, parental authority is always limited.
- B. Children: Primary duties and responsibilities of children
1. Honor and respect your parents
 2. Obey your parents
 3. Disobey your parents and other adult authorities, if they cause you to sin or to disobey God
 4. Fear and love God
 5. Love and serve the neighbor
 6. Learn about and practice the faith

7. Teach adults and be models of faith
8. God to school and study diligently for the future
9. Play and be in the present

IV. THE MESSINESS AND COMPLEXITY OF FAMILY LIFE

- A. Although children best thrive when they are raised by two loving parents within the covenant of marriage and who carry out these “best practices,” in a fallen world, people and relationships can be damaged.
- B. Single-parent and even two-parent families are broken and struggling in various ways.
- C. Parents of many children are abusive, are seriously ill, or have died.
 1. Some children are being raised by older siblings, relatives, or neighbors.
 2. Others have been abandoned, living in foster care, or are awaiting adoption.

V. OUR COMMON TASK IN NURTURING CHILDREN

Caring for children and nurturing their moral and spiritual lives is clearly an important and complex task that requires a cooperative effort among parents, relatives, friends, religious communities, schools, the state, and international organizations. All of us, whether or not we are parents ourselves, need to work diligently on many levels and in many ways to protect children and to nurture their faith.