

## Recent research indicates large numbers of cradle Catholics leave the church by age 23... why???

Here are some stunning statistics: 50% of millennial Catholics now claim no religious identity, and for every one person who joins our Church, six are leaving! And a 2016 Georgetown University study reveals that these decisions often happen, on average, around age 13! I'm sure there are many contributing factors, but be certain – what we are doing right now is not working!

So let me give you my perspective on this, based on over three decades of observation and countless conversations with parents, grandparents, teens and young adults.

According to the Church, parents are to be the first and primary educators of their children in the Faith (Catechism, CCC 2221-2223). But speaking with hundreds of parents over the years, I get the sense that many don't feel equipped or even capable of teaching the Faith to their children these days. Their own faith is battered, they have doubts, they may not have been taught the Faith well as children themselves. But whatever the reason, the “new” way of teaching the Faith seems to consist largely of dropping children off at a catechism class. And no matter how good the intention, often, there ends the passing on of the Faith, with little overlap into family life.

Now I'm just speaking generally here. There are many parents that teach and share their faith exceptionally well. But from my experience, this may be the exception...

The Faith **cannot** be taught primarily in a classroom -learning and memorizing various facts about God from someone a child barely knows. The faith is taught in relationship, and the most powerful, God-ordained relationship for this is between a child and his/her mom and dad.

Now I'm not necessarily advocating for the end of parish or diocesan-based religious education of children. But I am suggesting that this education **not** be the primary source of passing on the Faith. It should only supplement the sharing of the Faith at home. In fact, if I was to run a parish-based faith education program for children, I would run it for **parents**, or for parents **with** their children.

But either way, home or classroom, the target must be clear - it is not primarily the head that we must reach, but the heart. It is the heart of a child that a parent must turn to God. And perhaps the most important thing that we have to remember as parents is that we cannot do this on our own. We can be “super Catholic parents”, busy with all kinds of faith-based family activities - maybe we even home school our kids. But good as all this is, it is built on sand if we don't fully realize that it is **first** by the grace of God, ideally working through a parent, that the gift of faith is given to a child. This may sound obvious, but I know for myself that so often, I've relied far too much on myself when sharing the faith with my kids, and not enough on God.

The greatest thing we can do as parents, grandparents and teachers is to pray for those we are sharing the Faith with, because apart from Jesus we “*can do nothing*” (**John 15:5**). Yes, God will work through us, but He will be the primary instrument. Our first and most important calling in this will be to ask for the gift of Faith, or a greater outpouring of it, for those we are trying to share it with. Jesus captures this perfectly in **Luke 11:9-13** where He asks, what parent, though all of us weak and fallen, doesn’t know how to give good things to their children... so “*how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who **ask Him?***”

It is the Holy Spirit that will light the fire of the love of God in our children’s hearts: “*the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit*” (**Romans 5:5**) It is first and foremost *the Spirit’s* work –but we as parents **must ask on behalf of our children!**

But what if you say to yourself: my faith is weak, I often falter as a parent, I’m not worthy or even capable to do this. Ultimately, not one of us is capable or worthy of passing on this glorious gift of Faith to our children on our own. But with God all things are possible. So what we’ve prayed for our children we must also pray for **ourselves**: ask for a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit, ask for your faith to be strengthened. Ask! Pray! Learn your Faith, strengthen it! Trust God to respond and make up for what you lack.

And we must also know that our example –how we live our faith out in our daily lives – will have great effect on our children when it comes to sharing our faith: how we follow God’s Commandments, how we speak, how we argue with our spouses, how we do business, how we treat others... If our faith in God is real and strong, it will speak louder than any classroom. You don’t need to be a theologian to teach the Faith to your children, you simply need to love God and let that love shine. My blessed Slovak Grandma would have been hard pressed to explain transubstantiation –but she lived it. And everyone around her saw it, including me.

One thing matters in this world. Parents, we must put Jesus at the center of our lives, and then **ask** Him to help us. If we are too busy to do this, we are too busy. One of the greatest barriers to faith today is not giving God time in our busy lives. My suggestion is this: give God the first priority in your life. It will not always be easy, especially in the midst our current culture. I personally have to recommit to this virtually every day, and I fall often. But He will **never** be outdone in generosity. And at the end of our lives, when we look back and consider where our time was best spent, I doubt there will be any of us that will regret time spent following God’s call for our lives, and especially the time spent in sharing, teaching and deepening our faith with our children.

There is an unprecedented falling away from the Faith today. St John Paul II reminds us that “*The future of the world and the Church passes through the family*” (**Familiaris Consortio**). Parents, we are the first and best teachers of the faith in our families. Let this Christmas remind us of that, and let it be our greatest gift to our children...