

Someone once said, "The church is always one generation away from extinction." Given that reality, it is crucial that the church and parents successfully pass on their faith to their children. And yet, today's society, today's culture, creates quite a challenge for the church. Are we able to meet that challenge? I hope so.

It truly is a challenge, an overwhelming challenge. The average young person views more than 3,000 ads per day on TV, the Internet, billboards, and magazines. Increasingly, advertisers are targeting younger and younger children in an effort to establish brand-name preference at as early an age as possible. Children are a very profitable market. Companies spend about \$17 billion annually marketing to children compared to \$100 million spent in 1983. Marketing directly to children is a factor in the childhood obesity epidemic. Marketing also encourages eating disorders, precocious sexuality, youth violence and family stress and contributes to children's diminished capability to play creatively.

Prime time TV portrays 3 to 5 violent acts per hour, and children's Saturday morning programming offers 20 to 25 violent acts per hour. According to a report from the American Psychiatric Association, adolescents will have viewed 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence by the age of 18. Worse yet, the current portrayal of violence is highly graphic and realistic. At the same time, violent acts go unpunished 73% of the time. This sends the message that violence is justified and a viable method for dealing with problems.

The typical teen fare contains heavy doses of sexual content, ranging from touching, kissing, jokes and innuendo to conversations about sexual activity and

portrayals of intercourse. It is often presented as a casual activity without risk or consequences. Studies have shown that watching TV shows with sexual content apparently hastens the initiation of teen sexual activity and sexual talk on TV has the same effect on teens as depictions of sex.

Sixty percent of teenagers spend an average of twenty hours a week in front of TV and computer screens, and a third spend closer to 40 hours per week. When you consider how many hours our children and youth are in front of a screen, compared to a few hours a week they spend in Sunday School, worship, and youth group, the church and parents have a challenge. So much of what is portrayed on the various screens is the opposite of Christian values. It is a challenge for parents and the church.

It is important for the church to understand this challenge because the church and the parents make a commitment, a promise, when their children are baptized. Promises are made when we baptize our children. In the sacrament of baptism three parties are involved, the parents, the church and God. God promises to be the God of our children. God loves our children before they have any idea of who God is. It is like we say, "God loves you, and there is nothing you can do about it." In the baptism rite we declare that "God has made them members of the household of God." The parents make a promise. They are asked, "Relying on god's grace, do you promise to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to your child?" The congregation, the church, makes a promise. The church is asked, "Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ promise to guide and nurture [this child] by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church?" Parents and the church, all of us promise to nurture our children in the Christian faith.

We have made a promise and we have quite a challenge. It is not just the job only of parents.

A good example of a family that passed on their faith to their children can be found in this text from Paul's second letter to Timothy. Although a young man, Timothy played a key leadership role in the life of the early church. In today's text we learn that Timothy had a strong and "sincere" faith. Where did that faith come from? It came from his family, especially his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. Timothy's family was a family that successfully passed on their faith. How did they do it?

First of all, they lived it. Paul wrote to Timothy, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." Timothy's mother and grandmother lived out their sincere faith in front of Timothy, and that deeply impacted his faith. The fact is that faith is more caught than taught. When parents, and members of the church, live out their Christian faith, values, and standards, their children soak it up.

And boy do they. When Gina was about three years old, we went to the Iowa State Fair. When we were leaving in the darkness of the night, I had a hard time finding my way out of the parking area. I finally found an exit I recognized, and wanted to take a right turn. But the police officer directing traffic there would let me only make a left turn. Frustrated, I said out loud, "How in the heck am I going to get out of here." From the back seat came this high voice matching my inflections perfectly, "How in the heck am I going to get out of here." Our children notice how we behave, how we act. Children do follow our example, which includes how we live our faith, both at home and in the church.

We also discover that Timothy's family not only lived their faith in front of Timothy, but also directly taught him their faith. Later, Paul writes, "From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Not only must we live out our faith in front of our children, we need to teach them about the Christian faith, which is to be done both at home and in the church. Praying together, reading the Bible together, and talking about how Jesus would have us live and respond to certain situations are all valuable ways to pass on our faith to our children.

Passing one's faith from one generation to another was important for the Hebrew people. They passed on their faith in their rituals. At the Passover Feast, they reenact the events of the Exodus and the children are part of the rite. The youngest child is asked four questions that answer "Why does this night differ from all other nights?" Each year this rite is repeated. The children learned what they were celebrating and what they were celebrating. They learned about God's grace and love, God's desire for justice, by hearing the story over and over again. Our children learn through the rituals of our faith.

Jaroslav Pelikan tells of hearing his eight-year-old daughter sing "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," and reflecting on how the lyrics of the song did not really fit children's situation. "She had not read the Bible. She knew that Jesus loved her because her mother, her father, her Sunday-school teacher, her pastor, and others in the Christian community had told her so. Only later would she come into she come into contact with the Bible.

So many know the children's song, "Jesus Loves Me." Jesus loves me, this I know. That is why we nurture the next generation of the church. So that they may know the good news of the gospel; so that they may know Jesus loves them, and that they can enjoy the gift of life that God has given them.

Blessed be the Lord our God. Amen.