

The Place of the Father in Religious Education

OLIVER AND IANTHE PRATT

'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet. 2.9). This priesthood of all the faithful is the basis of the lay apostolate. Parents have a particular apostolic responsibility and need to understand the nature of their priesthood if they are fruitfully to fulfill their role.

Throughout the scriptures the role of a priest is to offer a gift to God in an effort to get into a right relation to him. The gift that is offered may take the form of Old Testament ritual sacrifices, of the spiritual sacrifice of a holy life, or of the sharing in the one effective sacrifice of Christ through baptism and the eucharist.

One of the earliest forms of priesthood is the natural priesthood of the father of the family such as the Old Testament patriarchs exercised. Noah and Abraham offered sacrifices to God for themselves and their families and even after the institution of the levitical priesthood kings such as David and Solomon offered sacrifice as leaders of the people.

Through the covenant made on Mount Sinai the people of God became a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, for they entered into an immediate relation to God in their worship. An official priesthood, however, was instituted to offer sacrifice on behalf of the people. These sacrifices, however, as the writer of Hebrews pointed out, were powerless to atone for sin and bring union with God. The true priesthood is that of Christ, for by his resurrection he was actually taken into God's presence as the completed and perfect human being. Through this sacrifice man can now also approach God with confidence and enter his presence. One alone is priest, Christ, but his priesthood is shared in by all the faithful through baptism. We are to be a 'holy priesthood' offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2.5) and to be 'living sacrifices' (Rom. 12.1). Our offering is essentially that of a holy life lived in accordance with the will of the Father and so in union with his risen Son. Hebrews speaks of spiritual sacrifices as works of mercy and praising God, and in the first epistle of St Peter the people of

God are to confess the faith and declare the deeds of the saviour expressly as part of their priesthood. The laity offer sacrifice above all when they share sacramentally in the eucharist, for as the body of Christ they are united to the head who is both priest and victim. Through communion they share in the glory of the divine gift that has been accepted by the Father.

Both parents have the spiritual and baptismal priesthood but it is only the father who has in addition the natural priesthood and authority of the head of the family. The early Fathers of the Church often spoke of the priesthood of the father of the family and his authority as being a true ministry, and St Augustine spoke of it in terms of a Church and bishopric in little. The family has been called a cell of the Church and this is not merely in a reproductive sense but in the sense that the life of the Church is reflected in it on a small scale.

It is through the exercise of their priesthood that parents develop the religious sense of their children. The spiritual development of the father and the mother is of primary importance, for they cannot hand on what they have not got, and children absorb their parents' attitude to God. Teaching by word is only effective if it is reflected in what the parents are and do, but the Christian needs to understand his faith if he is to make it fruitful and communicate it to others. Parents can only help a child to develop this understanding if they themselves have continued to deepen their knowledge and appreciation of the faith past school leaving age. There is often an anti-intellectual bias where the faith is concerned so that people do not develop their theological knowledge in step with their development of secular knowledge. This development by parents of a depth of religious understanding in proportion to their ability is part of their responsibility for the spiritual care of their family. Its importance is as great as, or even greater than, the temporal responsibility for the physical care of the family. Reading, participation in study or 'family groups' or in weeks of liturgical life and study where the children are catered for, are all means by which this deepening of our understanding of the faith and realisation of its application to the problems of everyday life can be achieved.

Instruction in 'religious knowledge' cannot be left to the school. Even where the school is in the forefront of the catechetical movement it is still only complementing the training given at home. The child derives its first understanding of God and of what it means to be a Christian from its parents in the family setting very early on, long before it reaches school age, and this training in the home must continue throughout childhood and adolescence.

Fathers today tend to take a much greater part in the everyday life of the family. Generally speaking they spend more time with the children than was customary in the days of long working hours and recreation largely outside the home. Most fathers today are prepared to wash up and even change the nappies. Therefore the way should be clear for them to take their proper place in the religious life of the family. The father should lead the worship in the home just as the Jewish father even today takes the lead, and he should familiarise the children with the Bible. He should be able to talk to them about God even, for instance, while gardening or carrying out household repairs watched attentively or perhaps helped by his children. One wonders whether the idea that the mother is the person best suited to the religious instruction of young children is not a convenient rationalisation for a father who is rarely with his children and who has not been able to build up a relationship of love and trust with them. Nevertheless, long working hours or time spent in 'commuting' may limit undesirably the time that some fathers are able to spend with their children and the fullest use should be made of time-off and holidays.

Even when most of the detailed work of the religious training in the home has to devolve on the mother because she is the only one able to spend much time with the children, the father, as the head of the family, has the responsibility for the overall direction of its religious life. This responsibility is one that ought to be thought about carefully in order to discover how it can best be exercised. Fathers, however, tend to regard any discussion of the role of the family as something to be left to their wives. It was significant that a Conference on 'the Needs of the Catholic Family' held in London three years ago was attended by well over one hundred mothers but by only a handful of fathers, yet the family is as much the father's concern as the mother's, and where consideration of its problems is involved it is particularly valuable to have both the man's and the woman's point of view.

We have too many lay organisations which enrol one sex only and at the best necessarily have a one-sided approach. There is even one organisation which requires a husband to keep secret its proceedings from his wife. Other organisations sponsor 'communion days' which encourage the members of the family to go to mass and communion separately, and there is a canon, fortunately not observed in this country, placing men and women on opposite sides of the church, in a manner inconsistent with the sacramental unity of husband and wife. Worshipping side by side is an important expression of this sacramental unity, directing it

towards its proper place in the community of Christ. Similarly, the advantage of taking part in common in family groups, theological study groups or other such activities is that both husband and wife can grow in understanding together. The problem of baby-sitting can generally be overcome, particularly if this service is presented as a form of apostolic action.

The religious life of the family is affected by its material circumstances. Each couple have to work out their own way of sharing the day-to-day work of running the home and looking after the children according to their circumstances, but it is something that needs to be considered deliberately and not just taken for granted. The husband is responsible for seeing that his wife has the best possible conditions for fulfilling her role within the family. If she becomes overburdened, family life will suffer, for overtiredness leads to bad temper and unbalanced handling of the children. If the husband, on the other hand, takes on too much, he will not be able to fulfill properly his responsibilities inside and outside the home.

The supernatural builds on the natural, and the wise upbringing of children in the natural sphere is vital if their spiritual life is to flourish. Even if there have been neurotics who have been saints, their sanctity has been achieved in spite of their difficulties. In family life, the worried, anxious or overtired parent is handicapped, for sound upbringing of children demands calm, mature and balanced judgment and action, as well as a spiritual life based upon the love rather than the fear of God.

Marriage is for the education as well as the procreation of children and where the parents are overburdened this education in the home will suffer. It is for this reason that generosity has to be balanced by prudence in limiting the size of the family by the means that God has given us.

There is, however, a subtle form of materialism prevalent in the Christian home, which places the physical needs of the family above the spiritual needs. The houseproud wife may well be spending too much time on domestic chores that are not essential, and be encouraged in this by a husband who likes everything to be spick and span. There are ways of cutting down work in the home which people use when someone is ill and needs nursing or there is a birthday party to be run or school sports to be attended. Parents find time for this sort of activity and if they understood how important it was they would also find time to bring the liturgical life of the Church into the home, to read the Bible with the children, to organise activities that help their religious development, and to continue to deepen their own understanding of the faith

by study. Parents have to guard against burying their talents in the field and taking too much the role of Martha rather than of Mary. The wife tends inevitably to become absorbed by the practical details of the work of the home and the husband can do a lot to help her keep things in proportion by encouraging deeper interests.

The father is psychologically of particular importance in the religious development of the children, who come to understand something of the fatherhood of God through their experience of their own father. If he is loving, just and uses his authority rightly, they will develop the idea of God as being loving and just and requiring obedience. If the father is capricious and over-severe or indulgent, the child will tend to grow up seeing God in these terms. Boys in particular are influenced by the model of their father and absorb their father's attitude to God. Unless they see that religion is a vital thing in the life of the father, and not just something confined to an hour a week on Sundays, they will tend to feel that there is something unvirile in taking religion seriously.

The missionary apostolate is more readily apparent in the context of the father's activities. Children often tend to discount the mother's devotion to God as they grow away from her and leave the home to go out into the world, but the father is facing the problems of the wider society in his various activities outside the home. This difference, even if it limits the part that the father can play in respect to the children during their early years, also means that he is better able later to help both boys and girls to adjust themselves to adult life and to be in the world but not of it. The Christ-centred life of the father is of great importance in leading children to discover their true vocation, whether it is to the ordained priesthood, to the life of the religious, or to the lay apostolate.