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# EVANGELIZING CULTURE

## THE MOST IMPORTANT PASTORS ARE PARENTS

BY CHRISTIAN SMITH



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For the last ten years, I have been studying the religious and spiritual lives of U.S. teenagers and emerging adults, in a project called the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). In the process of conducting our research, I learned many things about youth, including some pervasive ideas in our culture about kids and adults that are simply wrong. Further, I've had to revise some of my own views on the matter.

One of these revisions concerns the primary importance of parents in the spiritual lives of their children. Many Americans underestimate the influence of parents on their teen and emerging-adult's lives of faith. Yet the faith lives of parents, it turns out, is the most important measurable factor influencing the faith of their children. This fact shines clearly in my two books on the subject, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, 2005) and *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford, 2009). More than anything else, hands down, it is the religious beliefs and practices of parents that shape the faith lives of their children, for better or worse. And oftentimes for the worse.

In one sense, this finding should not be surprising. Isn't it obvious that parents greatly influence their kids? Yes, sort of. At the same time, our society sustains a very pervasive and powerful cultural script that says that after about age twelve or thirteen parental influences on children start to fade. Instead, the pressures of peers and the media become overwhelmingly important. It isn't true, actually. Parents of teenagers often think and sometimes say that their kids simply do not listen to them anymore, that they feel their influence on their children slipping away. That is understandable, a feeling any parent can understand. But it also can distract us from a crucial fact.

Simply, over the long run, through the teenage years, and even after kids leave home and become emerging adults, the consistently best predictor of the character of the religious and spiritual lives of young people is the religious and spiritual lives of their parents. This is the empirical reality, even if parents and kids have a hard time seeing it because of the

pervasive cultural script operative in society today. Of course, our influence or control of kids is never guaranteed. Parents are not all-powerful or absolutely responsible for the future actions of their children. And sometimes kids turn out very differently from what their parents would guess. So, this is a matter of influence, not determination.

Nonetheless, when viewed systematically, parents clearly remain the most powerful force shaping the faith lives of their children. What parents define in their own lives, in their household, as normal, expected, and important, their children generally end up taking to be normal, expected, and important. Thus, the role of parents in the intergenerational transmission of faith is very powerful, again, for better or worse.

This fact sticks out particularly when it comes to Catholic teenagers. My book, *Soul Searching*, shows that, in general, American Catholic teenagers are much less religiously committed,

knowledgeable, and invested than their non-Catholic Christian peers. However, when we use statistics to control for the church attendance and importance of faith of their Catholic parents, that difference disappears. Meaning, American Catholic teenagers are (as a group) less religiously committed, knowledgeable, and invested in their faith than other precisely because *their parents* are less religiously committed, knowledgeable, and invested in their faith. The difference among the youth is explained by the difference among the parents.

This all means that if churches, priests, DREs, youth ministers, or any other agent of faith formation want to effectively pass on the faith to the next generation, they *must* get parents on board and involved. The statistical chances of producing a young person of robust faith without their parents believing, celebrating, and living a robust faith are very slim.

So, the challenge of passing on the faith to young people is not only the concern of youth ministers. It is, or should be, the concern of *entire churches*, of all adults, particularly of parents. Transmitting Catholic faith across time and generations, as a concern and activity, cannot be segregated off as a “youth thing.” Sociologically speaking, it is inescapably a *whole church thing*. So, those who help build up the faith and practice of parents play just as important and indirect role in shaping the faith lives of those parents’ children as do others who work directly with their children. It is all an interconnected web of community formation, not a set of age-graded tasks that can be compartmentalized.

This fact should be both challenging and empowering for everyone in church, especially parents. Parents cannot slough off the responsibility to raise their children strong in the faith, assuming that DREs, catechism leaders, and youth ministers are the ones “in charge” of that. The latter, our studies tell us, tend

only to reinforce the good that parents model and teach their children (or else struggle, usually vainly, against the poor or lack of modeling and teaching by parents). So, if anyone cares what that church will look like one generation later, equipping and supporting parents in the proper raising of children in the faith needs to become a top priority.

At the same time, the good news is this: parents matter. They can and do have a real influence on their kids, even into their teen and emerging-adult years. That should be empowering.

Crucial here, of course, is that the parents be real. No parent can fake a committed, authentic faith to their children. Whatever is real and true of the parents is what will actually influence their children. Children learn mostly not from what they are told, but simply rather from observing and participating in the everyday assumptions, investments, concerns, and practices of their families. Only when the faith of parents is practiced seriously does

verbally explaining to children what it means and why it is important have a significant effect.

In short, the role of priests, religious brothers and sisters, DREs, Sunday School teachers, and others is crucial, indispensable, necessary. But when it comes to the formation of young people, one rule still holds true: parents are the most important pastor that young people will ever have.

