

During the rite of baptism, after the parents request the sacrament of baptism for their child, the priest or deacon states, “You are accepting the responsibility of training your child in the practice of the faith.” Then, before the pouring of water, the instruction to the parents is repeated: “Make it your constant care to bring your child up in the practice of the faith.”

To raise one’s child in the Catholic faith may be a responsibility, duty or obligation, but it really is a privilege, joy and honor. Our faith is our single greatest treasure, and to pass on the gift of faith is the greatest gift parents could ever give their child.

This responsibility flows from the understanding of who is the ultimate owner of the child. Most parents realize that their newborn child is a miracle. God is the creator who gives life and forms the child in the mother’s womb (Ps 139:13). God is the original parent and owner of the child, while the mother and father are biological stepparents and have the child on loan from God. In the Jewish tradition, children are consecrated to God (Lk 2:23), and in the Christian tradition, they are baptized.

The offering (Lk 2:24) recognizes God as the author and giver of life, and it serves as the parents’ request to keep the child. God accepts the offering, but God has terms and conditions for the parents: “You are to raise your child on my behalf; to teach your child to know, love and serve me; and to prepare your child to accept my plan for his or her life.”

God is love, and one of the parents’ most important duties is to teach their child about the love of God. This is not done with a lesson in a book or a video, but by example in the genuine love that the parents have for each other, and by experience of the love the parents have for their child.

The parents are the leaders of the house church, the basic unit and foundation of the Church, and their full, active and conscious practice of their faith is an ongoing lesson on how to be a dynamic Catholic. The child learns the faith through assimilation. Because the parents love God, the child learns to love God. Because the parents pray each day, the child learns to pray. Because the parents go to Mass each Sunday, the child learns the importance of going to Mass, the value of communal liturgical prayer and how to behave in church. And because the parents practice the virtues in their daily living, the child learns how to live a Christian lifestyle.

Parents teach their children to pray. This should not begin in second grade as part of their preparation for the sacraments, but as the child learns how to talk. When a child learns to say mommy and daddy, colors and numbers, it is time to learn the Sign of the Cross and meal prayers. When a child is old enough to converse with mom and dad, the child is old enough to say morning and night prayers, and when a child is old enough to memorize a home address or telephone number, the child is old enough to memorize the Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory Be.

Parents should have a children's Bible and other spiritual books and videos to teach their child about Jesus and the Gospel, the great people in Scripture and Bible stories. Parents can enroll their children in religious education programs beginning with Sunday school and vacation bible school, as well as a Catholic elementary school or the parish faith formation program. The parents' pledge at baptism also includes ensuring that their child completes his or her sacraments through the reception of reconciliation, first Eucharist and confirmation.

Father Van Sloun