



**I have learned more from those who have talked to me than from those who have taught me** (St Augustine)

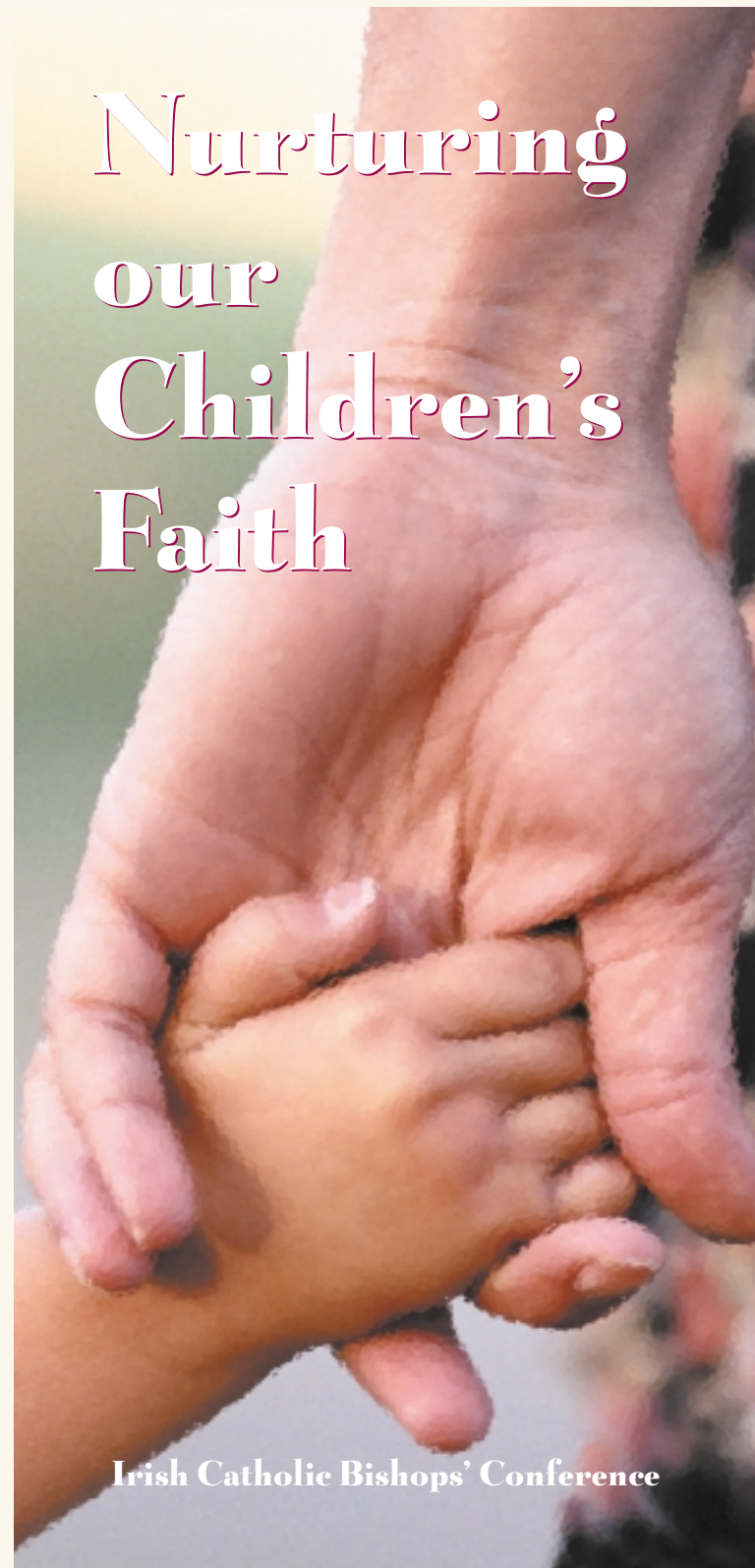
We see the love in Irish homes as the most important foundation for faith. Love is a word that has been over-used, but what other word

**Importance of love**

Our experience tells us that the faith of children is best nurtured when home, school and parish work together in partnership. Firstly and most importantly, children learn about faith in the home. Their faith is supported in the school by the hard work of teachers and chaplains, and by both priests and people in the wider parish community.

**A**s priests and bishops we have the privilege of being present at some of the most important moments in the lives of families. We are very grateful that we are welcomed to be part of such occasions, not only in churches and schools, but also in homes. We are happy to be present at joyful times for our young people, such as Baptisms, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. We are also present and available at times of pain, when a family is visited by sickness, or is distraught with grief because of death and bereavement. Whether the occasion is joyful or sorrowful, we can certainly say that faith makes a great difference.

# Nurturing our Children's Faith



However, there are many pressures that affect families. A time of increased prosperity has not benefited everyone. Not only those on social welfare, but those in low-paid work, are often caught in an ongoing struggle to provide for their families. Many young couples, too, feel forced by the high cost of living, and especially housing, to work long hours. As we have commented elsewhere, even among those who have benefited materially, many people now seem to have more of

**The gift of time**

could describe the sacrifices, large and small, that parents make daily for children? There is love in the patient care of an adult child for an elderly parent, and in the attention devoted to a child with disabilities. Love is visible in husbands and wives, who, in spite of all the challenges with which life presents them, still manage to keep alive the spirit of their marriage vows. It is present in the grief of childless couples who long for children. It motivates the efforts that people parenting alone make to nurture and support their children. It can be seen in the many single people who play important roles in the lives of their families and friends. Since God is love, it is not hard to find the face of Christ in the Irish family today. This witness of love in the family is an irreplaceable foundation out of which a child's faith can grow and be nourished.



We are not trying to minimise the difficulties that the family faces, but neither do we wish to lose sight of its strengths. We would like to thank all those who do so much to make family life strong, firstly parents and children, but also grandparents and members of extended families. There are so many signs of hope and growth in the Irish Church, which are well-nigh invisible, because they happen 'beneath the radar' of the media. To name but a few, there has been the resurgence in the tradition of local pilgrimages, a great increase in parish-based programmes, and many thousands of young people gather regularly for prayer in small groups. All of these initiatives connect with, and depend upon, lively and vibrant Catholic family life. Children's faith is best nourished when home, school and parish work together in partnership.

As a final thought, we would urge you to take pride in your Catholic heritage, and to do your best to be part of keeping it strong by seeking out and forming bonds with other families and individuals who value their faith. The gift of faith is precious; it is God's gift for us with the Holy Spirit working through us. Let us appreciate and nurture it together.

*Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.*

Ephesians 3:20-21



Despite the pressures on you, many of you do manage to make time, not only for your families, but for others. So many of you give support to elderly relatives or neighbours, or other

everything except time. The gift of time spent with their children is one of the most precious gifts that parents can give. The frantic pace at which we live our lives has led many to look for quiet spaces and opportunities for reflection. Jesus said 'I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me'. Our Catholic tradition is full of rich opportunities for developing our relationship with God; for example through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and Christian meditation, novenas and places of pilgrimage. In order to be able to help their children to pray parents need to pay attention to their own prayer lives. Thankfully, in recent times, it has become easier and easier to find books, magazines, websites and other resources which are designed to help us sustain and develop our prayer. All of these are ways of quietening down, of making space for a vital connection with God who loves us.



develop a loving, sensitive, forgiving and nurturing home environment.

**Living the Gospel**

Each of us has a responsibility to live in a way that bears witness to the message of Christ. Many people in Ireland strive to live the gospel, and do so in very practical ways. Still, we feel often that there is so much more that we could do. Yet, when discouraged by our many failures, it is a source of comfort that the grace of God continues to work through the messiness of all our lives.

Parents are the 'first and best teachers in the ways of faith'. Children are most influenced not by words, but by example. However, families are not alone in the work of nurturing children's faith. We are fortunate in the quality of teachers in our schools, and are grateful for their dedication and commitment. Teachers working in partnership with parents, and with the support of chaplains, diocesan advisors, members of religious orders and others involved in this important work are achieving great things. At parish level, along with diocesan and order priests there are youth and family ministers working to ensure that the next generation has a strong and vibrant faith.



families in need. Thousands of you give of your time, as members of caring agencies such as St Vincent de Paul, Accord and Cura,<sup>2</sup> in family ministry such as bereavement support and preparation for the sacraments, as members of pastoral councils, ministers of the Word and Eucharist, ushers, collectors and sacristans, choir members and musicians, to give just some examples. Talk to your children about what you do so that they will understand that caring for others is an expression of your faith. Time given to others is not time taken away from ourselves, but enriches all our lives.

Giving to others can be difficult in a culture where there is so much emphasis on acquiring more and more for ourselves. There are powerful commercial forces that are interested in your children, not in their welfare, but in their disposable income. Such forces have no interest in reinforcing parental influence on children. In fact, it is truer to say that they are much more interested in a child's influence on his or her

2. For those unfamiliar with Accord and Cura, Accord works primarily in marriage preparation and support, while Cura supports those who find themselves in difficulty due to an unexpected pregnancy.

their teenage years without too much difficulty, for some it can be a confusing period as they struggle to come to terms with finding their own identity and increasing their independence. There are more acute pressures now than there ever were before. Many young people have more disposable income. This means that they are more exposed to pressures to take part in the excessive consumption of alcohol and abuse of drugs. We live in a culture which is saturated with sexual imagery, and it is no wonder that many young people feel pressure to become prematurely sexually active, in situations in which they are vulnerable to being exploited, or indeed, exploiting others. Bullying and isolation mar many young people's teenage years. Although adolescents may seem more concerned about the opinions of their peers, the presence of caring parents is enormously important to them. A strong foundation in Christian values can be a vital support to young people at this time. While parents may feel that their children are rejecting everything, quite often once the storms of adolescence have subsided they will return to the values that their parents instilled in them.

### Domestic Church

The home has always been central to our faith, to the extent of being known as the 'domestic church'. It is here that children learn the message of Christ for the first time, in the love that their parents show them, and in the ordinary, simple,

Be the change  
you want to see  
in the world

(Gandhi)



parents. Their market research has shown that children influence the majority of household purchases, from cereal to computers. The faster children leave childhood behind and see themselves as consumers, the more it suits the market. Many people, especially parents, are rightly worried by this trend. It is not that people want to over-protect their children, but they want them to make choices based on sound Christian values which offer us an antidote to consumerism, and a perspective which enables us to live more human and fulfilling lives.

### Family life

As a Church we have always promoted the ideal of a man and a woman, committed to each other in married love, as the best situation in which to bring children into the world. Research has shown that marriage is best able to provide the stability that allows children to flourish. However, for a variety of reasons, some of them outside the control of the people concerned, this ideal is not always reached. At times we may have been less than sensitive to the goodness to be found within all kinds of families in our Church. Widowed families and people parenting alone often feel that there is not enough acknowledgement of the efforts they make to create loving families. Even those happily married will attest that they have their struggles, and that their families are far from perfect. However, as the US bishops put it in their *Pastoral Letter on the Family*, it is important to

There is no  
happiness  
without prayer

(Charles Handy,  
management writer)

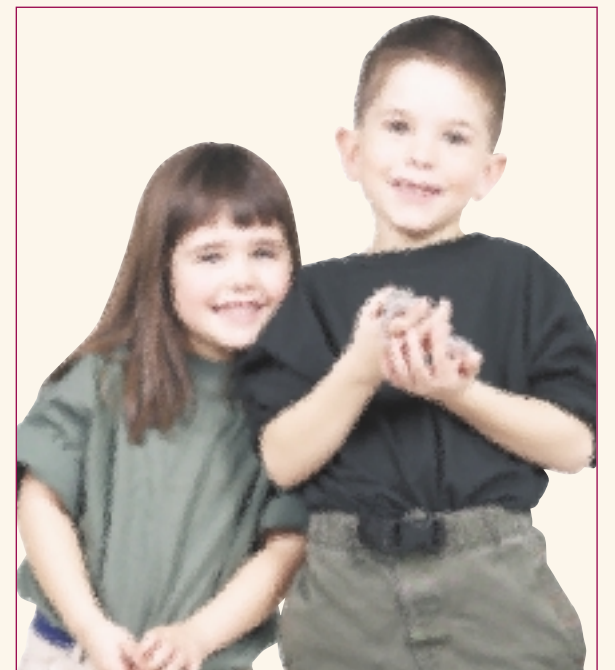


everyday things like prayers before bedtime. Family prayer is very important; even very small children can take part. It has become harder and harder to gather the family around the kitchen table for meals, but it is an investment of time that is repaid many times over. Perhaps those of you who have fallen out of the habit of family meals might try to eat together as a family at least once a week? In some families, a candle is lit, followed by a short prayer, at the beginning of the meal as a reminder that this is a special time.

Do not underestimate the power of little things. Children love rituals. The use of holy water can be a way of reminding each other of the love of God. Sacred images in the home are another way of reminding us of the presence of God, as are customs such as displaying palm branches of the St Brigid's Cross.

### The Sacraments

As part of preparation for the sacrament of First Holy Communion, some families create a 'prayer space' in their homes. It can be as simple as a shelf with an icon, a candle, and a stand for a copy of the family Bible.



remember that 'a family is holy, not because it is perfect but because God's grace is at work in it, helping it to set out anew every day on the way of love.'<sup>3</sup>

Parents make an enormous contribution not only to their children, but to society. Families where parents are firm but fair, provide sensible and flexible boundaries and listen to and make time for their children give them a gift that will stand to them for their whole lives. It is very important to make time for a strong home life and not to let the pressures of work and commuting squeeze out more important priorities.

### Adolescence

Adolescence can be a particularly challenging time. While many young people sail through

3. *Pastoral On the Family in the UN Year of the Family*, US Bishops, 1994.

Regular attendance at Mass is important too because the domestic church only thrives when it is part of a larger community. When children become involved in sacramental preparation many parents find themselves rediscovering the value of weekly Sunday Mass attendance which has a central place in the lives of Catholics. Priests have a particular role in encouraging and inviting parents and families to participate in life-giving liturgies. Gathering together helps to strengthen a local community as people share and express their faith in a public setting. The Eucharist is at the heart of many community celebrations and occasions such as Easter and Christmas, weddings and funerals, anniversaries and jubilees and school graduations. Coming together to worship strengthens the bonds of unity within the local and wider church.

### Hope in Christ

As Christians, our hope is rooted in Christ. Hope in the person of Christ is nurtured in his constant presence with us in the sacrament of the Eucharist. He is the centre. We gather around him, especially in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy when we gather around the altar to welcome him and to receive him. As Pope John Paul II said, the Eucharist 'is the most precious possession which the Church can have in her journey through history' (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 9). The Mass gives us strength to

We sow the seeds,  
we do not see  
the fruits

(Archbishop Oscar Romero)

