

When parents hear my story, that I was raised Catholic, left the Church after high school, but returned at age 25 – and then even became a priest! – they tell me they feel hope. Maybe their own children will do the same. What was the secret? I hate to disappoint them, but there wasn't any secret. My family was probably a lot like theirs. My Dad was a non-practicing Protestant. My Mom is a Catholic. Both parents made sure we kids went to mass every Sunday and to faith formation until confirmation in junior high, but, other than that, we didn't do a lot of religion at home besides grace before meals. I bet that sounds pretty familiar to many of you. And when I left home it was an easy decision for me to stop going to mass.

“Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Today I want to preach about kids and the Church. Jesus says that the Kingdom of God belongs to them – but often they don't seem to want it very badly. We Catholics are doing a poor job interesting our children in the faith, especially

after about age twelve. Curtis Martin, the founder of Fellowship of Catholic University Students, estimates that 85% of young Catholics leave the Church by the end of their college years, most long before.

What can we do, more specifically, what can you do as parents, to change those odds in your own family? And here, I'm not talking about the huge issues we may seem too small to change as individuals – the sex abuse scandals, society's sexual issues in general, perceptions of conflict between science and religion, etc. But what is in your control as parents that might help keep your children engaged in the faith?

Most of today's Gospel passage actually deals with marriage, so that's where I'll start. Jesus teaches that marriage is indissoluble, and in doing so He says, "What God has joined together no human being must separate." Notice that: God has joined you together. God is part of your marriage. He wants to be working through you and this marriage of yours, particularly regarding your children.

You parents are the primary educators of your children in the faith. When I say that it may sound scary, or like I'm blaming you for their falling away from the Church. But that's not what I'm saying. Now, don't misunderstand what I'm about to say. Knowing the faith yourself and imparting the truths, teaching, and practices of it to your kids are very important. You promised to do that at their baptisms.

But that's not your first, or primary, responsibility in teaching the faith to your kids. Prior to giving young people doctrines we need to give them a fighting chance to understand God as He is. Everett Fritz, a long-time youth minister, has written a book entitled, The Art of Forming Young Disciples: Why Youth Ministries Aren't Working and What to do About It. In it he quotes a Catholic psychologist who says that for the Catholic young people he deals with the experience of their parents' love closely mirrors the children's image of God. If parents are harsh disciplinarians their children will likely see God as one who punishes. If the parents are physically or emotionally absent, God often

seems absent to the kids as well, etc. On the other hand, if the parents love their children unconditionally, the children have little problem in believing in a God who does the same. I'm not saying, as Ludwig Feuerbach once taught, that we just project our own fears and desires onto an imaginary god. But I am saying that if kids don't know unconditional love in their home it's a stretch for them to understand that God loves them that way.

Scripture tells us, "God is love." How to love is always the first lesson you teach your kids about God, whether you do it consciously or not. The primary way you parents teach your children the faith is by the way you love one another in your marriage, and how you love them -- or don't. If we teach the doctrines of the Church without loving one another, then kids' faith has less chance of lasting past the years when children naturally and easily accept what parents say.

But if your sons and daughters see and know the warmth of your unconditional love there is a much better chance that your children will

practice the faith as adults – even if they question it and wander for a time. This is especially true for you Dads, because research has shown you have much more influence on your children’s religious life than their mothers, for better or worse.

Where my parents excelled as religious educators was in how they modelled unconditional love for me and my siblings in their own marriage and by their love for us. The formal religious instruction in our house wasn’t out of the ordinary. If it had been, would I have left the Church during those years? Who knows. But it sure was a lot easier coming back to the Church assuming that God loved me unconditionally despite my sins – just as my parents had always done.

I don’t know if this primary lesson you’re to teach your kids is good news or bad news for you. Maybe it’s easier to teach kids the Ten Commandments and take them to mass every week than to love your spouse and them unconditionally through all their maddening faults. Not that these are mutually exclusive! Once again, please don’t think

I'm saying that you aren't responsible for the imparting of the fullness of the Catholic faith to your kids.

But I am saying the first, most important, part of that faith formation is in your control – even in these crazy cultural times: just do your best to love your kids as much and in the same manner God does. You can do that even without a lot of theological knowledge. So, ask yourself, “If God is love, what image of God am I giving to my children by the way I love my spouse and them?”