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What Every Christian Child Should Know

Some time ago, I was finishing a funeral service at the cemetery, when a young man approached me to thank me for a speech he had heard me give. After I thanked him for his kindness, he went on to say that he and his wife were thinking about attending church, and if they did, they would like to come to St. John's.

But, he reported, he and his wife had decided that they would leave the choice of religion up to their children. They did not want to prejudice the minds of their children with early religious instruction.

I smiled and said, "Are you teaching your children to read and write? To add and subtract?" Beginning to feel a little uneasy he responded, "Yes." And so, I continued, "It is not a matter of prejudice. It is a matter of the truth. Reading and writing, addition and subtraction assume there is truth to be known and enjoyed. The Christian Religion is no different. The Church proclaims that Jesus Christ is Truth Incarnate. The question is: 'Do you want your child to know the truth about the whole of life?' " To which he replied with a thoughtful grin, "You know, you've got a point there."

In a culture where we are told that life consists in material possessions, in appearance, or power, or sexual prowess, the question of truth may seem eccentric or irrelevant. It is not. Among other things, it has to do with how we think of ourselves.

How does your child think of himself or herself? What is his or her self-image? This question is crucial. It will have everything to do with the choices they make, what they do and do not do, how they respond to peer pressure, how they live each and every day. Later on in life this question will become, "What is the meaning of life? Of my life in particular?" At that moment, possessions and power and appearance and sex will all pale in significance. And the habit of self-perception will mean everything.

Our culture is not unaware of this problem of truth when it comes to the self-identity of our children. How many schools, both public and private, make classes on "Life Skills" or "Ethical Choices" mandatory? We do not cease to look for ourselves. But in a world of flux, where appearance means more than reality, we never find what we are looking for.

When your children are grown where will they look for meaning? I

recently heard a famous author assert that we find ourselves by traveling and having new experiences. This person suggested that we travel continuously so that our experiences might ever grow. There is no doubt something to what he said. But such experiences are invariably interpreted through the lens of the soul who has them. St. Augustine put it better long ago when he said that such travel is useless if a man has not traveled within himself to know his own soul.

Christian parents have the glorious privilege and duty to teach their children the precious truth of who they really are. And this truth is not found in the fashions of culture, or ability, or even in the proud name of one's family.

Do not misunderstand me. There is precious meaning in the knowledge of one's family, in the history of the family name. And there is great joy in the experience of one's ability, proven through formal education, exhibited in the recital hall, trained on the athletic field. But all these taken together in their most wonderful moments are not enough. There is a still greater and truer meaning for Christians.

The first question in our Catechism is this, "What is your name?" The name asked for is not the family name, the surname, but the Christian name given in baptism. After this comes "Who gave you this name?" To which the answer is, "My Sponsors in Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven" (Book of Common Prayer, p.577).

The Catechism gives us the ultimate truth of our meaning and identity as persons. We are baptized into the life, and death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We receive "that which by nature we cannot have." We are adopted as God's own children. We are God's own, and as God's own, we are heirs of his eternal kingdom. Our lives are given an infinite meaning.

There is no more profound self-knowledge than this. The things of this world, the pomp of worldly power, and the narcissism of worldly appearance do not determine it. We are not defined by anything that we do. We are, by grace, the children of the living God, and heirs of his very life.

Baptism grants infinite meaning to the child of God. But baptism is not the end. The child of God needs to grow up into the full inheritance of his adoption. The child needs to learn what this gift means and how it is most joyfully lived.

As our new church school year approaches, each parent (and godparent) has the profound privilege and duty to raise their sons and daughters in the truth of Jesus Christ. Just as we teach them the basics of arithmetic and spelling and grammar, so we must teach them basic spiritual truth, things that they must know to live and grow as God's own.

For instance, they must learn that God is good, that he is the source and end of life, and that one day we shall all have to stand before his judgment. They must learn that Jesus is the only Son of the living God, and that God reveals himself definitively in Christ. They must learn that in Jesus we have been shown the way to live in repentance and amendment of life, the truth about God as our heavenly Father

whose care for us is everlasting, and the life of forgiveness and resurrection from the dead. They must learn that the Holy Spirit lives within them, that he pours out the love of God in their hearts, and that he will never forsake them. Just as our children must learn to read and write, to add and subtract, so they must learn the truth about God.

And so when they experience the problems of their own making and those of others, they will know who always loves them, and who gives them the power of a new mind, and the hope of a new life.

They will remember the fact of their baptism, that their names were enveloped in the name and life of God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And their lives will be shaped ultimately not by the shadows and secrets of their sin, but by the truth they have learned from their parents. The great blessing is that when they err they will return. In the words of St. Paul they will choose again to think on whatsoever is true and honest and just and pure and lovely and of good report and of virtue (Philippians 4:8). And thinking on these things, they will choose to love them.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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