Children, the Church, and the Domestic Church

Supporting Parents in the Task of Nurturing the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Children

Marcia J. Bunge

The editor of a recent volume on children in the Christian tradition, the author examines how the Church might develop its pastoral care so as to more adequately assist children in the attainment of a mature faith. She suggests that assisting adults in their vocation as parents is a crucial ministerial task for Church leaders.

Whether or not we have children of our own, we are concerned about the moral and spiritual formation of children in our midst and in our wider culture. Are they being raised with love and affection? Are they receiving a good education? Are they exposed to good role models? Will they have a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives? Will they be good citizens who contribute in positive ways to society? Certainly our concern for children and their formation has been heightened by a myriad of serious problems many children in our country are facing today, such as inadequate child care and educational opportunities, teenage pregnancy, violence in the media, juvenile crime, teenage depression and suicide, child neglect and abuse, and child poverty (Children’s Defense Fund). These and other problems have prompted growing public concern across

Marcia Bunge is professor of humanities and theology at Christ College of Valparaiso University. The editor of The Child in Christian Thought (Eerdmans, 2001) she also translated and edited a selection of J.G. Herder’s texts entitled Against Pure Reason: Writings on History, Language, and Religion (Fortress, 1993).
conservative and liberal lines for children and the tremendous challenges they face.

Among the many ways the Church can address the needs of children today, one of the most important is by supporting parents in their role as the primary agents of a child’s moral and spiritual formation. Several studies and common sense tell us that supporting parents is especially important because the family has the most potential of any institution for shaping the lives of children. Although children are influenced by friends and relatives, their immediate peers, the local community, and the wider culture, their parents still shape their lives, for better or worse, in fundamental ways.

Although we all recognize that parents play a crucial role in the formation of their children, parents today are not receiving the support and attention they need. In contemporary culture the importance of parenting is undermined by an overemphasis on individualism and self-fulfillment, and professional careers tend to take priority over all other commitments. Furthermore, parents in this country do not receive the kind of governmental support and economic benefits that are common in many other industrialized nations. Many parents experience serious economic pressures and have tight working schedules, and they no longer live close to relatives who can help them raise their children. Single parents must often take on two jobs to support the family. Even two-parent homes can have complex schedules that do not allow the family to be together on a regular basis. In addition, the media and popular culture bombard us with images of parents as unimportant, inept, or neglectful (Hewlett and West, 125–53). Children also devote an excessive amount of time to watching TV or playing on the computer, thereby spending less time with their parents.

Although the Church certainly upholds the importance of parenting and offers a variety of programs for families and children, it is not doing enough to support parents in the task of nurturing the moral and spiritual lives of their children. Religious education programs are often not only theologically weak but also neglect to keep in mind the importance of the family. Thus, many parents in the Church mistakenly believe that Church leaders and teachers, not the parents, are primarily responsible for the faith formation of children. As a result, few parents in the Church today speak with their children about moral and spiritual matters or integrate practices into their everyday lives that nurture faith (Strommen and Harde, 14).

Parents as the Primary Agents of Children’s Formation

The Church can help parents by providing a strong theological vision of the vocation of parenting that emphasizes the seriousness of this calling. The Church needs to enrich and deepen its language of parenting by providing a
biblically and theologically informed understanding of the central tasks and responsibilities of parenting that relates both the everyday realities and the profound experiences of parenthood to central themes of the Christian faith. Although most ecclesiastical traditions lift up the vocation of parenting, and although parents themselves recognize that raising children is a deeply spiritual endeavor, in general theologians have devoted more attention to discussing the nature and purpose of the celibate life. Again, much of the current theological literature on parenting does little beyond admonishing parents to teach their children the faith and emphasizing a child's obedience. Certainly, there are many excellent and valuable books about parenting by psychologists, but they rarely explore the moral and religious dimensions of parenting. Several recent books about the spirituality of parenting attempt to fill this gap, yet most of them do not incorporate themes from the Christian tradition. Providing a sound Christian theological vision of the vocation of parenting would encourage parents within the Church to take up this calling more seriously and would provide them with new language for articulating the depth of their experience as parents.

**Parenting in the Theology of Chrysostom**

One way the Church can enrich its language of parenting is by mining some of the insights from past theologians who have reflected on parenting. Although many theologians in the past, like today, neglected the vocation of parenting, several of them spoke about the goals and duties of parenting in powerful terms that highlighted the seriousness and depth of this task. For example, John Chrysostom, an important figure in the early Church and for Eastern Orthodox communities of faith today, discusses in detail the goals of parenting and describes them in rich theological and metaphorical terms (Guroian; Cahill, 50–60). He speaks of parents as “artists” who paint pictures or build statues with great precision for they are helping to restore the image of God in their offspring and thereby forming them into “wondrous statues for God.” He also likens the task of parents to Christ’s action for all of humanity. Just as Christ is the teacher for all of humankind, parents are to be teachers of their children. Furthermore, he outlines in detail the obligations of parents, such as reading them the Bible, praying with them, and being good examples. He ranks the neglect of children among the greatest evils and injustices, and he makes the striking claim that the salvation of parents is dependent on the virtue of their children (John Chrysostom, 72).

Chrysostom also speaks of the family as a “little church” or “sacred community.” The metaphor of the family as the “domestic church” underscores the notion that parents have the primary responsibility for nurturing the spiritual and moral lives of their children. In addition, since Chrysostom was deeply concerned about greed, material affluence, and the plight of the poor, his use of the metaphor also emphasizes, as Lisa Sowle Cahill has pointed out, that the family, like the Church, also needs to practice charity and reach out to the poor and
marginalized (Cahill, 50, 54–56, 60). Addressing primarily affluent families of Antioch, Chrysostom urges them to live simply and modestly and to use their resources to help the poor. As Cahill finds, although Chrysostom’s use of the metaphor reveals troubling elements of gender hierarchy, he presents us with a positive vision of the family that emphasizes the importance of “forming family members in the virtues of solidarity across class lines, sharing of goods, and simplicity of life” and of viewing the family as a vehicle of social transformation (Cahill, 60).

**Luther’s Teaching**

Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century Reformer, also reflected deeply on the central tasks and responsibilities of parenting, and he underscores the importance of parenting by saying that parents are apostles, bishops and priests to their children. “Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal” (Luther, 45: 46).

Although Luther knows that parenting can be a difficult task and is often considered an insignificant and even distasteful job, he believes parenting is a serious and divine calling that is “adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels” (Luther, 45: 39). In one often quoted passage, he says the following:

> Now you tell me, when a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool—though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith—my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling—not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith. Those who sneer at him and see only the task but not the faith are ridicule God with all his creatures, as the biggest fool on earth. Indeed, they are only ridiculing themselves; with all their cleverness they are nothing but devil’s fools (Luther, 45: 40–41).

According to Luther, as priests and bishops to their children, parents have a twofold task: to nurture the faith of their children and to help them develop their gifts to serve others. He believes that parents nurture faith in their children mainly by exposing them to the gospel. Parents can expose their children to the gospel in a number of ways, including baptizing their children, participating with them in corporate worship and communion, reading the Bible with them, praying with them, and teaching them about the faith. Although he clearly emphasizes the importance of corporate worship, he believes that the most fitting
setting for religious education is the home, and he intends his catechism to be used by parents to help them nurture faith in their children. Luther claims that parents can best prepare children for service to others by providing them with a good education. He believes a strong liberal arts program will help children develop their God-given gifts and talents, enabling them to serve both Church and society. In contrast to many in his time, Luther advocates education for all children (including girls and the poor). Amidst his recommendations for parenting, Luther emphasizes that faith comes through God’s grace and God’s activity, and he was not as certain as some theologians before or after him that a proper upbringing results in faith. Nevertheless, by providing very specific guidelines about the goals and tasks of parenting, he paradoxically believes that nurturing faith in children is an urgent task and that faith results largely from the diligent work of parents, teachers, and other adults (Strauss, 39).

Horace Bushnell

Like Chrysostom, Horace Bushnell, a leading Congregationalist pastor and scholar of the nineteenth century, also speaks of the family as a “little church” (Bendroth). Although he sees the important role of the Church in the faith development of children, he believes that the primary agent of grace is the family, not the Church. “Religion never thoroughly penetrates life,” he said, “until it becomes domestic” (Bushnell, 1861, 63). His popular book Christian Nurture envisions spiritual formation as a natural process that takes place not merely by reading the Bible and teaching children aspects of the faith but rather through everyday practices and routines and the example of adults. Thus, he stresses the heroic importance of “small things” and claims that “it requires less piety . . . to be a martyr for Christ than it does to . . . maintain a perfect and guileless integrity in the common transactions of life” (Bushnell, 1904, 291–92). He also encourages parents to interweave lessons about the faith with play and a variety of fun activities.

Critically retrieving these and other ways of speaking about the divine calling and spiritual depth of parenting is one step toward articulating a stronger theological understanding of parenting for today that would remind parents of the significance of their role and function.

Pastoral Strategies

The Church can support parents by suggesting specific practices for the home that nurture the moral and spiritual lives of their children and by integrating parents more fully into educational programs for children at church. Although many parents are eager to do more in their own homes to foster their
children’s faith and service to others, they are often at a loss of how to begin. Two of the institutions that have emphasized the crucial role of parents in the moral and spiritual development of children and have provided parents with specific and well-researched suggestions for carrying out this task are the Search Institute and Youth and Family Institute at Augsburg College.

Martin Strommen, founder of the Search Institute, and Richard Hardel, current director of the Youth and Family Institute, make four specific suggestions for helping parents to nurture the moral and spiritual life of children.

• Parents should be “gospel-oriented.” For Strommen and Hardel this means that parents should be believers themselves and should strive to live out the Christian faith in their everyday lives.

• Parents need to communicate their moral values in a climate of love, genuine caring, and congeniality in the home.

• Parents should participate with their children in service activities. They should find ways to work as a family to serve others. This can be done in formal or informal ways, such as helping in a soup kitchen or participating in a Habitat for Humanity project. The value of this kind of mutual service was underscored in a survey that found that “involvement in service proved to be a better predictor of faith maturity than participation in Sunday School, Bible study, or worship services.”

• Parents should share faith in the home by speaking frequently with children about faith and other important issues in their lives; by participating in devotions with their children (reading the Bible and praying); and by creating “rituals and traditions” (daily, weekly, annually) that communicate or reflect aspects of their faith (Strommen and Hardel, 95).

All of these practices have been shown to increase greatly the probability that youth will participate in activities of the Church, be intentional about their faith, and later in their lives participate in service activities.

In addition to offering guidelines for intentional spiritual practices that can be carried out in the home, the Church can support parents by integrating them more fully into educational programs for children at their parish. Often parents do not even know what their children are taught in Sunday School or confirmation classes. Without parental reinforcement at home, how can even the best religious education program, undertaken one or two hours a week, nurture children? Simply informing parents about the content of religious education programs can help them more easily reinforce and discuss with their children religious themes and issues that are introduced at church. Several congregations have discovered the benefits of going a step further by radically altering the structure of reli-
gious education programs. Instead of offering traditional classes by grade, they provide inter-generational, family-centered religious education programs that allow parents and children to explore the same material at the parish and to continue to reflect on it at home. These programs view parents as primarily responsible for a child’s spiritual formation. Pastors and religious educators provide them with necessary support and resources within the larger theological tradition and worship life of the congregation.

Carrying out intentional practices at home and becoming more involved in educational programs at the parish require time, and we are all aware of the many cultural and economic obstacles that make it difficult for parents to spend enough time with their children. Although the Church cannot possibly address all of these obstacles, by providing some guidelines for practices that nurture faith, by encouraging parents to take up these practices in the home, and by integrating parents more fully into educational programs for children in the congregation, parents might discover some creative ways to carve out more time to be with their children and to carry out intentionally spiritual practices in the home.

**Supporting Family Life**

The Church can support parents by taking seriously contemporary sociological studies on the effects of divorce on children, articulating a strong ethic of the family, doing more to provide concrete support to all families, and more actively endorsing local and federal legislation that promotes healthy and stable families. A growing number of studies by sociologists have documented that, in general, the best setting for the development of children, based on several measures of child well-being, is in an intact two parent family (Popenoe; McLanahan and Sandefur; Amato and Booth). Certainly, all of these studies emphasize that high-conflict or abusive marriages are detrimental to the well-being of children and that in these cases children are more likely to benefit from their parents’ divorce. However, these studies also show that approximately two-thirds of divorces in this country do not fit this description. Divorce negatively affects children in many ways. On average, children in single-parent homes are more likely to be poor, to do worse academically, to have higher levels of learning disabilities, to receive fewer years of education, to commit crimes, to have health problems and psychological disorders, and even to have lower incomes as adults than children in intact two-parent families.

Don Browning has done much to encourage mainline Protestant churches to address issues of parenting and marriage and to show them how to uphold the ideal of the two-parent family while reaching out with compassion to all families, in whatever form. His recent book, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground,*
co-authored with several other theologians, incorporates theological insights, biblical material, and studies of social scientists, economists, and psychologists and provides a normative vision of the intact two-parent family while, at the same time, emphasizing the need to offer tangible support to all families (Browning, et. al.). In this sense, the book appreciates the efforts of many evangelical and conservative churches that have managed to uphold a normative model of the two-parent family while offering highly effective and innovative programs for single-parent families and step-families (Wilcox, 23). However, in contrast to these churches, which also tend to emphasize headship within marriage and male authority, Browning and his colleagues believe that a vision of the family more in line with the message of Jesus and early Christianity emphasizes gender equity and mutual love and sacrifice.

The Church can help parents by discussing theological views of the family, such as those provided by Browning, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Stephen G. Post, and others, and by educating them about the social scientific research regarding the effects of divorce on children. As it upholds the importance of two-parent families for children, it should intentionally welcome and reach out to all forms of families, providing programs that better prepare couples for marriage and that nourish two-parent families as well as programs that address the needs of single-parent families, step-families, and couples in the process of divorce. The gospel itself provides a solid basis for the Church to be a welcoming and supportive place for all families, regardless of form, for it proclaims that everyone has sinned and needs God’s love and forgiveness and that through faith one is empowered and called to love and serve the neighbor, especially those in need.

Public Policy and the Family

In addition, the Church can support parents by more actively endorsing local and federal legislation that promotes healthy, stable families. Perhaps because family breakdown is often blamed solely on a culture of individualism and self-fulfillment, church leaders and theologians have not always taken seriously the economic, political, and social structures that are also creating obstacles to building strong families. The recent writings of several economists, social scientists, and theologians underscore the role of socio-economic factors in family stability...
and highlight the need for local and federal initiatives that support families (Wilson; Hewlett and West; Cahill).

Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, for example, argue that families in the United States do not receive the kind of tax breaks, health care benefits, or other forms of governmental and economic support that they once received in the 1950s and that families in other industrialized nations receive today. Parents now often work longer hours for fewer wages. Many working parents are unable to make a living wage, and the economic opportunities for African-American males in inner-cities is particularly bleak. These economic conditions make it more difficult for parents to build strong families. In addition, Hewlett and West emphasize that the importance of parenting is also undermined by an ethos of rugged individualism and by demeaning and disparaging images of parents in the media and popular culture. On the basis of a nationwide survey and focus group findings, they suggest specific political policies that would support parents both by relieving economic pressures on them and by reaffirming the dignity and value of their role for children and for society as a whole.

Church leaders have certainly not ignored the needs of families and children in their midst and in this country (U.S. Catholic Conference). They provide many programs for children and families, e.g., opportunities for children’s worship and daycare centers. They have also spoken out on issues that affect the well-being of children, such as child poverty, health care, education, and gun control. Nevertheless, without doing more to prevent divorce, to articulate a strong ethic of the family, to provide concrete support to all families, and to endorse political policies that promote strong marriages and families, pastoral leaders are ignoring central ways to address the needs of parents and children.

**Our Common Task in Nurturing Children**

Although this essay focuses on the role of parenting, raising children is clearly an important and complex task that requires a cooperative effort between the home, the parish, the school, the community, and the state. All those within the Church, whether or not they have children of their own, need to work diligently on many levels and in many ways to protect and nurture children.

Of course, there are many obstacles to taking up the cause of children, attending to their needs, and making their development and well-being a priority. It is not only parents who are tired and who struggle to balance competing demands and responsibilities. Many pastors, teachers, and community leaders are also overworked and face tremendous economic pressures, and they cannot possibly address all of the needs of children in their care.

Another deep-seated obstacle both within the Church and the wider culture is that we often hold negative attitudes toward children. Although we live in an
apparently child-centered culture, several studies have argued that our dominant attitude toward them is one of indifference and even contempt, as our treatment of poor children indicates (Anderson and Johnson, 13–18). Other scholars have found that our attitude toward children is shaped primarily by the logic of capitalism, and thus we view children not as beings with intrinsic worth but rather primarily as commodities, consumers, or economic burdens (Whitmore, 167–75).

Within Western theological and philosophical traditions that have shaped many of these attitudes, we find that children are often depicted merely as irrational creatures and as less than human. Furthermore, both within the Church and the wider culture, we tend to hold oversimplified notions of children. Articles about children in popular magazines tend to depict infants and young children as pure and innocent beings whom we adore and teenagers as hidden and dark creatures whom we must fear. Theologians tend to emphasize that children are either gifts of God and bearers of divine revelation or sinful creatures in need of discipline.

**Jesus and Children**

Perhaps one way the Church can begin to change some of these negative attitudes and oversimplified conceptions of children is by providing a more sophisticated and complex conception of children that incorporates the radical sayings of Jesus. Although it is important to explore the sinful tendencies of children and their duties and responsibilities toward adults, it is equally important to remember that the biblical tradition also speaks of children as gifts of God, signs of God’s blessing, and sources of joy. In the Gospels, children are depicted in even more striking and radical ways. At a time in which children occupied a low position in society, Jesus receives children, blesses them, touches them, and heals them, and he is indignant toward those who have contempt for them. Jesus identifies with a child and equates welcoming a little child in his name to welcoming himself and the one who sent him. Furthermore, he depicts children as models for adults of entering the reign of God, as models of greatness in this reign, and even as vehicles of divine revelation (Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48; Matt 18:1-5; Mark 10:13-16; Matt 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17; Matt 11:25, 21:14-16; Gundry-Volf).

Although theologians within the tradition have not always incorporated the radical sayings of Jesus into their theology, those who have done so often provide compelling and complex perspectives on children and childhood. For example, by paying attention to the sayings of Jesus, Karl Rahner came to regard children not only as fully human creatures who are worthy of dignity and respect but also as models for adults (Rahner; Hinsdale). In contrast to those today and in the past who claim children are not quite fully human—are beings “on the way” toward humanity—Rahner asserts that children have value and dignity in their own right and are fully human from the beginning. As a child’s history unfolds, he or she realizes what he or she “already is.” This view of children implies that
we are to respect them and have reverence for them from the start and that they are a “sacred trust” to be nurtured and protected at every stage of their existence. Rahner also recognizes that Jesus uses children as examples of entering the reign of God. For Rahner, they are examples because they lack false ambition and artificiality, they do not seek honors or fame, and they are guileless and serene. Thus, childhood for Rahner is not only one stage of existence but also a “spiritually mature state” which is required to enter the reign of God and in which one has an attitude of “infinite openness” and wonder.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps by critically examining perceptions of and attitudes toward children both within contemporary culture and within the Christian tradition, and by exploring more fully the Gospel sayings of Jesus and the work of theologians, such as Rahner, who have incorporated these sayings, the Church can move beyond some of the obstacles in the Church and in society to treating all children with more care and compassion. Affirming the full humanity of children and recognizing that care of children lies at the heart of the Christian message and of the Christian life could help prompt parents and all those within the Church to do more to address the challenges of children today; to support legislation that helps families and children; to treat all children with more respect and dignity; to pay more attention to their spiritual and moral formation; to explore the gifts they offer to families and communities; and to take up our responsibilities toward them with renewed passion.

**References**


