

## In religious education, actions speak louder than words

Heidi Schlumpf | Feb. 28, 2011



(Paul Lachine)

Our family didn't do the traditional First Friday Devotion when I was a kid. Instead we had First Wednesdays.

On the first Wednesday of every month, we loaded our car with donated hot dishes (Midwest-speak for casseroles), Jell-O salads and cakes, and headed to St. Ben's, a parish in inner-city Milwaukee that operated a soup kitchen for the poor and homeless. What had started as a first Communion service project became a monthly ritual for our family, one my parents continue to this day.

As a kid, I didn't mind the long drive, or serving the meals to the guests, or even eating hamburger-rice hot dish for dinner. But my parents insisted our family go and sit among the guests while we ate. That was pretty uncomfortable for a suburban girl who only saw African-American people at the mall.

But it's also what I remember most.

I remember men with missing teeth, alcohol on their breath and other, more offensive odors. I remember exhausted-looking women with their equally tired children. I remember the gratitude for a warm meal served by friendly folks, but also the palatable sadness and the resignation on their faces and in their body language. No one wanted to be in such a situation. No one deserved this. It was wrong, even sinful, that they needed St. Ben's, while I did not.

That message was reinforced at our Vatican II parish, where the pastor gave long, fiery homilies on the justice issues of the day: racism, poverty, violence and war. His words sunk into my growing conscience, but it was St. Ben's that made these ideals real. God doesn't ask that I care for the poor in theory; I must care for that smelly guy at St. Ben's.

My parents, who were both teachers, surely knew what I had to discover as a new professor: Students learn best, not by reading textbooks or listening to eloquent lectures, but by doing something. They are not receptacles into which we pour information or knowledge. Rather, the best teachers facilitate students' own learning. The challenge is to create exercises or experiences that do just that.

My parents never taught me what I later learned were the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Even today, I have to Google it, since I was never forced to memorize them. But my parents did these Christian practices -- and they brought their two daughters along.

Someone's sick? We brought a pot of soup -- and prayed.

A death, even of an acquaintance or a relative of a friend? We went to the wake and/or funeral -- and prayed.

A second collection? We gave -- and prayed.

There wasn't a lot of discussing how this was the Christian or Catholic thing to do. You just did it. As St. Francis of Assisi is said to have said, "Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, use words."

My children are too young for formal religious education yet, but my husband and I recognize and accept our responsibility as "the principal and first educators" of our children, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches.

And we have both learned that it's what we *do* as families that matters -- especially when we may not realize that the children are watching and listening.

Do we look the panhandler in the eye and smile as we give him some money or food? Or do we grumble about crime and drugs and walk on by?

Do we forgive those who have wronged us? Or do we carry a grudge and share it with anyone who will listen?

Is our home a place of hospitality -- for visitors, foreign exchange students or even a teen who needs an alternative home? Or do we only share it with close friends and family?

I applaud recent trends toward "whole family catechesis," a model in which entire families participate in faith-sharing, service and outreach; or other home-based religious education, even homeschooling. There is a place for formal, parish-based instruction, but it's not what ultimately is most important in forming young Christians.

Last Christmas, as I read through the basket of Christmas cards my parents had received, there was one I look for every year. It's from a family farmer in northern Wisconsin whose economic plight was highlighted in the newspaper almost 20 years ago. My father tracked them down and sent a little something to try to help. In those two decades, my father has visited their farm, invited them to our home and continued to help them try to make ends meet.

No words necessary.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

**Support independent reporting on important issues.**



---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/25/2017 - 18:06):** <https://www.ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/religious-education-actions-speak-louder-words>

**Links:**

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>