

Do I HAVE to Raise My Kids in the Catholic faith?

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Q: The Church teaches that I have a duty to raise my children in the faith. But shouldn't it be their choice? Is it fair to indoctrinate them?

A: So, this is interesting. And it is something I am hearing more and more. The first question I ask in response is very simple: Do you believe that Jesus is God or not? Things really can't get more basic. If I do not believe that Jesus is God, then I believe that Christianity is entirely based on something untrue. At best, it is a mistake. At worst, it is a lie. If a person didn't believe in Christ, but presented Catholicism as an option, they would essentially be lying to their children. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, there is only one reason to teach your children anything: because it is true. A parent who considers not teaching their children that Jesus is God and the Savior of the world does not believe that Jesus is God and the Savior of the world. I do not mean that as a condemnation, simply as an observation.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to know that you also have a mission. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). In fact, this is the test of whether or not I am really a disciple of Jesus: do I do my

utmost to spread the Gospel? In 1968, Pope Paul VI wrote (in one of my favorite encyclicals of all time) that “it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn” (Evangelii Nuntiandi).

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Here’s the deal. Your life has a purpose and you have a mission in Jesus: to help others into the new life you have received from Jesus. And if you have been called to the vocation of marriage and the family, your mission field begins in your home. To help the people living under your roof realize that their lives are not meaningless; that their lives are bigger than they seem. That there is a God who loves them. Your mission is to them first of all...and then to everyone else you come in contact with. But they are first. Miss that, and you miss the very reason why you even exist.

But the question remains: is it fair to indoctrinate these helpless children? Well, the very root of the word “indoctrinate” simply means “to teach” (“doctrine” means “teaching”). Is it fair to teach your children anything? Of course it is...as long as it is true. We teach our children that sharing is good, bullying is bad, and the earth is a sphere. We don’t say, “I won’t send my child to school until he decides for himself.”

I think what this questioner fears is “brainwashing”. I fear that too. But what is brainwashing? Its purpose is to short-circuit the mental process of reasoning. Its apparent goal is blind, unthinking belief and obedience. But one of the main principles of the Catholic Faith is using one’s intellect to its full extent.

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Help your child learn how to think critically. This is not rooting them in skepticism, but giving them the tools to ask intelligent questions and be able to look for good answers. They are living in hostile territory. If you think that you are going to strike a truce with the culture and simply allow for the free frolicking of your children’s minds in the field of the world, you are gravely mistaken. The world has not given up on trying to shape your children in the least. The average teen spends 72 hours per week using some kind of media. And what are the messages communicated through our mass media? Talk about indoctrination! Think about advertising. Advertisements are specifically designed to short-circuit the mental process of reasoning. This is why many of us spent money we didn’t have last month on things our loved ones didn’t need.

In fact, in my work with youth and college-aged students, I have more often found a “blind disbelief” than I have ever found “blind belief”. Many have an automatic, unthinking skepticism; a refusal to even consider faith in Christ as something reasonable. You are right.

Brainwashing is bad. This is why we have to steep our children in Catholicism. It, and it alone, is the antidote for the indoctrination toward skepticism our culture presents to us.