

Traveling Companion: Will our children be Catholic?

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When parents present their babies and children for baptism, I notice how many indicate their non-involvement or participation in church. Many are not married in the church and many more indicate they seldom or rarely go to church on the form they fill in requesting baptism for their child. I wonder how many still cling to the old adage, “hatched, matched and dispatched.”

Recently, I read an interesting book that was born out of a symposium. The title of the book was “Secularity and the Gospel: being missionaries to our children.” The book arose out of a think-tank organized by the Oblates.

The book’s initial starting statement indicates that “our churches are graying and emptying, and many of our own children are no longer walking the path of faith, at least not public and ecclesial faith with us. The most difficult mission field in the world today in Western culture, secularity – the board rooms, living rooms, bedrooms and entertainment rooms within which we and our families live, work and play.” The book indicates that we know what to do with the people who walk through our doors but we do not know what to do with people who are not already going to church – i.e. our children – to enter our doors.

On the one hand, we have great parish programs and opportunities for involvement while, on the other hand, we are experiencing a constant decline in church attendance.

Pundits propose various reasons for such a situation. Conservatives suggest secularity is the cause. Liberals suggest the church is out of step; that it is too rigid, too patriarchal, too clerical and too preoccupied with its own agenda. The great German theologian, Karl Rahner, suggested that we are approaching a time in Western culture when one will be either a mystic or a non-believer.

To those who suggest secularity is the problem, the book suggests that “the secular world is not a moral cesspool within which faith’s primary task is to convert the godless. The secular world is still a world loved by God and a world with much moral and spiritual strength. In the name of faith we are called to love that world.”

Given the situation we face, the book asks what image of Christ do we present that will speak most effectively to our children and our world today. It takes as its lead Paul’s letter to the Philippians 2:5-8 where he introduces the idea of “kenosis,” or self-emptying. It goes on to explain that this means “being present without demanding that your presence be recognized and its importance acknowledged; it means giving without demanding that your generosity be reciprocated; it means being invitational rather than threatening; healthily solicitous rather than coercive; it means being vulnerable and helpless, unable to protect yourself against the pain of being taken for granted or rejected; it means living in a great patience that does not demand intervention, divine or human when things do not unfold according to your will; it means letting God be God and others be themselves without either having to submit to your wishes or your timetable.”

We may wonder and receive part of the answer from the fact that people like St. Francis of Assisi; converts like Thomas Merton and recent spiritual writers like Henri Nouwen still fire the imagination of the ordinary person. Another part of the answer might be in the popularity of movements like Marriage Encounter, Charismatic Movement and Cursillo. They have a commonality of a sense of community, a certain direction to life as well as some concrete actions. Still another part of the answer might be a re-flaming of our “Catholic Imagination” – so well delineated by author and sociologist, Fr. Andrew Greeley decades ago. We are opting for more functional churches rather than more beautiful ones. Often people decry the loss of the sense of the sacred. Maybe we have become too sterile in our aesthetics. Maybe we have abandoned many of our pious religious practices and allowed Protestants to embrace them on the upswing. Finally, maybe Kathleen Norris was right when she said that children are not bad, just unfinished.