

You know all of us were actually ‘home-schooled’ whether we realized it or not. My mother taught me to APPRECIATE A JOB WELL DONE: *If you’re going to kill each other, do it outside. I just finished cleaning.*” My mother taught me RELIGION: *You better pray that will come out of the carpet.* My father taught me about TIME TRAVEL: *If you don’t straighten up, I’m going to knock you into the middle of next week!* My mother taught me LOGIC: *If you fall out of that swing and break your neck, you’re not going to the store with me.* My father taught me IRONY: *Stop crying or I’ll give you something to cry about!* My mother taught me about the science of OSMOSIS: *Close your mouth and eat your supper!* My mother taught me about CONTORTIONISM: *Just look at that dirt on the back of your neck!* My mother taught me about HYPOCRISY: *If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a million times, don’t exaggerate!*

I love this feast of the Holy Family. It’s a wonderful reminder that God fully entered into the world in which we live – so much so that, He grew up in a family like ours – with parents, grandparents, cousins and aunts and uncles. He had to learn how to walk and talk, had to be potty-trained, and learn to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’ The Scriptures remind us that He was like us in all things but sin. So this feast is an annual reminder that family is a good, holy place – even if it is not an easy or fun place all the time. This is true both for parents and for children. But family is the unique place where we learn how to love.

Towards the end of the movie, RACHEL, RACHEL, there is a particularly moving dialogue. Rachel, the story’s main character, an aging teacher who never married, is more than a little frustrated with her state in life – teaching other people’s children rather than having her own. Lamenting to another woman, who is a mother, she complains about how difficult it is for her as a teacher to, year after year, intimately work with and get to know the young children in her classroom -- only to have them soon move on to other classrooms and to grow away from her. She expresses an honest envy of women who have their own children.

The mother, to whom she is speaking, says in reply: “It’s not so different for a parent. You also get to have young children only for a short time. They move on and grow away from you. They have their own lives and don’t belong to you. In the end, even for parents, your kids are never really your own!”

There is much to be learned from meditating on this – the children parents have -- are not really theirs. They are given to them, in trust, for a time, a short time really, and they are asked to be mothers and fathers, stewards, mentors, guardians, teachers and friends to them, but they are never really their children. They belong to somebody else – God – and to themselves more than they ever belong to their parents. There is both a deep challenge and a deep consolation in understanding and accepting this.

The challenge is more obvious. If we accept this, we will be less inclined to act as ‘owners’ to manipulate our children for our own needs, to see them as satellites within our own orbits, and more inclined to love, cajole, challenge and correct, even while giving them their freedom.

The consolation is not as obvious – and it my real focus here: When we realize, in the healthy sense, that our children are not really ours, we also realize that we are not alone in raising and caring for them. We are all, in the end, foster parents. God is the real parent and God’s love, care, aid and presence to our children is always in excess of our own. God’s anxiety for our children is also deeper than our own. Ultimately, no one is ever a single parent, even when they don’t have a human spouse to help in child-raising. God, like us, is also worrying, struggling, involved, crying tears, trying to awaken love. What is consoling is that God can touch, challenge, soften and inspire at levels inside of a child that no human being could ever reach.

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Moreover, children cannot, ultimately, turn their backs on God. They can refuse to listen to parents, walk away from them, spit on their values – but there is always another parent from whom they can never walk away, whom they carry inside. I wonder if anyone would ever have the courage to be a parent without realizing this.

That parents are not alone in the task of parenting needs emphasis today for another reason: More and more, very sincere couples are opting not to have children for fear of the world into which they would be bringing those children. They look at the world, at themselves, their inadequacy and are frightened at what they see: “Do we really want to bring children into a world like this? We are powerless to guarantee them health, safety, security, love. It’s an unfair risk to the child!”

Persons who think like this are right in their feeling of powerlessness and in their sense that they cannot guarantee anything for a potential child. But they are wrong in their feeling that they alone are responsible for effecting and guaranteeing these. God is also there and, because of that, in the end, all will be well and all manner of being will be well. One can risk having children since God risks it. I’ve always loved that line of Carl Sandberg: “A baby is God’s opinion that the world should continue.”

Finally, and perhaps most consoling of all, realizing this can do more than a little to bring back some peace and joy into the hearts of those who have lost children tragically – to accidents, but especially to disappearance, suicide, drug and alcohol-related deaths, and other such things that make parents second-guess about their failures and betrayals, and worry about all the things they should have done. Again – we are being asked to not forget that we are not the only parents the children have.

When a child dies, in whatever circumstances, he or she was received by hands far gentler than our own. They left our foster care and our inadequacy to fully embrace them to live with a parent who can fully embrace them and bring them to joy and wholeness.

One of my closest priest friends has been my friend since we were in high school. Stanley and I have been through loss of parents, siblings, illnesses, and family tragedies together. Every time we get together we end up at some point marveling at how you who have the vocation of parenthood ever manage to pull it off. We both agree that our lives are a piece of cake compared to all that it takes to raise a child from infancy to adulthood. So I just want to tell you – thanks for working so hard to be such good parents and share this treasure of our Catholic faith with them. I am always amazed that you are able to get the family dressed, combed, and generally somewhat ship-shape for Sunday Mass! Even the snarly teenagers! And I’m glad you snarly ones are here too! It’s all part of being a family. So I say in particular to you parents and prospective parents: Fear not – You ARE inadequate! But there is good news! You are never alone! Remember the promise of Christmas – Emmanuel! God is with us! Amen. (adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 5/21/2016, GOD IS THE REAL PARENT)