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HELPING OUR CHILDREN GROW IN FAITH

STAGES OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT

By Sandra DeGidio, OSM

“Why do you want your child baptized?” I asked the young couple.

“Because we want our child to have faith,” they answered with a tone of surprise at the question.

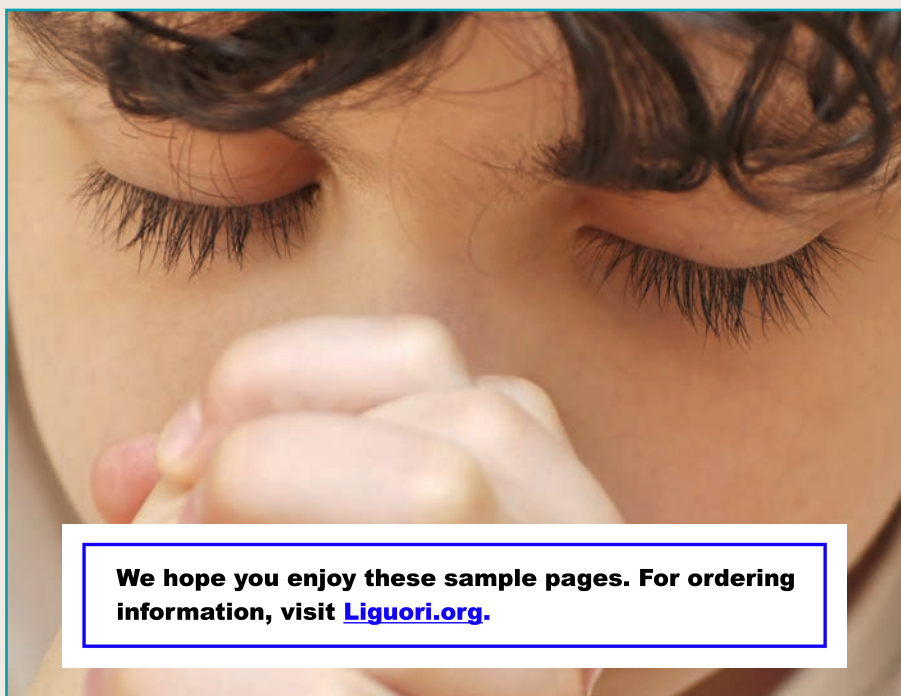
Christian parents want their children to have faith. But they sometimes think—incorrectly—that faith can be handed over in a neatly wrapped package. They may believe providing children with infant baptism and religious education classes will automatically inject faith into them. Faith is God’s gift celebrated in baptism, but it doesn’t develop on its own.

FAITH IS A PROCESS

People aren’t born with faith nor is faith magically infused with the sacraments—or even taught like religion or theology.

We cannot really be *taught* or *given* faith because faith is a living relationship. Yet, we can grow in faith, live in faith, act in faith, celebrate and ritualize our faith. And we can share our faith with others. Although people aren’t born with faith, they’re born into a faith-environment and their faith can be nurtured. Our children—and all of us—are meant to grow in faith.

Faith cannot be looked at as a thing. It’s a relationship based on love and trust. It’s an ability we develop that enables



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us to see God and God’s work in the world around us because we see God’s qualities in the significant people in our lives. And it’s a gift we learn to appreciate as we grow.

Faith is a process of growth in relationship with God and God’s people, which develops much like any relationship, and it continues to develop and grow all our lives. It’s never a finished product that can be packaged and handed on, any more than we can hand on a relationship we’ve developed with another.

Growth in faith takes place in stages. It develops much like an onion—layer by layer, stage by stage. Each stage has its own behavioral patterns. It's possible to facilitate growth from one stage to another by first *recognizing* the behavior and then challenging and encouraging continued growth toward successive stages. Since this process begins at birth, parents are the most important people in the faith-growth of children.

FIVE STAGES OF FAITH-DEVELOPMENT

Let's look at those stages of faith-development and the behaviors associated with each, focusing on how to nurture and support our children's and students' faith at each stage. Let's explore what personal responses or helpful experiences might facilitate continued faith-growth in our children.

The ages that accompany each stage shouldn't be viewed as absolute. Everyone is different and develops at different rates. Ages presented are rough guidelines to give a sense of how faith *might* develop chronologically.

1. PRE-FAITH OR ROOTING STAGE

(Birth–2 years)

By age two, children have learned the basic principles by which they'll live. The first two years aren't just *important* in the process of faith development, they're *essential*. Faith is a



relationship of love and trust with God and God's people. If we haven't experienced love, we won't know how to give love. If we aren't loved, we won't see ourselves as lovable. A child must experience love during those first crucial years in order to return love to God and others. The beginning of faith is the belief that God loves and cares for us. Knowing this helps us then believe what God says, does, and asks of us.

Love is an essential condition for faith. A child's behavior expresses that need for love and affirmation. Consider the two-year-old who might play contentedly by herself but stops to give and receive a hug from Mom or Dad every fifteen minutes. She needs constant reassurance that she is loved. The most important parental response at this stage of faith-development is the response of love through nurturing,

touching, and satisfaction of basic needs. Children who receive such reassurance will come to understand God as love, especially as they grow toward the second stage. Without that love and nurture, knowing God's love and loving self and others will be difficult.

2. IMITATING STAGE

(2–6 or 7 years)

At this age, a child's image of God is the image of their parents. God is as loving, forgiving, kind, and generous as their parents are. These children are great imitators. They imitate their parents' behavior, not because they understand it, but because they believe it's important since their parents see it as important.

Ritual is important at this stage. Children may not understand the levels of meaning or abstract expressions of faith within rituals, but they'll imitate the actions and attitude of their parents in ritual. Family rituals begun with children at this age quickly become family traditions. Family participation in the liturgical life of the faith community is important. It's also good to encourage spontaneous prayer and teach traditional prayers.

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