

KELSEY CLEMSON

Wisdom of the aged

Social and economic pressures today often mean that parents have little or no time for nurturing their children's faith, which is where grandparents, as in so many other areas of family life, can play an important role – a role now being recognised and supported by many parishes and dioceses

A seven-year-old boy approached his Irish Catholic grandmother bearing a gift he had made for her. She asked her unbaptised grandson what it was, as he handed her the long strand of plastic beads. She was intrigued that he knew about the rosary and asked him whether he ever prayed. The boy revealed that he sometimes talked to God quietly in his head after his mother read his bedtime stories and left him to sleep.

This story expresses one of the challenges grandparents are facing today when their children are no longer active (or very active) in their faith. In this woman's case, her daughter no longer goes to church and her grandson has never been baptised. Her faith is important to her and she wonders how she can share it across the generations without stepping on her daughter's toes.

She is not alone; many grandparents have similar concerns. They want their grandchildren to have the chance to know and love God, they want to share their faith with their grandchildren – but, at the same time, they want to respect the fact that parents have the primary responsibility for their children in these matters.

Even when grandparents and parents are in agreement about bringing a child up as a Catholic – and the parents are regularly practising – they may not be in complete agreement about what this means and they may need to identify the complementary roles they play. In addition to providing a crucial link in passing on the faith, grandparents can bring wisdom, stability and love to their families.

The role of grandparents is becoming increasingly significant today. A study on the involvement of grandparents and child well-being, published in May last year in the interdisciplinary research journal *Children & Society*, made this clear. Under the title "They've always been there for me", it surveyed almost 1,600 young adolescents and reported that the majority of these youngsters saw their mother's parents either daily or twice a week.

In "Listening 2004", the major research project of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, grandparents expressed a need for support in passing on their faith to their grandchildren. In response, the Celebrating Family initiative has been engaging with the Dioceses of Liverpool, Middlesbrough and Plymouth in a series of directed conversations with parents, grandparents, teachers, parish priests and catechists exploring what it means for the home, school and parish to pass on faith in God and how each group can support one another.

Last autumn, the Marriage and Family Life Project Office at the bishops' conference invited Catherine Wiley, founder of the Catholic Grandparents Association (CGA), to address diocesan coordinators of family ministry on the support that we can offer grandparents. At the first annual grandparents' pilgrimage to Knock, she had heard grandparents express concerns about how their children had "fallen away" from the faith. It was clear to her that we needed a forum and a strategy to help grandparents to share with each other the great task and responsibility of passing on their faith.

Since its creation, the organisation has been on a fast track with more than 500 registered members and 14,000 attendees at the 2009 pilgrimage.

In Britain, plans are being finalised for two grandparents' pilgrimages – one to Aylesford Priory on 16 July and another one, the ninth annual pilgrimage to Walsingham, on 23 July.

Grandparents and their families are invited to join in the celebrations, which will include Mass, family activities and special guests. This summer's pilgrimages will kick off an ongoing support network for grandparents in England. The Diocese of Arundel and Brighton has already started plans for a Grandparenting Workshop to take place in the autumn.

In addition to the annual pilgrimage and workshops being offered in dioceses, parish branches meet regularly to socialise, to pray, to exchange grandparenting advice and to

plan events such as celebrating the Feast of Sts Joachim and Anne, Jesus' grandparents. Meetings often take place after one of the Sunday Masses and last between 45 and 90 minutes. The meeting normally begins by lighting a candle and saying together the Pope's Prayer for Grandparents. It asks Jesus to look with love on grandparents the world over; it asks him to protect them as living treasures of sound religious tradition and asks him to help families and society to value the presence and roles of grandparents.

The group catches up on personal news such as the births of new grandchildren and gives updates about what is happening in the Catholic Grandparents Association. The members may pray for special intentions of people in the group – for grandparents who are struggling, for their children and grandchildren, for those who are sick. The meeting closes after tea and biscuits and the chance to chat to one another about what is happening in their lives and families.

The bishops' conference, in partnership with the Catholic Grandparents Association, is developing a handbook and starter pack for parishes to use in organising Grandparent Gatherings. A 2006 report by the Pontifical Council for the Family reminded us that the family has always been a privileged channel for the transmission of the Gospel and when children perceive the generosity and Christian meaning of life through the words and behaviour of their parents and grandparents, they gradually learn to follow their example and are orientated towards religious values.

Being a grandparent is a tremendous and incredible joy. It outweighs all the difficulties we might encounter; it is a vocation rooted in love. Much has been written about the "power of a praying parent". Now is the time to begin talking about the "power of praying grandparents" too.

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