Family Friendly Grade-Level Religion Programs

School-based, grade-level religious education *can* be made more family friendly.

by Joseph D. White, Ph.D.

School-based grade-level religious education can be made more family friendly by choosing texts that provide practical and creative ways to involve families and using the books in a manner that is responsive to the needs today’s families.

* Choose a grade-level textbook series with a strong family component, for example, a section written specifically for families as part of each lesson. At minimum, this should include information about the doctrinal material the child has learned, developmental information about how children this age understand the topic, adult-level catechesis for the parents, and practical ways families can share the message at home. These pages can and should be perforated, so they can be sent home each week if the textbooks stay at the school. Other strong family components, such as on-line resources for families and materials to assist in family prayer, would be helpful as well.
* Send parents “Ask-Me” questions – questions they can ask their kids about the main points of that week’s religion class. These could be sent directly to the parent via email. Be sure to supply parents with the answers to the questions as well.
* Focus on the Key Concept throughout the lesson. Repeat it as you complete various activities (i.e., “We are doing this project to remind us that (insert Key Concept here)” or “This Bible story shows us how (Key Concept)”). As the children leave class, ask them to tell you the Key Concept for that week. This will help them have a ready answer when parents ask what they are learning.
* Involve parents as volunteers, and give them plenty of options with respect to roles. They could volunteer as classroom assistants, helpers with special events, or “guest speakers” to discuss any areas of Church ministry in which they are involved. For example, parents who serve as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion could help instruct the children preparing for First Communion on the proper way to receive.
* Where possible, order lessons so that multiple children from the same family are working on the same themes at the same times of the year. This makes it easier for families to learn together.
* Provide some family faith experiences. Consider adding seasonal celebrations for All Saints Day, the feast day of your school’s patron saint, and perhaps for Advent and Lent. For children preparing for the sacraments, host day retreats that are designed for the whole family, with perhaps some time for parents and children separately and some opportunities for experiences together.

Pope John Paul II famously said, “As the family goes, so goes society, and so goes the world in which we live.” We could just as easily say, “As the family goes, so goes the parish, and so goes the Church in which we live” – for our parishes are made up of families, and every child with a vocation to the priesthood and religious life is born within a family. For this reason, Pope Benedict has said, “The family…is the cradle of life and of every vocation” (Angelus talk, February 4, 2007). Let us renew our commitment to place families at the center of our catechetical efforts.