

## Grandparents – You are not alone

*There are some fortunate Catholic Grandparents who can look around the circle of families established by their sons and daughters and rejoice in the evidence of Christian and Catholic faith and practice which they see in all of them. But in Western Europe I suspect that nowadays such Grandparents must be rather exceptional, even in traditionally Catholic countries. It would, I think, be far more common to find Grandparents who see among their children's (and Grandchildren's) families, a whole range of religious belief and practice, from fervent fidelity to apathy and indifference. More distressing is the situation of Grandparents who see all their Grandchildren drifting away from the practice of their religion, especially when contact is limited - as it often is - by distance or other factors.*



If you are in this last situation it's important that, providing you yourself are living out the faith that was handed on to you, you should avoid any sense of inadequacy or - still more - failure. Just make sure that you are offering your Grandchildren, and everyone else, the example of a true Catholic life lived openly and joyfully for all to see. This is, after all, the basic and most effective contribution you or



anyone else can make - a contribution which will live on after you and may well produce its effect after you have gone to your reward. And try to stay close to your Grandchildren - make sure that they (and their parents) know that you are interested in all aspects of their well-being, material as well as spiritual. Remember their birthdays; follow their progress at school; be around at many of the happy moments - football, hockey, sports days, and so on and, at all the



big moments - graduation, first job, etc.

But, if you want to do something more to emphasise to yourself and the world that you are a true, dedicated Christian Grandparent, here are one or two extras you might think about. You might find out if there is a branch of the Catholic Grandparents Association near you and, if so, join it. Its motto is 'Passing on the Faith' - that noble work in which you wish to play your part,

even though your efforts with your own Grandchildren don't seem to have borne much fruit. You'll find yourself with a group of people sharing just the same problems (and occasional joys) as yourself, and all Grandparents have lived long enough to know how helpful that can be. If, as yet, there is no branch in your area, how about starting one? You'll have to be an enthusiastic Grandparent, but you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you're making a real contribution, not just in your own family environment, but in the wider field of passing on the Faith to the next generation. The Catholic Grandparents Association is well established in Ireland and in other countries. Full information can be found on its website: [www.catholicgrandparents.com](http://www.catholicgrandparents.com).

You might think about joining a Grandparents' Pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a powerful communal prayer, demanding something extra, involving not only words, but actions; requiring

travel, effort, and perhaps sacrifice; a united prayer made by people with the same aspirations, sharing similar interests and similar difficulties, all reasons calculated to add to its effectiveness. It is a distinctive form of prayer with an honourable place in Christian history, the sort of prayer that claims a response from God and inspires and enthuses the participants.

A pilgrimage is also a shared celebration, bringing together people with a common cause for rejoicing. Grandparenthood is surely a reason for great celebration, since it brings deep joy to the elderly in their later years and to the young in their early years.

A pilgrimage empowers and strengthens those who take part. This is especially important for present-day Christian Grandparents, on whom the Church increasingly depends if the Faith is to be passed on as it has been passed on for centuries.



Our Lady of Walsingham

In recent years, pilgrimages for Grandparents, mostly to Shrines of Our Lady, have been established in many places. In England, the National Grandparents' Pilgrimage has, since

2002, taken place at the ancient shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, Norfolk. It is held on the Sunday before July 26th (or on July 26th itself, if this is a Saturday). July 26th is the Feast of Saints Joachim and Anne, parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Grandparents of Jesus, and Patrons of the Catholic Grandparents Association and of all the pilgrimages it organises.

The Walsingham pilgrimage is very much a family affair, with a strong emphasis on Grandchildren. After the pilgrim Mass, there follows a very lively children's liturgy and, thereafter, there is a picnic plus miniature fun fair until it's time to go home.

The Irish National Grandparents' Pilgrimage, held annually in the magnificent Shrine of Our Lady of Knock, Co. Mayo, Ireland, on the second Sunday of September, is on a much larger scale. Of late, upwards of 15,000 pilgrims take part, most of them Grandparents. Each of the four pilgrimages held so far has been led by



Our Lady of Knock

an Irish Bishop. Each pilgrimage has also been addressed by a well-known keynote speaker.

The Irish pilgrimage is, perhaps, more sharply focused on Grandparents, at least on the day itself, though Grandchildren are very prominent in the months of preparation. Children



all over Ireland are contacted each year through their parishes and schools, and are invited to write prayers for their Grandparents - these prayers are collected and brought to Knock for the pilgrimage. Some of them (and there are many wonderful examples to choose from) are read or displayed at the Mass, and all of them are kept in the Shrine museum where their parents and relatives can have access to them, now and in the future.

I hope that readers will forgive this rather long digression, but I feel that it is important that Grandparents know they are not alone in their often difficult task of passing on the Faith. The Catholic Grandparents Association and Grandparents' Pilgrimages are two important means of spreading information, guidance and encouragement among them, and also in providing opportunities for meeting and sharing with each other.

To return to our topic - the situation of Grandparents who conscientiously do

their best by example and exhortation and yet see their Grandchildren falling away from the Faith despite all their efforts. Being, by definition, earnest Christians themselves, they will already know that they must now leave the situation in God's hands. But this is not a despairing gesture - far from it. Normally when we undertake a project, we like to be able to measure the success, or otherwise, of our efforts, and we look for indications that will enable us to do this. But, as Scripture often tells us, God's ways are not our ways. When we're working for God, we don't look for success or worry about failure. We simply do our best and leave the rest to Him. We'll certainly expect ups and downs, just as Jesus himself did, but we won't be carried away by the one or feel dejected by the other.

Another thing that Scripture very helpfully says is: *'There is one who sows and another who reaps.'* We are definitely among those who are

sowing the seeds. We may not even live to see the harvest. We'll very likely see the years of turbulence as our Grandchildren grow up - the adolescent awkwardness, the revolt against restraint, the questioning and the kicking over of traces. But we may well be gone when the more tranquil years of maturity follow, when our Grandchildren face their own responsibilities and turn once more to the values and beliefs they learned in earlier years. And, even if they don't, as David Quinn observed in his keynote address at the Irish National Grandparents' Pilgrimage in 2008, *'they will at least have become acquainted with the basic elements of the Faith. They have learned how to pray; they know some of the stories of the Bible; they know some very basic catechism and, even if they don't practise it, the fact that they are acquainted with it, means that you have given them a compass, and on that compass you have shown them*

*where magnetic north is so, if they get into trouble in their lives in the future and they want to find a sure place, they know where to look because you have helped to show them the way.'*

Let's close this chapter, and with it this brief volume, on a positive note. Our title 'Grandparent' is surely one of honour. 'Grand' is a word that signifies importance. We think of Grand Opera, the Grand Canyon, even the Grand National! The word 'grand' in French means 'great'. What could be greater or more important than our vital task of handing on to future generations the values, skills, accomplishments of the past, enhanced by the additions and improvements of our own time. This is the way in which communities and nations grow and develop - in fact, the way in which civilisation itself advances. But when, as believing Christian Grandparents, we talk of our special role in this great stream of transmission, via the handing on of the Faith, we raise the task to new



heights; it becomes a calling, a calling from God or, in the Church's language, a vocation. It's the vocation that gives meaning to our later years, when our



strength starts to wane and our powers to decline. And, not only meaning but also joy, since it brings us closer to people - children - whom we already love. So, as well as being great and important, this is a happy vocation, something to be welcomed and celebrated, something which lights up both our own later life and the early lives of our Grandchildren.

In recent years the Church has increasingly recognised the vital importance of the vocation of Grandparents at this present time. The Vatican has organised international gatherings to reflect on means of encouraging and strengthening it. Among the worldwide delegates present at these meetings have been representatives of our pilgrimages and of our Grandparents Association. And, in response to repeated requests by the Grandparents Association, Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has himself composed and circulated a noble prayer for all grandparents (see p.48) which, hopefully, you will have heard proclaimed in Church. In it, he gives Grandparents such impressive titles as '*strong pillars of Gospel faith*', '*living treasures of sound religious traditions*', and prays '*that they may pass on to future generations the fruits of their mature human and spiritual experience*'. A prayer to God, certainly, but at the same time a real challenge to Catholic Grandparents everywhere.