

The Road Less Traveled: A Study of Catholic Homeschoolers. A Preliminary Report

Abstract

This paper is focussed on Catholic parents in Alberta who have chosen to homeschool their children, despite the presence of a fully funded Catholic school system. In particular, it will examine how parents pass on beliefs, values and culture in a homeschooling context. It will be concerned with religious education in the broad sense of the term and explore how parents apply their theological vision to educational questions, especially religious education.

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In short, culture is the way of life, ethos or lifestyle of a people. The essential element is the value system. Cultures are both human products and producers of human persons. People create cultures and cultures influence and mold their growth and behaviour.

D.S. Amalorpavadas, Church and Culture in Joseph Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot Lane (Eds) *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1987, 201-206 at 201.

Some Theoretical Context for the Study

In contemporary Catholic discourse the family is frequently described as the domestic church (Bourg, 2003; Atkinson, 2005). This concept became popular in the post conciliar period and arises out of a theology which sees the laity as an integral constituent of the Church as the body of Christ. In more sociological language the family can be seen as providing a basis for both spiritual mentoring and the accumulation of spiritual capital (Tamminen, 1994; King and Mueller, 2004; Boyatzis et al, 2006).

The family is also of pre-eminent importance in the religious education and formation of children (Meyer 1996). The importance of inter-generational transfer of religious beliefs and practises had been commented on in a variety of studies spanning numerous faith traditions (Kelley and De Graaf, 1997; Keysar et al 2000; Bendroth, 2002, Beste, 2009, Bibby, 2009). Contemporary Western societies however, present challenges to the transfer of beliefs and values to a younger generation (Balswick and Balswick, 1989;

Ploch and Kramer, 1998). For many young people the process of maturation is closely allied to a move away from conventional religious belief (Kay and Francis, 1986; Dixon, 2003; Rymarz and Graham, 2006). How to address this drift away from conventional belief and practise by young people is a significant challenge for mainline Churches (D'Antonio et al 2001).

The transmission of these religious beliefs and practices within families is a complex, but nonetheless critically important, process (Christiano, 2000). Children who display early indications of religious belief and practice are far more likely to maintain this pattern in adult life (Hoge et al, 1982). Rymarz (2009) has argued, however, that the pressure of living in a culture where religious expression is often vicarious presents major challenges to actively religious families (Visscher and Stern, 1990). These challenges are especially acute if parents seek to maintain a degree of religious commitment that moves beyond conventional levels.

The place of the family in a theological contest is an area of interest (Rubio, 2003; Ouellet, 2006) Studies of Catholic families, though, have tended to focus on those who reflect conventional models of parenting (Bucko, 2007). One aspect of this is sending children to schools, either Church sponsored or state run. There has been little empirical work, done, however, on Catholic parents who choose an alternate model of parenting one that encompasses homeschooling children. The literature on homeschooling emphasizes this as, amongst other things, a radical choice of parents to have a stronger

relationship with their children by providing a more active and involved parenting style (Gaither, 2008; Lawrence, 2007).

The Study

An educational option for parents in Alberta is homeschooling. Parents whom homeschool their children are a small but not insignificant minority and have a variety of motivations for making this choice. Within this group are Catholic parents who have chosen to homeschool their children despite a fully funded Catholic school system. Much of the research on homeschooling has focussed on educational outcomes and examining the performance of homeschooled children on conventional academic measures such as reading ability. This project will be focussed not primarily on children and educational outcomes but on the parents who have chosen to homeschool – the departure point is the question, “why do you do this?”

It seeks to gain a better understanding of the life journeys that have lead some Catholic parents to select homeschooling for their children and what makes them persevere on a road that is much less travelled. In particular the study examines how parents pass on beliefs, values and culture in a homeschooling context. It is concerned with religious education in the broad sense of the term and gather information on how religious education is conducted in Catholic homeschooling families.

This study arises out of a scholarly interest in namely how families, pass on religious beliefs, values and practices to their children and what role schools play in this process. Much of this work has been directed to religiously active Catholic families. In summary, many of these families experience great difficulties in providing religious nurturing for their children. A development of this work is to investigate further this process of familial sponsorship of religious development but in families who do not utilize conventional educational measures such as elementary or high schools. The homeschooling movement is a significant social phenomenon in North America. Although much larger in the United States, a sizeable number of families in Canada, especially Western Canada, choose to homeschool their children. One of the largest groups of parents who choose this option are Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians. In many ways these parents are the public face of Christian homeschoolers. A smaller and much less researched group are Catholic parents who choose to homeschool. This study focuses on this group. Their choice seems especially interesting as they are taking this option despite a fully funded Catholic school system which, on the surface, would seem to cater to their needs. The primary issue that this project seeks to investigate are the reasons for Catholic parents choosing to homeschool over the more conventional choice of sending their children to established Catholic schools. Supplementary to this is how these families religiously model and nurture their children. Part of this examination is an explicit examination of religious education both formal and informal in homeschooler.

Methodology

The theoretical basis for this study arises out of a grounded theory paradigm. I am interested in hearing the stories of Catholic parents who homeschool but I do not have a strong sense of what these stories will entail. I have never worked with homeschoolers before but have had much experience investigating religious education in a variety of settings. The main focus is on generating data around the initial research focus, namely why some Catholic parents elect to homeschool their children. An assumption in this study is that such parents will be willing to talk about this question and will be able to articulate their views. This assumption seems to be well-grounded as the parents have elected to follow a course which is not conventional and are likely, therefore, to have reflected on their actions. In order to gain a better appreciation of the motivation underpinning Catholic homeschoolers personal narratives will be important. In order to be better understood these narratives they need in the first instance to be heard. I am not speaking to homeschooled children as this is not within the scope of this study.

The principal research tool in this study will be the in-depth interview, which sits well within a grounded theory paradigm. The initial interviews will be relatively open ended, allowing the participants to speak widely about their decision to homeschool. As I come to terms with the narratives that I have heard I anticipate that the interviews will develop more structure as I begin to formulate more specific question to ask those who take part in the study in its later stages. Such a development is a well-accepted approach within grounded theory as researchers develop[s a stronger voice in the conversation as their understanding of the issues grows. It is always difficult to estimate the number of

interviews that will be undertaken using a grounded theory approach. Amongst other things the goal here is to achieve saturation, that is, where no new information is being revealed. In-depth interviewing takes time. So far initial interviews have lasted up to 3 hours and in every interview so far, with one exception, both parents have participated. I have also reinterview a number of participants on the basis of clarification or new questions that have arisen. I have also, after the initial interview, asked questions, via email of certain participants. These process allow for "rich" information to be provided and this in turn needs to be carefully analysed and incorporated into a final synthesis. I think 20 interviews would be a reasonable estimate of the of interviews to be conducted. At present 12 have been completed

Participants were recruited using a snowballing technique where participants refer other interested Catholic homeschoolers to me. The in-depth interview is greatly assisted if the participant is comfortable with the process and feels that they will be given a good hearing when approached. Snowballing allows for previous participants to suggest to candidates and also possible recommend the researcher to the next person as one who is carrying out a credible research project. There a number of Catholic homeschoolers that I am aware of that could have been approached for an initial interview. The first person was approached by me but after this participants all others have and will be referred by those who have already taken part in the study.

Interviews were analysed following content analysis (Minichiello et al 1992). After each interview, participant responses were analysed in detail, using contemporaneous notes

and thematic response codes developed (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These codes were related to common response categories and dominant categories identified. These categories then informed the next interview and response categories became more and more refined (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). To be invited to participate in the study parents had to be referred by another homeschooling parent and meet three criteria.

- Had homeschooled for over 5 years
- Were still involved in homeschooling their children
- Were regarded as successful homeschoolers by the referring person

General probe areas are listed below.

Interview Framework Catholic Homeschooling Parents

Family

1. Members (how many in the family, individuals position, etc)
2. Prayer (frequency and type)
3. Mass attendance as family or more individual (do older members still go to mass)
4. Activities (how time is spent, especially faith based activities)
5. Relationships with children
6. Religious education of children both general and specific

Parish/Church

1. Involvement in parish - both quantity and quality (mass, youth group etc)
2. Relationship with parish priest and other parish ministers
3. Relationship with other Church groups or with other priests

Work

1. Experience of homeschooling
2. Impact of homeschooling on family

3. Impact of homeschooling on personal spirituality
4. Impact of homeschooling on marriage

Beliefs Today

1. What are some key beliefs (belief in God, Jesus as the Son of God, God being revealed in creation etc. etc.)
2. Do they feel part of the Church?
3. Would you change anything in the Church today?
4. How do they see their belief developing over the next 5-10 years?
5. How important is religion to you?
6. Other comments

Results and Discussion: a preliminary survey

A number of dominant theme categories are emerging and these will be discussed in turn. A unifying concept is that participants in this study are creating a particular kind of family culture for themselves.

1. The Decision to Homeschool: “we wanted something different for our kids”

Many Catholic homeschooling parents (CHP) did not start homeschooling for explicitly religious reasons. One of the primary motivations was to create a different experience for their own children. The decision to homeschool arose in many instances from a certain preexisting unconventionality of the parents', especially the mothers, most of whom had at least undergraduate degrees. One mother was very involved in the breastfeeding movement, another in education of children with learning disabilities and another in advocacy for children. They have chosen an unconventional path and as such have

reflected on this decision in quite deliberate terms. For many CHP they want a different educational and relational experience than what they experienced as children. As one participant put it, “I wanted a better relationship with my son than I had with my father. With us there was always a distance and I didn’t want that with my boy” 2H3

In the process of homeschooling, however, many of the participants began a spiritual path that has led to more explicit held religious positions. CHP expressed strongly held religious beliefs they placed great emphasis on orthodox Catholic beliefs such as the divinity of Christ, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the importance of the teaching or magisterial Church.

Although the initial decision, in many cases, to homeschool was for educational or philosophical reasons this choice, however, was made from a foundation of religious attachment. For some CHP they had always maintained religious practice but this had been relatively dormant (for many I suspect they were underreporting their level of religious commitment prior to undertaking homeschooling. They took as their comparison point their religious beliefs and practices as they are now and not as they compared to their contemporaries when they began homeschooling). For others the decision to homeschool came in the midst of a profound searching which for some led them into the Catholic Church. One participant put her decision to homeschool and her subsequent path in these terms:

We both came from active [Catholic] families but we didn’t really know a lot about our faith. I had an intense interest in education and so did [husband]. Once we started we got more interested in our faith and as love for it grew we

saw so many opportunities for our children to grow in their faith that we now would never have it any other way.

One area for further exploration is the idea that homeschooling facilitates religious questioning on the part of parents. CHP do not have the a ready option option of deferring religious formation to an outside body such as the school. They, therefore, must take much more responsibility for the religious formation of their children. Even though many felt the challenge of this task it does allow for the parents to explore their own beliefs and practises and to take ownership of these. Many of the participants in the study so far have report that their own faith develop as a result of having to both model and to explain religious beliefs and practises to their children. For many of the parents entering the world of ritual Catholic practice was a relatively new experience but they did this in partnership with their children and as a result of initial exposure interest in this ritual aspect of catholic life developed. This idea is illustrated by the following comment:

I really find the tapes by Fr {...} really helpful. I have trouble understanding grace and her really lays out well...this is important because I need to pass this on to {children's names} TZ 2.

To be sure a smaller group of parents had chosen to homeschool their children because of explicitly religious reasons. These were often mentioned in contrast to theft type of education their children would, or had received, in Catholic schools:

We just weren't happy about what was going on in the school, we felt very disillusioned by some of the attitudes our kids were picking up. [girl's name] was coming home very upset and when this started to happen to [boy's name] as well we just had to take stick. We spoke to the principal about it but she

seemed to dismiss us and keep making the point that the school had to cater for all needs. We think that formation in faith is critical and they just weren't getting it

Even for these parents though the experience of homeschooling had lead them to a deeper exploration of their own faith and to a greater actualization of it.

2. Intentional parenting: “we decided to take charge of parenting our children”

A strong theme that came through the interviews so far is the idea that CHP see their parenting in intentional terms. It follows from this that they have relatively clear goals and expectations for the education of their children. This is not to say that the parents in the study have a highly regimented routine for their children to follow. In fact many of the participants noted that one of the things they value most from homeschooling is the freedom that it allows and that they are not bound by regulations and meticulously followed daily schedules, although there were some exceptions to this.

An important and oft mentioned characteristic of what was seen as conventional schooling was an obsession with testing and empirical measurements of learning in general. Many of the participants strongly distanced themselves from these practises. The point of homeschooling is to provide a different learning context for children and not to simply replicate the patterns found in schools. One parent put this well when she commented on the conveyor belt approach of many schools and how she was determined “to get our kids off that conveyor belt by educating them at home”. As another parent

commented, “what the point of homeschooling if you have to do this at 9, this at 10 and have lunch at 12.10?” CS 1

The whole approach to learning was seen by many CHP in terms of an alternative vision, one that had many overtones with the classical idea of a liberal education, that is, in nurturing a capacity for critical thought:

I wanted my kids to grow up to love learning and not to be tied to grades but to have learning as a lifelong passion. I feel that I am much more able to do this at home. We want our kids to be thinking communicators who show good leadership. 1M2

For most of the CHP in the study being able to direct childrens education to agreed objectives was especially valued. As one participant put it:

That’s the great joy of homeschooling, we are able to set our own pace and to do what we think is important for our children. Sure it takes effort and discipline but you don’t go into this sort of thing unless you have a family strong sense of where you want to go and hope you want your children to develop. For us we want our kids to be critical thinkers NP 4

The freedom of homeschooling extends to use of formal curriculum materials. In Alberta all students, even homeschoolers must be associated with a school board. Most of the participants in this study were connected to a board that specialized in home schooling. The board provided a curriculum and this was adhered to but it allowed much leeway for how children were educated. When asked about the formal religious education of their children most CHP reflected an individual, unregimented approach. Some mentioned certain texts or using curriculum material provided to homeschoolers. My sense of this

though was the approach to religious education was consistent with the general attitude to education and that it was relatively flexible and tied to respond to the needs of the individual.

We use a few different resources, we tried some of the Seton material but found that it took up a lot of time so we took what we needed and then used other stuff. [person's name] our friend in [place] gave us some really good ideas and we have chased these up. BP 4

A critical part of religious education was the opportunity for faith expression. Religious faith in this environment is not an abstraction but part of the learning environment. The homes I visited, for example, were decorated with religious pictures. A number of families prayed the Angelus and followed other devotions. Again the picture here was not uniform. Indeed some CHP expressed disappointment that they did not do enough “religious things”. The point, however, is that in this environment that opportunity for faith expression is far greater than in more conventional educational settings. For one the parents are deeply interested in cultivating the faith of their children. As one parent put it: “I want to do everything that I can do to raise my children to know, love and serve God.”

BB 4.s

One of the criticisms of the conventional schooling system was this it did not engender quality learning but was geared more toward a process and not to the individual. One important illustration of this was in the perception of CHP that their children may have “fallen through the cracks” in school. A number of parents reported that they felt there

children's special needs would not have been catered for in a day school. One couple, for example, commented that they only began to homeschool after their son had been tested, at the prompting of others, and shown to have had an exceptionally high IQ. When school authorities were told of this they were incapable of meeting the child's needs and could only come up with what was seen as a generic scholastic program for children with "special needs". In a similar vein another parent told of all the extra time she spent with her son helping him to read. She felt that this extra care would not have been evident in a day school where the needs of the individual are often subsumed by the needs of the larger group.

CHP do have expectations on how their children will develop. Many of these goals can be seen in terms of educational opportunities that broaden the educational experiences of children. To give some examples of this, one couple spoke of the freedom that homeschooling gave them to allow their children to cultivate their musical abilities. One child, in particular, was able to practice for hours a day on his instrument in order to pass very advanced musical examinations (this is also an example of the often expressed disdain for testing being overridden). Other children had developed a range of interests and hobbies that the parents attributed to the greater time that was available to them as a result of homeschooling. One teenager had taken special courses in chess and as a result coached younger children at a nearby school. Another was able to cultivate her interest in animal husbandry by spending time caring for animals and supplementing this practical experience by taking courses in this area via distance learning mode.

3. Time to be a Parent “as we were at home more our hearts for home grew more”

CHP often displayed a different dynamic in discussing their children, one that was predicted on them having much more time with which to interact with their children. This did not just relate to the time the children were at home and not in school. Homeschooling seems to engender a mentality where the children are expected to be interacting with parent and their siblings. Commenting on the time available to homeschoolers one father put it succinctly when he noted “when we took our boy out of school we suddenly had at least 3 hours more a day that was the time he spent on the bus”. Some parents expressed the range of activities that their children were involved in as compensation for not getting a diploma which is the end product of conventional schooling. This was clearly an issue with some of the participants in the study. As one mother commented, ‘we know our kids won’t get the high school diploma but we feel that there are getting so much more”

An illustration of how family time in CHP is regulated consider the attitude to recreation that many of the participants expressed. For most CHP the use of television and other electronic forms of media is regulated. Many of the parents were wary of allowing their children to become too involved in any one activity especially those that took them away from the family. For instance one parent commented that he steered his sons away from hockey because it is time consuming, “practise four nights a week and then games all over the province on weekends, we said no.” CM 2. In terms of the overriding notion of family culture this would seem a significant comment. In CHP the negotiation of time

and indeed how time is spent is directed much more toward the concept of family time as opposed to individual needs and interests.

4. Networks: “We may be mavericks but we are mavericks who stick together”

One critical aspect of the family culture of CHP is homeschooling takes place within the context of strong, abiding supportive networks. At one level CHP are involved with other homeschoolers in the school boards that they belong to. At another they are involved in their local parishes. CHP in this study were committed to the local parish in a variety of ways. Their level of commitment in fact was often a counterpoint to more conventional Catholic families. One story illustrates this well. One couple recounted how their children are among the few who serve at Mass. This even includes Masses for the local Catholic school which are held on occasion in the parish church. It seems the school has difficulty in finding students to serve so the call goes out to homeschoolers who oblige but the irony of this situation is not lost on either CHP or the parish priest.

The most significant networks are those with other CHP. Here the network is sustained by a common belief in the value of homeschooling and a strong commitment to raise children in an environment where religious nurturing is given a high priority. This creates a strong commonality in CHP and makes the network very resilient and sustaining. As one parent commented “we sometimes feel we live in a Catholic village”. To illustrate how this network functions consider the following example. A number of the participants in the study commented that their children do ballroom dancing. I

observed that this seemed a little unusual but how this arose tells much about the family culture of CHP and how they network with each other. One parent was looking for some more social activities for her children as they got older and came across a skilled ballroom dancing teacher who offered to run classes. Ballroom dancing, of course, relies on a critical mass of participants and is best suited to a gender mix. She mentioned her idea to other CHP. Many agreed that this was a good activity for their children to be involved in. Notice how the parents are involved here at a foundational level, they are intentional and active in the parenting of their children. They could also negotiate with the teacher the best time to do run classes, that is, the time that is most conducive to the families involved. This shows again the notion that the family comes before the activity. The idea took wings and now as well as classes the network also sponsors dances, a supper is provided and these evenings are very social and seem quite popular.

In conclusion I think a critical issue here is seeing Catholic homeschooling as a manifestation of a microculture. If we follow Amalorpavadas definition of culture, by examining what CHP believe, think and do will give a great insight into how religious education and faith nurturing occurs in this environment. One somewhat obvious, but nonetheless important, observation is that the dynamic of family life amongst CHP is different to that of conventional Catholic families. In my previous work, for example, I examined active Catholic families (Rymarz, 2009). In the initial study design I had proposed to interview parents in the evening in their homes. With one exception this did not occur. I more often interviewed one parent at their place of work – typically in a lunch hour or other break. These interview rarely went beyond 30 minutes not because of

the time constraint but because the participant had difficulty articulating responses to questions about religious formation in their families and their own religious beliefs and worldview.

In this study, again with one exception, all the interviews, so far, have been conducted in the family home with both parents present. Parents often speak for over three hours and are very able to conduct a conversation that explores their own religious positions and the goals that they have for their families. The dynamics of CHP is such that they appear to have much great control of how they use their time and more reflectivity about what they are trying to do as parents. This in turn lays the foundation for what I have called here intentional parenting with its implications for religious education and faith formation.

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