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Letting the children go

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Jan. 5, 2010

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Parents spend years saying, ?How do you ask?? and ?What do you say?? to children who think the phrase ?I want it? is information enough. Parents spend months of prime adult life crouched before toilet bowls cheering streams of urine from children who are quite content to wet their pants. Forever. Parents spend even more years enlisting unwilling children to help with dishes and laundry.

Why? Any honest parent will tell you that the simplest and most pleasant way to complete a household task is to do it yourself. If you cook dinner alone, you?ll do all the work, it?s true, but you can do it listening to NPR, or watching ?Seinfeld? reruns, or working in blessed silence. No whining. No ?Why do always have to help?? No complaining. No ?I set the table yesterday!?

The parent who does his own laundry is more likely to have a drawer of matching socks. The parent who does her own laundry is less likely to find her ?dry clean only? wool sweater stuffed into the washer on the ?hot/warm? setting. We know how --and why -- to separate the whites and darks. We know the simple pleasures of clean sheets and actually care about having them. Kids do not.

So why do we spend so many years engaged in domestic skirmishes? Because we?re preparing our kids to leave. From the day they arrive we?re preparing them to leave, to go out into the world and take their places. Parents are always cheering the tiniest stabs at independence: holding up his head, crawling, grabbing a spoon, taking her first steps, and, fools that we are, talking.

It might be easier all around for Mom to continue to cook and clean and fold and iron, but she doesn?t want to foist such helpless beings off on someone else. She wants children who can, and do, help clear the table at a friend?s house. She wants children likely to be more-than-once-invited houseguests. She wants them to have the social skills to attract a wife or husband. She wants them to know how to behave in an office or at the in-laws or on the street.

Children are given to us so we can prepare them to leave. All those years in Mama?s arms and under her skirts are not meant to be a permanent arrangement. Our children belong in the world.

And so do we. We are not baptized for the church. The waters of baptism are not the initiation rites for any club. We are baptized to serve the world, in the world, for the life of the world.

I think of this every Christmas Eve. The church is lit and poinsettias bank the crèche. The gentle mother and her chubby baby are all tucked away in flowers. Joseph stands watch over them. I want to stay. I want to breathe in the perfume of beeswax and incense and furniture polish, and never leave. Outside, unshaven men will ask if I have any change. Sometimes, as I hurry past, I think I hear them asking if I will change. Walk faster. Ignore him.

But I know the church won?t allow it. I know I will be slapped awake and pushed out the door on Dec. 26 by the first of the bloody Christmas feasts we call *Comites Christi*: Stephen dying under the rocks, John in prison far from home, the tiny boys snatched from their mothers? breasts and murdered, Thomas Becket opening the doors of the church to let his killers in.

We get to rest at the crèche only a while before we go where we belong, out into the world, to be the body of Christ for the world.

I think of this now as I watch my daughter and her husband prepare to leave for Haiti. They are going to help build and strengthen the goat herds in that hungry land. They are going to help with village vaccinations and nutrition classes. They are going to teach. They are going to learn.

They have lived in Haiti before, but, this time, they are taking my grandchildren with them. Luc is 4 and Anna is 2. I have seen them most every day since their births. I am grieving this leave-taking with an intensity I wish I could curb or tame. I don?t want to be so frightened for them. I don?t want to be so sad. I want the tears to stop. I want my sleep back.

I want my daughter back. I want them all back, playing in the yard, where I can hear them and see them and call them in for supper. I want them -- the five of my children and the four of my grandchildren and the three of my children by marriage -- reading in rooms upstairs and sleeping where I can go in the night and check their rising and falling breaths. I want them at my table. I want to stay at the crèche.
I try to remember whose they are and where they belong.

[This first appeared in the July 2008 issue of *Celebration*, the worship resource of the *National Catholic Reporter*. Melissa Musick Nussbaum lives in Colorado Springs, Colo.]

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