

CATHOLIC & GRANDPARENTING



5 CHALLENGES AND 5 OPPORTUNITIES

Lauri Przybysz

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INTRODUCTION

BECOMING GRANDPARENTS

“If I knew having grandchildren was so much fun, I would have had them first.”

Author Unknown

Remember when you first became a parent? And each time it happened again? You held your infant or adopted child in your arms and looked into his or her little face, and many powerful feelings washed over you: joy, relief, trepidation, worry, pride, and love. This was *your* child. Looking back to those days, we who are parents know that we had a million questions and hopes and expectations for what it would mean to be a parent. One thing we knew for sure: Our life had changed, for the better and forever!

When we became parents, a precious someone was counting on us for everything. You may have thought, “I’m not sure if I know what to do or if I will even be up to the task, but I know that raising this child is my job for life.” You had a new life to protect and care for, and you likely thought anxiously, “Where’s the instruction book?” And in that moment, you very well may have prayed, like I did, “God, help me!”

Now years later, we grandparents know God did help us raise our kids. Over the years—through their infant tumbles, kindergarten experiments, pre-teen awkwardness, adolescent trials, and young adult launching—we can look back and see God’s loving and guiding hand at work along the

way. And if we lost a child, we knew that he or she would always be part of our family, no matter what. The words of the Scriptures take on new meaning when we see them with a parent's eyes. Here is a passage from Matthew 11:28-20 (from the Bible in contemporary language as translated by Eugene Peterson in his book *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition* used throughout this book) that I think sums up what all parents and grandparents go through: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

We parents experienced so many "firsts": first tooth, first stitches, first date, first sleep-over. We know we made mistakes, but we learned from them. God's grace was at work through it all.

Fast forward twenty or thirty or more years. Now that baby of ours has a baby of his or her own, and our life has changed again. Our role of parent has expanded and deepened in complexity. We are now a grandparent.

God was with us as we learned how to parent, so we can trust God to equip us as we learn how to grandparent. Some of the lessons we learned as parents will help us. Yet, because grandparents are not the parents of the new child, we will have new lessons to learn as well—new challenges and new opportunities, if you will. Our Catholic faith puts a high value on having children. We are open to all life, and we encourage all couples to welcome new babies into their family. But

parents who generously take up their vocation to welcome children need help from other adults. And who better (most of the time) than their own mother and/or father who raised them?

Because we are Catholics, we understand ourselves to be part of a Mystical Body, the Body of Christ, responsible for one another, as St. Paul told the Corinthians: “The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don’t, the parts we see and the parts we don’t. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance. You are Christ’s body—that’s who you are! You must never forget this” (1 Corinthians 12:25-27, *The Message*).

Our Catholic faith also teaches us families are part of an ongoing journey of care that is part of God’s plan for the human race. We believe all people have an eternal relationship with one another that has been blessed by Christ. The presence of children is a sign of the continuity of the human family throughout salvation history, from generation to generation. We grandparents, as part of our own extended family, can help communicate God’s message of love and hope for the future to all people, not just to our own children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. What a vocation that is!

Times of change are challenging, but they are also full of opportunity. In this little book, we will explore some of the many challenges grandparenting brings and look for the grace that lies hidden in the many opportunities grandparenting offers. Unlike our own first-timer experience of raising

our own children, we at least now have some real experience to draw upon.

Lauri Przybysz
Severna Park, Maryland

ACTA SAMPLE

FIRST CHALLENGE

Grandparenting has changed since our grandparents did it.

Not everyone grows up with grandparents in their lives. I was blessed to know all four of my grandparents, and what stands out for me is how different those four elders were. They were culturally different from each other and from me: my dad's parents immigrated from Sicily as young adults; my mom's parents came from Scotland.

All four of my grandparents had their strengths and weaknesses, as do I. Not everyone parents the same, and not everyone grandparents the same either. Even my husband, John, and I have differences on how we approach our grandparenting, but we gladly work them out for the sake of our kids and grandkids. When John and I remember our own grandparents, we see qualities to emulate and some quirks we don't want to repeat, and you likely will too. Maybe your grandpa was a wonderful cook, and you want to pass on his recipes for posterity. Maybe your grandma taught you to crochet, and you hope your grandchild will want to learn that skill too. However, if reading books with you or telling you stories were not your grandparent's strong suit, however, you still may want to include those kinds of activities in your own grandparenting repertoire, now that you have the chance, even if you weren't able to do it for your own children when they were growing up.

What's so "grand" about it?

While many people can testify that grandparenting is a joy, you may find yourself having mixed feelings about it. Have you wondered if you would be able to meet your own expectations of what a good grandparent is, or the expectations of your adult children? The life transition to having children can be difficult for them, but it can also be challenging for us. We may be more aware of our limitations and the mistakes we have made in the past. We may also be aware of our increasing physical limitations. We grandparents are, rather by definition, "not as young as we used to be." When our own child becomes a parent, we have to shift gears and may find ourselves—rather suddenly and often not ready for—belonging to the "older generation." If we are a particularly "young" grandparent (either in age or in attitude or both), it can be a shock that takes some getting used to. Believe me, I know of which I speak. Or, as we get a bit older, we discover that it's not so easy to get down on the floor to play



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with dolls or build with Legos—or at least it's not so easy to get up again. I've been there and done that as well. As we become older, we will miss having the strength and energy we had when we were younger and may take a little longer to get over the colds our loving grandchildren unwittingly share with us.

But despite these challenges, including maybe the increased expectations on grandparents put on us by society (and sometimes our own children), it still remains a grand vocation.

ACTA SAMPLE

FIRST OPPORTUNITY

We can write our own job description.

The good news is that there is an opportunity build on the challenges caused by the changes in grandparenting today. When we were parents, we know we had our limitations and we made some mistakes. Grandparenting is like getting a mulligan or a do-over! Knowing what we know now, we grandparents can put our child-rearing experience—both good and bad—into practice. As grandparents, we are motivated (perhaps even more than when we had our own children, if that is possible) more by love and less by duty. We get to approach grandparenting every day as an opportunity for us to grow, both personally and spiritually, rather than as a task or series of tasks that have been thrust upon us about which we have no say. When love is our motivation, God will assist us.

Our children, whether as a couple or as a single parent, have made us grandparents, and we should always be grate-

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ful for that gift. Becoming grandparents can be an opportunity to view our children and our own parenting journey in a new light. From our own parenting years, we have a wealth of experience to draw upon that we can employ to teach both our children and their children some important lessons we wish someone had taught us. Becoming a grandparent presents us with a chance to change and grow and try new things. Not a cookie baker or good with crafts? You can learn. Not good at reading or telling stories? Your grandchildren will give you another chance. In fact, they'll demand it! Pope Francis encourages parents and young people to listen to their elders tell their stories, "It makes them feel connected to the living history of their families, their neighborhoods, and their country," he says (*The Joy of Love*, 193).

So now's your chance to try anything and everything. You will discover the creative ways of interacting and relating to your grandchildren that best fit you...and them. With some exceptions, we grandparents get to do what we want, when we want. We get to write our own job description.

What's in a name?

Oh, and here's another thing you get to choose: your new name! Will your grandchildren call you Nana? Poppy? Granny? Bubba? Grandma and Grandpa? John's and my grandchildren call us "Grandma" and "Dziadek," which is Polish for Grandpa. Sometimes the grandchild names you, and that is OK too. One grandchild dubbed my father "Beanpot," (aiming for the sound of Grandpa, we think), and Dad was delighted to answer to it.

Given a choice, did you choose the names you called your own grandparents? If they were your role models for the perfect grandparents, maybe you can ask to be called by their titles. Or take the opportunity to blaze your own path to grandparental identity by declaring your own nom-de-grand. On the other hand, don't close yourself off to what your grandchild comes up with. "Beanpot" might fit you perfectly, as it did my father.

My point is that you yourself should feel comfortable with whatever name you're called. It could be with you for quite a while. The grandkids won't really care, and your children and in-laws shouldn't either. Your preference for how you want to be called says something about your grandparenting style and the relationship you would like to have with your grandchildren. Therefore, in my opinion, it should ultimately be your decision. Your children and grandchildren will acquiesce, trust me.

When you learn the story behind a grandparent's name or title, you are also learning something about the extended family's ethnic heritage and even personality. Grand-names often reveal a long history of where families get their ideas of what it means to be a grandparent. Whether formal or fanciful, they should be titles of honor, testaments to a new and special status in the family. But whatever your grandname, use it to grow into your identity as a grandparent over the many years you will be called it.

Do you have a hobby or skills that you weren't able to share with your own children when they were young? Here's your second chance. My dad found a new outlet for his talent for drawing and making up stories when he be-

came "Beanpot." Grandparents come in all shapes and sizes, equipped with our own unique strengths and talents. One new "Pap Pap" in our parish wants to be the family historian, full of memories of "how it was" in his day. As he develops his skills as a storyteller, he will give his grandchildren a treasure of knowledge about their roots and culture. Another new "Gram" in our parish, who wants to be known as a nurturer, can become a comfort when her grandchildren and their parents need a break from one another, but only if she is always ready with a warm smile and words of encouragement for both.

Prayer: Loving God, you have called us to a new stage of our parenting vocation. We trust that you will give us the gifts we will need to be good grandparents. We trust in you to give us patience, understanding, love, wisdom, and courage in this new adventure. Bless our grandchildren and their parents. Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauri Przybysz is Executive Director of the Christian Family Movement-USA and President of the National Association of Family Life Ministers. She received the Doctor of Ministry from the Catholic University of America, specializing in marriage and family enrichment. Lauri and her husband John have spoken on encouraging “the Church in the home” at the Pontifical Council on the Family in Rome, and at family life conferences in the U.S., Europe, Latin America, and India. Her articles on marriage and family spirituality appear on the U.S. Bishops’ *For Your Marriage* website. Dr. Przybysz is mother of six and grandmother of twenty-one.

ACTA SAMPLE

5 CHALLENGES

- Grandparenting has changed since our grandparents did it.
- Parents and their kids live fast-paced lives that leave little family time.
- We are tempted to interfere in our children's parenting.
- Our grandchildren may not be raised in our faith.
- Communication between the generations can be difficult.

5 OPPORTUNITIES

- We can write our own job description.
- We can be a resource and example to busy and stressed parents.
- We can learn and practice prudence, humility, and patience.
- We can find new ways to model our faith to the next generations.
- We can discover how to establish communications and build relationships across age differences.

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