Will my son be a Christian?

by Miroslav Volf in the April 4, 2001 issue

The statistics are clearly in my favor. An overwhelming majority of children adopt the religion of their parents. So I shouldn't worry. It is highly probable that my son Nathanael will grow up in some sense a Christian. But I still worry, mainly because I am not satisfied with him being a Christian "in some sense." Mindful of Kierkegaard's critique of Christendom, I'd almost rather that he be no Christian than an indifferent Christian. I want him to embrace Christianity as a faith by which to live and for which to die.

But how do I pass on that kind of faith? The question is gnawing at me daily, though it bites the strongest during the high seasons of the church calendar such as Advent and Lent, when we concentrate on the mysteries that lie at the heart of our faith—God's coming into the world and the Lamb's taking away the sins of the world.

A few months ago I was leafing through Joseph Yerushalmi's classic book on Jewish history and memory, *Zakho*, and came across a letter that Franz Kafka wrote to his father. I underlined the following text twice:

> You really had brought some traces of Judaism with you from the ghetto-like village community. It was not much and it dwindled a little more in the city and during your military service; but still, the impressions and memories of your youth did just about suffice for some sort of Jewish life. . . . Even in this there was still Judaism enough, but it was too little to be handed on to the child; it all dribbled away while you were passing it on.

What will Nathanael see in my hands as I am trying to transmit to him the Christian faith? Just traces of what has slipped between my fingers, partly because there was not much in my hands to begin with? I'd be devastated if this were to happen.

Clearly, you cannot pass on what has dribbled away. But when it comes to faith, the trouble is that you may not be able to pass on even what you firmly hold in your hands. Take my father. The child of a Catholic father and a Baptist mother, my father drifted away from faith by the time he was in his early teens. He returned to it

in the concentration camp. No, it was not the horror of hovering for months between life and death that did the trick. To the contrary. Immense suffering intensified his rebellion against God. He was in hell right now, my father thought, so nothing worse could happen to him later. As for a God who would let such suffering befall human beings? If he existed, he deserved to be cursed and spat upon.

But then my father encountered a man who was rebelling against the horror around him in a different way. Raging hunger, hard labor and thousands of daily humiliations neither extinguished the sparkle in his eyes nor made his hands weary of helping others. Gradually, my father started believing this strange man who dared to talk about God's power and love in the midst of hell. Miracle of miracles, no sooner had my father embraced the Christian faith than he was appointed a baker for the whole camp—by communist guards who were out to destroy all religion! His hunger was gone, and he was his own boss who could appoint the evangelizer as his helper.

From his conversion until his dying day, my father's faith was genuine, deep and intense. None of it dribbled away as he was passing it on to me. Yet what did I do with his gift? Sandwiched between the trials of being a preacher's kid in a small church and being a laughingstock at an officially atheist school, I decided that I wanted nothing to do with religion. God was just plain too much trouble—intellectually and practically.

My problem was not my father's empty hands. It was rather that what I found in them was impossible to bear. His faith demanded too much and was at odds with the prevailing cultural sensibilities. So I rejected it. When I was brought back to faith it was through the prayers of my devout mother. Every evening when her prodigal son would go out, she would wait on her knees for him to return. It was not enough for me to be handed a robust faith; I had to be made to *want* a faith that, in Bonhoeffer's famous words, "bids a man to come and die."

Nathanael was barely two and unable to form proper sentences when he asked the biggest of all questions. "Daddy, what God mean?" I was taken aback, but then began talking about the One who created the skies, the oceans and the dry land; the birds, the fish and all the other animals. I sensed that I was talking past him and felt humiliated as a theologian (though I am not sure that one could answer this question in any way that a two-year-old would understand). I told an acquaintance about my predicament. She responded, "It is not what you say that matters, but what you do."

“And that is supposed to be helpful?” I thought to myself. She increased the burden of my responsibility, but I was not sure how much it would help Nathanael.

Then I remembered my mother’s prayers. Right language about God matters; godly life matters even more. Yet neither will suffice. If the seed sown by word and deed is to grow and bear fruit, it will need the life-giving water of God’s Spirit. So I abandoned trust either in statistics about religious belonging or in the strength of my own faith. I vowed to pray.