“Are these the parents I grew up with? Grandparents sure are different from parents!” Perhaps you’ve gotten this reaction from your grown children as they watch how you relate with their children. Yes, we grandparents are different than we were as parents, even though we are basically the same people with the same strengths and weaknesses. With the birth of our first grandchild, however, we experience a new dimension of God’s love and thus discover a new capacity within ourselves to love.

At Baptism, Christ comes to share his risen life with the child and to dwell within the child, gradually revealing himself and fashioning the child into God’s own image and likeness. Those of us who gather around the child and the parents at Baptism are there to give witness to and, as best we can, to embody God’s love for this child. As grandparents, our role is so vital! Children need to know that God’s love for them is unconditional. Do we exhibit a caring love, a Christ-like giving-of-ourselves kind of love for our grandchild? Does he or she experience total, loving acceptance in us?

Children are hungry for loving relationships. They will welcome our love with open arms, and our grandparent-grandchild relationship will nourish them in a unique and special way. But their deepest nourishment will come in their relationship with God. In addition to communicating our own love for them, we can help them fall in love with Christ. What an occasion of great joy it is to read the Bible with our grandchildren, introducing them to the Good News of the Good Shepherd’s unfailing love for each of us! And how sweet is the pleasure of bringing our children to celebrate his
love and to meet him in the sanctuary of the church!

God can be so real for children! In fact, they often help us experience God as real in our lives. This can happen as we simply spend time with them and enjoy them; life is such a wonder for young children, and so they can help us to see things with new eyes. As we slow down and “smell the roses” with our grandchildren and wonder together over God’s gifts, we can enjoy our own life, as well as our own relationship with God, more fully.

Joy is a real characteristic of children, one that can be very contagious. But we can miss out on this joy if we are preoccupied with the children’s behavior. As parents we may have been anxious about how our children behaved themselves, particularly in the presence of their grandparents. Behavior surely has its importance, and grandparents often have definite ideas on how children should behave, but we need to be aware that behavior, especially moral behavior, does not consist so much in following the rules as in behaving in such a way as to please the ones we love. How different our own behavior would be if we always asked ourselves, “Will God see my actions as a response to his gift of love?”

Perhaps you’ve heard yourself or other grandparents say, “I never let my kids get away with that!” Sometimes we grandparents have short memories about what we did as parents. We certainly need to stop unacceptable behavior, but we also must realize that our grandchild has not yet totally become whom he or she is to be. A child has a lifetime to learn to respond to God’s call. Maybe we expect from our grandchildren what even we do not do perfectly.

It will be easier for us to accept our grandchildren with all their gifts and imperfections if we don’t have preconceived plans for their development. (Such plans are best left to God, who has a plan for each of us, grandparents and grandchildren alike!) It is also easier for us to accept and enjoy our grandchildren because we usually do not have the primary responsibility for their care or development. In most cases, when we or they get tired, we can hand them back to their parents.

But is our involvement in our grandchildren’s lives really only part-time? You already know that you never stop being a parent even after your children are grown up and on their own. The same thing is true about grandparents. Our concerns about our grandchildren’s lives—their jobs, their health, everything—never end. Besides communicating our own love for them, our presence to our grandchildren as they grow up also can be a sign of God’s faithful presence to them. Sharing their happy times, such as their Baptisms, First Holy Communions, graduations, and weddings, should be our special concern. Birthdays are always special, of course, and we can also remember the child’s baptismal anniversary. Material gifts can be a reminder of God’s love. Maybe Grandma could embroider the child’s baptismal garment. If grandparents gave their grandchild his or her first Bible, wouldn’t that tell the child how important the Bible is?

Finally, we can and should pray regularly for and with our grandchildren. We can pray that they realize God’s love in their lives. The new life they received in Baptism will help them grow to be more and more like Christ, and they will be able to respond more and more to his love. If this happens, you can be sure that as a grandparent you have made a difference in their lives and also in God’s “big plan” for all of humankind.