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The Parents' Right to Educate their Children (I)

"Since education is primarily the responsibility of the child's father and mother, any other educational agent is such by the parents' delegation and subordinate to them." A new article in the series on the family.

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Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states

that parents have the right to choose the education they want for their children. [1] Moreover, the signatories included this principle among the basic rights that a state can never abrogate or manipulate. Human beings by their very nature are intrinsically social and dependent beings, with a dependence that is shown most clearly in the years of infancy. All men and women need to receive an education, to acquire knowledge and culture in a social setting.

A child is not just a creature thrown into the world. A close tie exists in the human person between procreation and education, so much so that the latter can be seen as an extension or complement of generation. Every child has a right to the education needed to develop his or her capacities, and corresponding to this right is the right and the duty of parents to educate their children.

A manifestation of God's love

The rights to educate and to be educated do not depend on whether they are taken up by positive law, nor are they “granted” by the society or the state. They are primary rights in the strongest sense of the term.

The right of parents to educate their children is in the service of the children's right to receive an education adequate to their human dignity and their needs. The latter right grounds the former one.

Attacks on the parents' right here end up being attacks on the right of children to be educated, which in justice should be recognized and defended by society. Nevertheless, that the child's right to be educated is more basic does not imply that the parents can renounce being educators, perhaps on the pretext that other persons or institutions can educate their children better. The

child is, above all, a child, and being accepted as such in the heart of a family is fundamental for each one's growth and maturation.

The family is the natural place where relationships of love, service and mutual self-giving are discovered and learned, relationships that shape the most intimate core of the human person. Therefore, except when absolutely impossible, every person should be educated in the heart of a family by their father and mother, with the help of other persons: brothers and sisters, grandparents, uncles and aunts, etc., each in their diverse roles.

In the light of faith, generation and education acquire a new dimension. Each child is called to union with God, and becomes for the parents a gift that is, in turn, a manifestation of their own conjugal love. When a new child is born, the parents receive a

new divine calling. God expects them to educate each child in freedom and love, teaching them to freely direct their lives towards him. He wants each child to find in the love and care received from the parents a reflection of the love and care that God himself has for each person. Therefore for a Christian father and mother, the right and duty to educate their children can never be renounced. And this is true for reasons that go beyond a sense of responsibility: for this right and duty form part of the parents' respect for the divine calling each child receives in Baptism.

Since education is primarily the responsibility of the child's father and mother, any other educational agent is such by the parents' delegation and subordinate to them. “*Parents are the first and most important educators* of their own children, and they also possess a

fundamental competence in this area: they are *educators because they are parents*. They share their educational mission with other individuals or institutions, such as the Church and the state. But the mission of education must always be carried out in accordance with a proper application of the *principle of subsidiarity* .” [2]

To educate their children, parents will need to seek others’ help. The acquisition of cultural or technical knowledge, relationships with people outside the family circle, etc., are necessary elements for each person’s integral growth, which the parents by themselves cannot attend to adequately. Hence “all other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities *in the name of the parents, with their consent* and, to a certain degree, *with their authorization* .” [3] Such helps are

sought by the parents, who at no stage lose sight of what they are seeking to achieve, and are attentive to try to ensure that these helps respond to their intentions and expectations.

Parents and schools

It is in this context that schools should be viewed: as assisting the parents in their own educative work. Being aware of this reality is even more pressing when we consider all the influences that can lead parents today (at times without being fully aware of it) to fail to grasp in all its fullness the marvelous task that falls to them, thus renouncing in practice their role as primary educators. The educational crisis Benedict XVI so often warned of is rooted in this confusion. Education has been reduced to “the transmission of specific abilities or capacities for doing, while people endeavor to

satisfy the desire for happiness of the new generations by showering them with consumer goods and transitory gratification.” [4] As a result, young people “feel left alone before the great questions that inevitably arise within them,” [5] at the mercy of a society and a culture that has made relativism its own faith.

In the face of these possible deviations, and as a consequence of their natural right, parents should view the school as in some way an extension of their home, an instrument for their own task as parents, and not simply a place where their children are provided with information and knowledge. As a first requirement, the state should safeguard the *freedom of families*, in such a way that they can choose in an upright way the school or the places they judge to be most suitable for the education of their children.

Certainly in its role of fostering the common good, the state possesses certain rights and duties concerning education. We will return to this topic in a future article. But this involvement cannot interfere with the legitimate intent of parents to educate their own children in keeping with the noble goals they themselves have chosen for their own lives, and that they consider enriching for their progeny. As Vatican II teaches, the public authority “is bound according to the principles of distributive justice to ensure that public subsidies to schools are so allocated that parents are truly free to select schools for their children in accordance with their conscience.” [6] That is why it is important that those involved in politics and in the media seek to safeguard this right and promote it to the extent possible.

The parents' concern for the education of their children is shown in countless ways. Whatever the institution where their children study, it is only natural for them to be interested in the atmosphere that prevails there and in the content of the teaching. This concern safeguards the *freedom of students*, the right that their personality not be deformed or their aptitudes stunted, the right to receive a sound formation, without abusing their natural docility in order to impose on them opinions or human prejudices. Thus children are helped to develop a healthy critical sense, while also making clear to them that their parents' interest in this area goes beyond grades and test scores.

The communication between parents and teachers is just as important as that between parents and children. A clear consequence of viewing the school as another instrument for

carrying out their own educative task is to take an active interest in the initiatives and goals of the school. Fortunately it is becoming more common for schools, whether public or private, to organize periodically open houses, sports events or academic information sessions. Especially in the latter type of meeting, both parents should try to attend, if possible, although this might mean a sacrifice of time or of rearranging obligations. In this way the children are shown clearly, without any need to say so, that both parents consider the school a relevant element of family life.

In this context, getting involved in parents associations (helping to organize events, making positive suggestions, or even participating in governing bodies) opens up a wide range of new possibilities for active co-operation. This effort will certainly require a spirit of sacrifice:

dedicating time to dealing with other families, getting to know teachers, attending meetings.... Nevertheless these difficulties will be amply rewarded by the opening up of many opportunities for apostolate, especially for a soul in love with God and eager to serve. Although the regulations of the school might not permit direct intervention in some aspects of the educational programs, it will always be possible to encourage teachers and administrative personnel to strive to ensure that the school transmits human virtues and love for noble values and beauty.

The other parents are the first ones to be grateful for this effort. For them a father or mother involved in the work of the school, who on their own initiative show a strong concern for the environment in the classroom or other aspects, becomes someone from whom they will seek out advice

about the education of their own children. This opens up a path to forming friendships, and to an apostolate that ends up benefiting everyone whose children are involved in the school. Thus what St. Josemaria wrote in *The Way* on the fruitfulness of personal apostolate will become a reality: “Among those around you, apostolic soul, you are the stone fallen into the lake. With your word and example produce a first ripple... and it will produce another... and then another, and another... each time wider. Now do you understand the greatness of your mission?” [7] *J.A. Araña - C.J. Errázuriz*

Footnotes:

[1] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, no. 26.

[2] John Paul II, *Letter to Families* , 2 February 1994, no. 16.

[3] *Ibid.* [4] Benedict XVI, *Address to the Diocesan Assembly of Rome* , 11 June 2007.

[5] Benedict XVI, *Address to the Italian Episcopal Conference* , 28 May 2008.

[6] Vatican II, Declaration *Gravissimum educationis* , no. 6.

[7] St. Josemaria, *The Way* , no. 831.

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