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The Family's Educational Mission (I)

The self-sacrificing love of the parents generates in the family an atmosphere that facilitates their mission of leading their children to live the human and Christian virtues.

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Created in the image and likeness of God, man is the “only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake.”[1] When we are born,

and for a long time afterwards, we depend totally on the care of our parents. Although from the moment of conception human beings enjoy all the dignity of a human person (a dignity that needs to be protected and recognized), time and the assistance of others are needed if we are to achieve our full perfection. This development (which is neither automatic nor autonomous, but attained freely and in union with others) is the aim of education.

The very etymology of the word “educate” underlines the human being’s need for education. “To educate” comes from the Latin verb *ducere*, which means “to guide.” Each person needs to be guided by others in order to develop fully and correctly. This word is also related to *educere*, which means “drawing something forth.” To educate is to “draw the best ‘I’” out of each person, to develop all their capabilities. Both

these aspects, to guide and to draw out, form the basis of the mission to educate.

Parents: the principal and first educators

As the Magisterium of the Church has often stressed, “parents are the principal and first educators of their children.”^[2] This is both a right and duty grounded in the natural law. Everyone can see, although at times only intuitively, that there is a necessary link between the transmission of human life and the responsibility to educate one’s offspring. The notion that parents could forget about the children they have brought into the world, or that their obligation extends only to their material needs, neglecting their children’s intellectual and moral formation, is something everyone rejects. Underlying this natural reaction is the clear understanding

that the primary place for the growth and development of each person is in the family.

Divine revelation and the Church's Magisterium have given us a deeper understanding of why parents are indeed the primary educators of their children. "Since God created man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man."[3] In the divine plan, the family "is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it reflects the Father's work of creation."[4] The transmission of life is a mystery of the cooperation between parents and the Creator in bringing into existence a new human being, each of whom is God's image and called to live as his child. The responsibility of educating is an integral part of this mystery.

Therefore the Church has always taught that “by its very nature the institution of marriage and married love is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory.”^[5] Being open to life belongs to the very essence of marriage; this entails not simply having children, but also the obligation to help them live a fully human life and come close to God.

The mystery of Redemption sheds light on the parents’ mission to provide education as God wants. Jesus Christ, who by his words and deeds “fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling,”^[6] wanted to become incarnate and grow up within a family. Moreover, he raised marriage to the level of a sacrament, bringing it to its fullness in God’s plan of salvation. As in the Holy Family, parents are called to cooperate in

God's loving providence and guide those entrusted to their care to maturity, accompanying and fostering from infancy to adulthood their children's growth *in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.*^[7]

John Paul II summarized all this teaching when explaining the three characteristics of the parents' right and duty to educate their children.^[8] First, it is *essential*, since it is tied to the transmission of human life. It is *original and primary* with respect to the educational role of others, because the relationship of love between parents and children is unique and involves the core of the educational process. Finally, it is *irreplaceable and inalienable*: it should never be usurped nor can it be completely delegated to others. Aware of this reality, the Church has always taught that the educational role of parents "is of such

importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute.”[9] Sadly, the dimming of these truths has led many parents to neglect or even abandon their *irreplaceable* role to such an extent that Benedict XVI has spoken of an “educational emergency,”[10] which everyone must strive to remedy.

Aim and animating principle of the educational task

“God who created man out of love also calls him to love—the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.”[11] Given this reality, the aim of the educational mission of parents cannot be other than teaching how to love. This aim is reinforced by the fact that the family is the only place where persons are loved not for what they possess, or what they know or can produce, but simply for their being

members of the family: spouses, parents, children, brothers and sisters. John Paul II's words are very significant in this regard: "Looking at it in such a way as to reach its very roots, we must say that the essence and role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love . . . Every particular task of the family is an expression and concrete actuation of that fundamental mission."[12]

Love is not only the aim, but also the animating principle of all education. John Paul II, after outlining the three essential characteristics of the parents' right and duty to educate their children, concludes: "in addition to these characteristics, it cannot be forgotten that the most basic element, so basic that it qualifies the educational role of parents, is *parental love*, which finds fulfillment in the task of education as it completes and perfects its service of life: as well as being a *source*, the

parents' love is also the *animating principle* and therefore the *norm* inspiring and guiding all concrete educational activity, enriching it with values of kindness, constancy, goodness, service, disinterestedness and self-sacrifice that are the most precious fruit of love.”[13]

Consequently, faced with the “educational emergency” highlighted by Benedict XVI, the first step is to remember once again that the aim and driving force behind all education is love. In the face of the deformed images often given of love today, parents, who are sharers and collaborators in God's love, have the joyful mission to transmit forcefully the true image of love.

The education of the children is the consequence and continuation of conjugal love itself. Hence the family life which arises as a natural development of the spouses' love for

one another is the appropriate environment for the human and Christian education of children. The mutual love of their parents is the first school of love for the children. Through their parents' example, children receive from a young age the ability to love truly. This is why the first piece of advice St. Josemaria would give to couples was that they should safeguard and renew each day their affection for one another, since mutual love is what animates and gives cohesion to the whole family.

“Love each other a lot, for God is very happy when you love each other. And when the years go by—now you are all very young—don't be afraid. Your love won't weaken, but rather it will grow stronger. It will even become more ardent, like the affection of your courtship once again.”^[14] If there is love between the parents, the children will breathe

in an atmosphere of self-giving and generosity, reflected in the parents' words, gestures and myriad details of loving sacrifice. These are generally very small things, but things a heart in love gives great importance to, and which have an enormous impact on the formation of the children right from their earliest years.

Since educating children is a necessary continuation of paternity and maternity, the mutual participation of both spouses is needed. The educational mission is proper to the couple inasmuch as they form a marriage. Each spouse shares in the paternity or maternity of the other spouse. It should never be forgotten that all the others who assist in the task of education—schools, parishes, youth clubs, etc.—do so as collaborators of the parents. Their help is a prolongation, and never a substitution, of the home. And both parents have to take an

active role in building up the atmosphere of a home. God gives his grace to make up for the unavoidable absence of one of the spouses, but what can never happen is that either spouse renounces or is half-hearted in this task.

Certainly, the enormous social and workplace changes in recent years have also had a deep impact on the family. Among other developments, the number of families in which both parents work outside the home, often with quite demanding jobs, has grown significantly. Each generation has its own problems and resources, and we cannot say that one time is better or worse than another. Nor should we fall into casuistry. But love always knows how to give priority to the family over work, and is inventive in finding ways to make up for lack of time by putting greater intensity in family relationships. Moreover, it should never be

forgotten that both parents need to be involved in building up the home. It is a mistake to think that a father's fundamental duty is to earn money, and that he can leave in his wife's hands the domestic tasks and the children's education.

To Mary and Joseph, who watched over Jesus as he grew in wisdom, age and grace,^[15] we entrust the mission of parents, cooperators with God in this task of such great importance and beauty.

Footnotes:

[1] Vatican Council II, Pastoral Const. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 24.

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1653.

[3] *Ibid.*, no. 1604.

[4] *Ibid.*, no. 2205.

[5] Vatican Council II, Pastoral Const. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48.

[6] *Ibid.*, no. 22.

[7] Lk 2:52.

[8] Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhort. *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 36.

[9] Vatican Council II, Declaration on Christian Education, October 28, 1965, no. 3.

[10] Benedict XVI, Letter to the Diocese of Rome Concerning Christian Education, January 21, 2008.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1604.

[12] John Paul II, Apostolic Exhort. *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 17.

[13] *Ibid.*, no. 36.

[14] *Hogares luminosos y alegres*, p. 36.

[15] Cf. Lk 2:52.

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