

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PRESENT-DAY FAMILIES TO EDUCATE THEIR CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

From the moment a couple gets married, the question of children takes on a much greater significance: it becomes a question of their children and their need to be educated.

As Chesterton wrote: "History began with a father, a mother and a child - a human trinity, a triangle, which is repeated an infinite number of times in the course of history".

Two questions come to mind: How to set about bringing to fruition successfully the potential for development in a child? In a word, what kind of education should a family give its children at the present time?

Families must help their children to develop as human beings and as Christians.

When a child is born, it is already influenced by two natural factors: its genetic code (there are attempts to alter this nowadays by genetic engineering), and the environment in which it is born. All the rest has still to be provided.

As a consequence, the home has always been the place where a child has its first, unique and decisive experiences, and where the basic elements of its personality are moulded and formed.

This is what is known in family psychology as the "second birth", because it is in the family that the child is introduced to relationships, communication, patterns of behaviour, information. It is here that education begins.

Unfortunately, this crucially important environment is under attack in our own days by what is known

as "the areas of conflict between the modern world and the family".

Let us now take a closer look at the fundamental elements of the human and Christian education of children in the home.

HUMAN EDUCATION

As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "In order to be deeply Christian, one has first of all to be deeply human".

The human education of a child consists in training it in view of its own ultimate good and that of society. This is achieved by a gradual poetic, affective and biological process of maturation, which enables it to accept its responsibilities. This has to be the primary function of a family, if children are to be mature and forward-looking.

The human education of children should concern itself with the following three areas:

1. The feeling of happiness and freedom

The word "family" should be synonymous with "not being bored", with "fire", "warmth". A child can live at peace and in a disciplined way only if the home is a happy one.

To grow as a person, one must grow in freedom also, but this freedom has to be understood as being "the possibility of choosing the best of two or more goods". This is a form of freedom that has to be acquired: it is an important factor in the process of human development. This freedom brings with it other values: independence, responsibility, conscience, self-sufficiency.

2. Acceptance of authority

This is another important element of human education, especially at a time when such values as authority, rules and moral standards are derided.

A family provides an ideal opportunity for learning how authority should be exercised: the authority of parents over their children; the authority among brothers and sisters. Authority is possible only if it is based on truth and love.

It is in the home that the child first comes into contact with God. Pope John Paul II wrote the following recently in his encyclical "Veritatis Splendor": "It is clear that people are free since they are able to understand and accept God's commandments...In fact, it is in this acceptance that human freedom comes to full and true fruition" (N 35).

3. Service of the community

This is the third element of human education. If each member of a family has a "task" or a "mission" in the home, then the home becomes a place where leadership and service are learned, which in future years will benefit society.

Service in the family community teaches a sense of responsibility and loyalty towards institutions, because such service gives rise to love and affection for those who serve.

Moreover, service in the community inculcates a genuine sense of social responsibility.

We can conclude this first part on human education by another quotation from Pope Paul John II, taken from the encyclical "Centesimus Annus": "The family has to be considered again as a place where life is held sacred. The family is sacred, it is the place where life, given by God, can be properly made welcome and protected against the numerous attacks to which it is exposed. It is the place where it can develop in conditions which are conducive to genuine human growth" (N 39).

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Christian education consists in helping baptised children become daily more aware of the gift of faith they have received, and grow gradually as sharers in the mystery of salvation and in the fulness of Christian life.

As Christians, children need to be trained in the following:

1. The faith, in order to become

Witnesses: the family must be a place where there is prayer to God the Father;

Preachers: the family assesses events in the light of faith;

Educators: in the family, the children give personal assent to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which becomes for them a "school of salvation".

It is in the home that the child discovers that "faith is what gives life strength". It is also where it learns other values like truth, conviction, self-esteem, openness and transcendence.

2. Liturgy, which is

the Prayer of the Church: It is in the home that the child must be taught to pray. As De St Pierre said: "If young people do not pray, it's because they haven't been taught to pray".

Parish Mass: it is in the parish that people meet as a Christian community, which encourages unity, relations based on Christian charity, and love that is built on the love experienced in the home. Love is the moving force behind all human events, and it must permeate all facets of social life.

This love which was born in the family and parish community brings with it other values such as fraternity, solidarity, respect, friendship, tolerance.

3. Vocation, which is:

"The permanent response to a permanent call from God". This is a response that begins in a home where there is real Christian education.

The family must:

Create an atmosphere conducive to vocations, an atmosphere of charity and respect.

Support the vocation by means of family prayer and the advice of the parents when a vocation is born.

Guide the vocation by assessing all the gifts the child has received from God and which suit it for a higher form of life; and by evaluating the skills it has and enabling it to put them at the service of others.

CONCLUSION

The Vatican II Council was right to call the family a "domestic Church".

If the Church has dogmas to be believed, the family too must have its own Credo.

If the Church has a moral code to be followed, the family too must have its moral principles.

If the Church has its own worship, the family too must know what to celebrate and how to celebrate its own special occasions.

Promoting human and Christian values among children is the way to build a new society based on love and peace.