

# Family, first for education

(A talk written for the Juventutem Chapter of the Chartres Pilgrimage in 2013)

## Foreword

My husband and I have been blessed by God with eight children (seven sons and one daughter) and we have been home-educating now for about fourteen years. Our eldest son will be 18 in June, and is just finishing A levels after going into school for the first time at 16. This has been our way of life for so long, I tend to forget that many Catholics still think of home-education as the preserve of a radical, extreme, and perhaps slightly weird assortment of Catholics on one or other fringe of the Church – be it of the charismatic or traditional hue. After all, we in the UK are blessed with an abundance of Catholic schools manned by professional, dedicated teachers – what would possess any normal, sane parent to opt out of that, taking the chance that their child might miss out on the opportunity for an excellent education (or at least a better education than that offered in many state schools)?

I'd like to explain in this talk why hundreds of Catholic parents like ourselves - quite sane, normal parents - have made just that decision, and why more and more are choosing to join them every year.

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## Rights and Duties of parents in educating their children

First, I'd like to throw some quotes out at you about the duty and responsibility of parents to educate their children. I know this doesn't sound very thrilling, but as Catholics we are concerned with following the mind of the Church, so finding out what She teaches about parenthood and education is the best place to start (well, that is, once you've got up off your knees from all those novenas you'll hopefully be saying when the time comes to make these decisions for yourselves). I also want to quote these because this is where our own journey began – in seeking a deeper understanding of our own role as understood by the Church. I won't comment on these quotes, I'll just let you listen to them and think about them:

- The code of canon law 1917:  
*'The primary end of marriage is the procreation **and the education** of children.'*
- Pius XI in Casti Connubii ('On Christian Marriage'),  
*'Both by the law of nature and of God, the right and duty of educating their offspring belongs in the first place to those who began the work of nature by giving them birth, and they are indeed **forbidden** to leave this work unfinished.'*
- Pius XI in Divini Illius Magistri ('The Christian Education of Youth')  
*"The family therefore holds directly from the Creator the mission and hence the right to educate the young, a right inalienable because inseparably joined to a strict obligation, a right anterior to any right whatever of civil society and of the State, and therefore inviolable on the part of any power on earth."*
- Vatican II's Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education):  
*"Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the **most serious obligation** to educate their*

*offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators. This role in education is so important that only with difficulty can it be supplied where it is lacking."*

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- John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation 'Familiaris Consortio':

*"The right and duty of parents to give education is essential. . . it is original and primary . . . it is irreplaceable and inalienable, and incapable of being entirely delegated or usurped by others. "*

- The Catechism of the Catholic Church:

*"The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. The right and duty of parents...are primordial and inalienable. "*

Phew. Sorry about all the quotes, but as you can see, the Church is quite unambiguous about both the duties and the rights of parents in educating their own children! When my husband and I read these documents they brought home to us the seriousness of the task we had undertaken simply by bringing a child into the world. It was quite daunting! Our reading also made us question the usual approach to education (and the one we ourselves had initially adopted), which consists in asking the question, *'Which school will my child go to?'* Suddenly, that question didn't seem an adequate response to fulfilling our duties in the eyes of the Church. At the very least, we knew that our assessment of what would make a school suitable would now be rather different from what it had been before. We were no longer going to be asking, in the first place, about Ofsted reports and SATS results – instead, we would be asking, *'To what extent can this school adequately take our place as the primary educators of our children?'* You won't be surprised to learn that when you start thinking like this, you start asking deeper questions about the education which you are so gravely obliged to provide and what it actually consists in. So, it was back to the encyclicals for us...

## **A Catholic education**

If you had asked me when my first child was about three years old what it meant to talk about 'Catholic education' I would probably have said that it wasn't much different from ordinary education except that it took place in a Catholic school where the Religious Instruction would be overtly Catholic and where there would be a Catholic ethos - with statues and crucifixes, regular school Masses and good relations with the local parish and clergy. I might also have said that a Catholic education could well be academically superior to that offered by the surrounding secular schools by virtue of the greater discipline and stronger community spirit of a 'faith school'. But it was around this time that I had started reading what the Church had to say about Catholic education and I found this (from good old Pope Pius again):

*"Education consists in preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do here below, in order to attain the sublime goal for which he was created....hence **there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to man's last end.**"*

That really put things in perspective. Like all parents, I knew that education had something to do with preparing my child for what he must 'do and be in the world', but like most parents I had mistakenly taken this for its true purpose, not recognising that education, like everything else in this life, was about getting my child to heaven. When you look at it like this, your idea of what makes a school 'Catholic' changes quite dramatically. To quote Pius again (sorry, but he is very good on this subject!):

*"To be this (i.e. a Catholic school), it is necessary that all the teaching and the whole organization of the school, and its teachers, syllabus and text-books in every branch, be regulated by the Christian spirit... so that Religion may be in very truth the foundation and crown of the youth's **entire** training".*

This isn't about RE lessons on a Friday afternoon – this is about the whole education being inspired with, informed by and founded on 'man's last end.'

## So, what about school?

Now, I am not suggesting here that there are no Catholic schools in our country which fulfil these criteria, nor that we are lacking in committed teachers who wouldn't jump at the chance of teaching in such a school should the opportunity arise, but I am convinced that the majority of Catholic schools here do not fit the Holy Father's description of what they should be. I think that, to take just one example, the tragic statistics on school leavers' Mass attendance bear testimony to this (the last figure I read - it was admittedly a few years ago - estimated that over 90% of pupils leaving Catholic schools in the UK no longer regularly attended Sunday Mass). Now, I don't want to dwell here on what's gone wrong in our Catholic schools as it isn't what I've been asked to write about; you can look at the evidence, reflect on your own experiences, and make your own minds up about it. But for ourselves, and for many other parents of our acquaintance, this knowledge presented us with a tricky situation. We knew that we had a serious duty to provide a Christian education for our children which was concerned above all with their salvation, but we felt that we could not rely on our schools to provide that education. We wondered what the Church had to say about this and found this in Canon law:

*"Parents are to entrust their children to those schools in which Catholic education is provided; but if they are unable to do this, they are bound to provide for their suitable Catholic education **outside the schools.**"*

That seemed pretty clear: the Church didn't say, 'OK, the Catholic school might no longer be providing an authentic Catholic education but that's all you've got so you can still fulfil your duty by sending your child there.' No, what it said was that in such a situation we were bound to provide this education 'outside the schools.'

I'll confess I began to feel a bit nervous at this point as I knew what all this reading was leading towards. And I know it doesn't reflect too well on me, but in all honesty my immediate reaction was '*Home-education looks like far too much hard work, I don't think it's for me.*' I also knew that my family and friends would think I had completely lost my mind and become some kind of religious nut, and of course I was not immune to that old fashioned human desire to want to go along with the crowd just for a quiet life...so, what did I do but go straight along to the local Catholic school for an application form. But when it came to it, I couldn't sign (believe me, I tried). I wrote endless lists of pros and cons, trying to convince myself that the school was fine and that home-education wasn't for me. It helped (or hindered) that my husband was, at this early stage, not at all convinced. He could see the arguments but was very sceptical about our ability (well, my ability) to teach our children. I was not a trained teacher, and I was already finding being at home with a three year old, a one year old and another baby on the way very tiring and challenging. At the back of both our minds (since we had met whilst studying for our degrees at Oxford), was the worry that we might really mess things up and that our children, without the advantages of the school system, might not reach the educational attainment of which they were capable. This sounds rather pompous now, but it was how we thought back then. Looking back now it's clear that despite everything we'd read, we were still primarily concerned with our children's material progress through life – like 99.9 % of the people around us, we saw our duty to educate as a duty to help them get on in life. The time had come to stop reading and to pray!

## Prayer and home-education

I want to digress a moment here from the chronology of this story to think about the role of prayer in home-education. I've lost count of the number of times I have told parents: home-education brings you to your knees. Not that we didn't pray before we began to home-educate - if you had known us back then you might have taken us for pretty good Catholic parents: we had been married in the Old Rite, never missed Sunday or Holy Day Mass, took an avid interest in the affairs of the Church, had statues and religious books liberally dotted about our home, taught our children the rudiments of their Faith, and prayed together regularly. But until we faced this challenge over what to do with our children's education, we were never really *forced* to our knees out of sheer necessity. We found ourselves confronted with two diametrically opposed options: we could ignore what we had read and do what everyone and his dog was urging us to - put our son into the lovely, oversubscribed local Catholic primary (we'd be mad not to!); or, follow our consciences, and risk the wrath and ridicule of friends and family by educating him ourselves. It felt like a test of faith. We were SO tempted to put him in school. School seemed so reasonable, so sensible, so ....*normal*, and home-ed seemed so over the top, so unfamiliar, so.... *risky*.

You've probably all been faced with some point in your life where you've felt God was calling you to do something that seemed to go against your natural instinct but which you just *knew* was right (Saint Joseph wanting to do the right thing and put away Mary always springs to mind when I think of this). The decision to home-educate was like that for us. And in those situations you can only do one thing: pray to discern God's will. So we got on our knees and made a novena. At the end of it, the application form remained un-posted, the deadline had passed, and we experienced that calm which always follows a period of conflict when you finally give up foolishly trying to run your life *your* way and just put it all in the hands of God who knows what's best for you. We took the leap of faith that is home-education, and when September came, and our friends' children trotted off to school, wide eyed in their crisp, over-sized new uniforms, I found myself sitting in our tiny London flat with a four year old, a two year old, a very demanding newborn baby and a grumpy neighbour who complained constantly about the noise, with the unstated challenge always hanging in the air, '*Why isn't that child in school?*'

God had shown me what He wanted me to do, and once I had accepted that it was His will, I was determined to do it, but He didn't seem to plan on making it easy for me. And this is really what I mean about home-education bringing you to your knees. It isn't easy. It is difficult, and challenging, and humbling, and it throws back in your face all your own faults and weaknesses and shortcomings on a daily basis. It does not allow you a moment's complacency. But as I'm sure you already know, struggle and humiliation produce a very fertile ground for a developing prayer life, and the graces which God showers upon you when you put everything into His hands more than compensate for the struggles you encounter on the way.

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## Home-education and the family

That was all 14 years ago and since then, there has been a lot of water under the home-educating bridge. I've tried to tell you briefly *why* we chose to home-educate; I don't have time here to tell you in any detail *how* we do it, nor to answer all those obvious questions that seem to crop up in every conversation about home-education. (Here are a few: What about socialisation? How can you teach if you are not a qualified teacher? How do you know what to teach? How can you possibly teach all those

different ages at the same time? What do you do when a new baby comes along? What about the teen years - surely you have to put them in school for GCSEs? What about A levels? How will they ever get into University?). I don't need to answer those questions here because you can find the answers simply by talking to one of the many Catholic families whose perfectly well-socialised children have survived their parents' unqualified attempts to teach them and, grades in hand, are now happily studying for degrees or working in whatever area they have chosen to work in (or, as often happens, are busy home-educating their *own* children!).

Here, instead, I would like to offer a more personal perspective as to what I think we as a family have gained from our home-educating journey. When I told my husband the topic for this talk, he immediately said, 'You must talk about the family – it's *all about* the family!'. And he is right. At the end of the day, home-education is not in the first place about the education of any individual child – though that is what where we set out from, and that is where our focus often too narrowly lies. In reality, the greatest blessing that home-education brings is that it unites and strengthens the family, and in our times, when the family is so much under threat, it is difficult to underestimate the importance of this. When family members live together, day in and day out under one roof, they cannot help but be closer to one another than if they were all to go their separate ways at the start of the day then meet to swap stories at the end of it. But family unity is much more profound than simply 'being stuck together' in the same physical building; it is a spiritual unity too. In home education (which is really just a more distilled version of ordinary Catholic family life), all the family members, from the parents and teens right down to the newest baby are part of one single enterprise, one single effort or movement: we are all trying to reach heaven, and we are all trying to help each other to do so. Education is – or should be – an integral, and integrated, part of that movement.

This unity might not be evident on a day to day basis (especially not when you see brothers giving each other a shove, mothers complaining about their workload, teens being typically hormonal and toddlers tantrumming) but it is always there, like an undercurrent, not often spoken of overtly but implicitly understood. I say that it is not spoken of overtly, but perhaps that is not strictly true, for when the family members gather each morning to offer their day to God, when they take their meals together with a common blessing and an Angelus prayer, and when they come together as the evening draws in to pray their much needed rosary, the common purpose of their lives becomes more explicit, even tangible.

And I think that this is exactly what the Church is talking about when she says that '*there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to man's last end.*' Catholic education goes beyond - it must go beyond - the school books, the subjects, the grades and the confines of the RE lesson. These are part of it to be sure, but they are almost the accidents. The substance is the very real and vigorous effort to make that all-important journey towards our last end – and to make that journey together. I can't help thinking that the best Catholic schools (as Maria Montessori once said), are those which most resemble an extended Catholic family. All education is about formation, and Catholic education is, at heart, about formation in our Catholic faith. So the question parents need to ask when they are making decisions about how to provide for their child's education has to be, 'Which form of education available to us will best form our child in his or her faith – which one will best help our child to gain heaven?' If you can honestly answer, 'the one offered in my local Catholic school', then that is a wonderful blessing for which you should thank God! But if in your heart, you cannot honestly give that answer, then perhaps God is calling you to create a faith-filled education for your child in your own home.

## Afterword: Teaching the Faith in the home

I've tried to talk here about Catholic education as a whole being directed towards the eternal salvation of our children and families, but I think the last word should be given to one specific aspect of that education – and the most important one: catechesis. And since at the start of this talk, I bombarded you with a lot of quotes about the duties of parents, it seems fitting to end with a couple of quotes about their rights and privileges.

In his Apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Trandendae*, Pope John Paul II describes how invasive secularism can make real religious growth impossible and observes that when this happens, the church of the home, or the 'domestic church' remains the one place where children and young people can receive an authentic catechesis. He adds, "*There cannot be too great an effort on the part of Christian parents to prepare for this ministry of being their own children's catechists and to carry it out with tireless zeal.*"

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* echoes these sentiments:

*"Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity and disinterested service are the rule. The home is well suited for education in the virtues."*

*"By the grace of the sacrament of marriage, parents receive the responsibility and the privilege of evangelizing their children. Parents should initiate their children at an early age into the mysteries of the faith of which they are the "first heralds" for their children. They should associate them from their tenderest years with the life of the Church. . ."*

And finally, *"Education in the faith by parents should begin in the child's earliest years... Family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith. Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and to discover their vocations as children of God."*

So, the Church tells us that parents are uniquely placed to teach their children the faith from their earliest years, and that this is both a responsibility and a privilege. You won't be surprised when I say that in my own experience, and that of many other families, home-education is perfectly placed to allow parents to exercise this privilege in the fullest possible way. Not only can you ensure that your child receives solid, sound catechesis in his RE lessons, but you can try to ensure to the best of your ability that the lessons learned there will not stay on the page but will be carried into the whole of his education, and into the whole of your family life. I could not begin to enumerate the number of occasions on which some opportunity to reinforce what has been taught in a catechism lesson has come along quite naturally in the course of the day. And I would not like to estimate how many such opportunities would be lost were we not living and working so closely together, living our ordinary daily lives, working, playing, eating, conversing, praying. In all honestly, I am quite convinced that home-education, far from being the preserve of radical, extreme or slightly weird fringe Catholics, is in reality the most natural, and most effective form of education in the faith that any parent could hope for. And that, I think, is simply because it is lived out in the heart of the family, right where God intended His children to live and learn to love Him.