

Home School Religious Education Orientation Manual

The Teaching Home and The Teaching Church

I. The Great Commission

When the Paschal Mystery had been accomplished, on the first Easter day, Jesus instructed his apostles: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations ... and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you" (Mt 28:19-20). The Apostles were not learned men; they were, most of them, fishermen. Neither were the Apostles particularly strong in faith. Even as Jesus commissioned them to teach and baptize the entire world, we are told, "they doubted." The Apostles accepted the Great Commission of Jesus, even though they were unworthy. With their vocation, they received what is called the grace of state (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2004); God would provide all that they needed.

Indeed he did, as the Church fulfilled her mission in astonishing and diverse ways. The Acts of the Apostles shows the many members of the emerging Church, both laity and clergy, actively engaged in the work of catechesis. Catechesis is "the name . . . given to the totality of the Church's efforts to make disciples, to help men believe that Jesus is the Son of God so that believing they might have life in his name, and to educate and instruct them in this life, thus building up the body of Christ" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 4). History shows that "periods of renewal in the Church are also intense moments of catechesis" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 8).

The work of catechesis continued in varied ways after the Apostles passed into glory. In the early centuries of the Church, many thousands of converts learned of salvation and were baptized through the Church's catechumenate. In the great era of the Church Fathers, bishops devoted an important part of their ministry to catechesis, writing treatises that remain models for us even today. In the middle ages, it was the Catholic Church that created the institution that came to be known as the university.

All of the Church's councils gave catechesis priority in their constitutions and decrees. In the last centuries, in this country, we saw the rise of the Catholic school system and CCD programs as well as a host of educational programs for adults, youth, and persons with disabilities.

As the American bishops wrote in their pastoral letter, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, catechesis "is a perennial task and joy for the Church of Jesus Christ . . . [Yet] rarely if ever has it been more pressing a need, more urgent a duty and more ennobling a vocation" (6).

Most recently, over the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of a new -- yet traditional -- way of teaching the faith to the young: through Catholic home education.

II. The Parent as Primary Educator

Catholic home education (or home schooling) is the very generous way some parents are responding to a particular charge from the Church. Throughout the 20th century, the popes, with increasing urgency, have called parents to be the "primary educators" of their children.

"Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children," says *the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2223). "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."

In his 1994 *Letter to Families*, Pope John Paul II wrote: "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" (16). And again: "The Church wishes to carry out her educational mission above all through families who are made capable of undertaking this task by the sacrament of matrimony, through the 'grace of state' which follows from it and the specific 'charism' proper to the entire family community. Certainly one area in which the family has an irreplaceable role is that of religious education" (16).

The Second Vatican Council, in its Declaration on Christian Education (5), also affirmed the "primary and inalienable right and duty" of parents to educate their children. In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the council fathers go on to say: "[B]y their very nature the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children ... Graced with the dignity and office of fatherhood and motherhood, parents will energetically acquit themselves of a duty which devolves primarily on them, namely education and especially religious education" (48).

This teaching of the Church corresponds to the promises a couple makes in the Rite of Marriage and also during the baptism of their children: to accept children from God and to raise those children in the Catholic faith. Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, has emphasized the sacred character of the parents' work in education: "For Christian parents the mission to educate ... has a new specific source in the sacrament of marriage, which consecrates them for the strictly Christian education of their children ... it enriches them with wisdom, counsel, fortitude, and all the other gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to help the children in their growth as human beings and as Christians" (38). Elsewhere in the same letter the Holy Father refers to the right and duty of parents to give education as "essential," "primary," "inalienable," and "incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others."

Catholic home educators have taken this teaching literally and taken it to heart. They have responded generously with their time, attention, and love, giving their days over to the personal care and tutoring of their children. Yet they do not labor alone. The community of faith finds order in the principle of subsidiarity, according to which "a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always

with a view to the common good" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1883). The principle of subsidiarity dictates that parents receive proper assistance from the Church in this, their task of education. "For parents by themselves are not capable of satisfying every requirement of the whole process of raising children, especially in matters concerning their schooling ... Subsidiarity thus complements paternal and maternal love and confirms its fundamental nature, inasmuch as 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*" (*Letter to Families* 16). The Church, at the diocesan and parish levels, should in no way hinder parents from exercising their option to homeschool. If the local Church can assist the family in any way, she should. This duty of the Church was expressed by the U.S. bishops in *To Teach as Jesus Did*: "While it was relatively easy in more stable times for parents to educate their children and transmit their values to them, the immense complexity of today's society makes this a truly awesome task. Without forgetting, then, that parents are the first to communicate the faith to their children and to educate them, the Church must make a generous effort today to help them to fulfill their duty." Thus the generosity shown by homeschooling parents should inspire in pastors and educators an equal impulse to generous service.

III. The Role of the Teaching Church

The Church calls herself *mater et magistra*, mother and teacher. A homeschooling parent, then, stands for the Church in a profound, unique, and vivid way. Such parents are their children's catechists, and insofar as these parents fulfill their role faithfully they are icons of the living Church. Taught rightly, their children will come to know the reality of the teaching Church in a profound way.

Here, too, the principle of subsidiarity is at work, and the hierarchical Church serves families even as she rules them. Pope John Paul II urged bishops to "let the concern to foster active and effective catechesis yield to no other care whatever in any way" (*Catechesi Tradendae* 63). He directed them to take on the "chief management of catechesis, while at the same time surrounding yourself with competent and trustworthy assistants." A bishop serves all catechists, whether in the school, the parish, or the home, by offering them clear Catholic doctrine and ensuring the soundness of their teaching.

In this service, pastors, according to Pope John Paul, are "the immediate assistants" of their bishops. The Holy Father instructs priests to "neglect nothing with a view to a well-organized and well-oriented catechetical effort" (*Catechesi Tradendae* 64).

Catechesis is the work of the whole Church, but the Church's members have different responsibilities (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae* 16). Parents are their children's primary educators, but not their only educators. The teaching Church is the guarantor of the soundness of Christian doctrine -- the revealed truth that comes from Jesus Christ -- whenever that doctrine is conveyed. Parents are obligated to fulfill their duties, as are priests and bishops, and *all must cooperate* in this single endeavor to educate in

Christ's name. There is no other authentically Catholic way to teach except in union with the pope and one's bishop. "Because of their charge, pastors have, at differing levels, the chief responsibility for fostering, guiding, and coordinating catechesis" (*Catechesi Tradendae* 16).

IV. Education and Communion

In *Catechesi Tradendae*, the pope teaches that "circumstances demand that catechesis should adopt widely differing methods for the attainment of its specific aim: education in the faith ... The variety in the methods used is a sign of life and a resource" (51). The rich diversity of Catholic homes naturally produces a variety of means of teaching doctrine. While respecting the diversity of methods, however, the Church has a serious obligation to ensure the authenticity of the Gospel message as it is taught.

The pastor, as father of the parish Church, should offer counsel as each family plans its catechesis. And a Catholic homeschooling family, which seeks communion with its local Church, should apprise its pastor of its catechetical plans. The official documents of the Church -- from Pius X's *Quam Singulari*, on children's reception of the first sacraments, to Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* (37-38) -- speak of the need for close cooperation between pastors and parents, especially in the work of catechesis.

In the spirit of this tradition, the pastor or his delegates should make available to homeschooling families the diocesan Church's general guidelines for catechesis. These guidelines are based largely upon the Church's *General Catechetical Directory*, the U.S. bishops' *National Catechetical Directory*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Parents, for their part, should consult the diocesan guidelines in preparing their lessons for the year. All of this sharing of information should be carried out in a spirit of mutual service. Both pastors and parents merit respect because of their charisms, and both deserve deference because of their graces of state.

The pastor has the responsibility to evaluate readiness for reception of a given sacrament (cf. *Quam Singulari*), and he should clearly state for all parish families how he will determine that readiness. When service projects or other works are required, the parents may be entrusted to oversee the works.

Here it must be acknowledged that not all homeschoolers who are Catholic are providing adequate catechesis. The home-education movement is broad-based, and as it grows it takes in more Catholic adults who are not attending Sunday Mass and who may not be well-schooled themselves in Catholic doctrine. The children of such parents may not be dispensed from parish religious education programs simply because they are homeschooling. The pastor and his delegates are called upon to use discretion and prudence, so that the devout are not slighted because of the lax, and the lax are not further encouraged in their laxity. Furthermore, while parents are the primary educators, their interpretation of doctrine can never supercede the legitimate teaching authority set over them in the Church.

V. Education as Blessing

Writing of catechesis in 1979, Pope John Paul II offered a description of the model teaching home: "Education in the faith by parents, which should begin from the children's tenderest age, is already being given when the members of a family help each other to grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words but which perseveres throughout a day-to-day life lived in accordance with the Gospel. This catechesis is more incisive when, in the course of family events (such as the reception of the sacraments, the celebration of great liturgical feasts, the birth of a child, a bereavement), care is taken to explain in the home the Christian or religious content of these events" (*Catechesi Tradendae* 68).

Catholic home education is a blessing to which some families have corresponded generously. No individual or family can remain faithful apart from communion with the Catholic Church. We find Jesus Christ sacramentally present today in the person of the priest who celebrates the sacraments, in the worshipping assembly, in the Word of God and in the most Blessed Sacrament- the Eucharist. We hear Christ the Teacher in the bishops who teach, sanctify, and guide our Church.

Homeschooling gives the Church a wonderful opportunity to consider the interdependence of the members of the Body of Christ. In humility, we acknowledge our need for each other, and God's goodness in providing for our need through the Church, His holy people. No educational program can succeed without the cooperation of families. Yet no family can succeed apart from communion with the Church. Communion is not an abstraction; it is not merely a contractual bond with a creed and a catechism. The work of education calls families and pastors to cooperate in authentic love and unity. If these are our intentions, God will provide all that we need.

(Adapted from the Diocese of Pittsburgh)

Parish Home School Religious Education Guidelines

These are the current Guidelines for use in St. Thomas of Villanova Parish concerning parents who choose to catechize their children at home with or without the benefit of the prescribed program for the Parish. We distinguish here between the Parish prescribed, and the self prescribed catechesis for home study.

It is the responsibility of the Diocesan Bishop to issue norms concerning catechetics and to make provision that suitable instruments for catechesis are available. (Canon 775 #1)

Pastors have the responsibility for sacramental preparation and all catechesis so that the faith of the faithful becomes living, explicit, and productive through formation in doctrine and the experience of Christian living. (Canons 843 #2; 773; 777)

In the light of the entire process for catechesis to include the four components of knowledge, community, service and worship, home schooling alone cannot replace catechesis or sacramental preparation in the church parish. (*General Catechetical Directory* #17; *National Catechetical Directory* #32; *Catechesi Tradendae* #202-26). The parish must continue to be the prime mover and preeminent place for catechesis. (CT #67)

Guidelines for Religious Education Home Schooling

When parents decide to be responsible for the total religious education of the child(ren), they will meet the following criteria:

1. Parents will register in the parish and declare their option for home schooling.
2. Certificates of Baptism must be submitted to the Director of Catechetical Formation upon request.
3. An in-depth interview should take place with the Director of Catechetical Formation and Parents, discerning the reasons for not including their children with others of the parish.
4. The Director of Catechetical Formation will approve the home program and text(s). The preferred text will be the one used in the parish religious education program, the parish elementary school program. Other texts and materials are to be approved by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.
5. The Director of Catechetical Formation will meet periodically with the home catechists and child(ren) to review the progress of the program.
6. The home catechists will follow the curriculum prescribed for all students of the parish Religious Education program, which is the approved curriculum of the Archdiocese, unless otherwise specified.
7. The parents and children enrolled in home schooling will participate in the Immediate Preparation Program in the parish (including all parent meetings and rehearsals). The readiness of the child(ren) for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation and Penance will be mutually determined by the home catechist and pastor or his designee. (Canons 843.2, 890)
8. Reception of the Sacraments of Initiation and Penance will take place in the family's parish of registration.
9. Unless otherwise indicated, the catechesis taught in the home is only for the children living in that home.