

## Parents as Primary Educators of Their Children - A gift to the Church.

Natural families are bound together not just by emotion but by blood. And in our case - the family we call the Church - is bound by the blood of Jesus Christ. We're all redeemed by His blood and therefore we're all in the Gospel vocation together: deacons, religious, laypeople, priests and bishops. We all have the task of bringing Jesus Christ to the world, and the world to Jesus Christ. So let's go out from this conference committed to acting like a family, in our homes, in our parishes, and also in our national community of faith.

Today, in the United States, only one in four families can be described as "traditional" — in other words, two parents, single income, with children living at home.

This kind of family, which is more or less the classic Christian model of a family, has *declined by nearly half* in less than 30 years. Meanwhile, the percentage of children living with single parents has *quadrupled* since 1972. Divorce is much more widely accepted. And unmarried couples with no children make up one-third of all American households — in fact, they are now the largest single category of U.S. households.

The results aren't surprising. Wounded families make a wounded culture. In fact, for more than a decade, research by Judith Wallerstein, Sara McLanahan, Barbara Defoe Whitehead and others has clearly shown that easy divorce and so-called "diverse" forms of family structure just don't work. Step-parent and single-parent families in the United States do *not* reinforce the social fabric. Rather, they unintentionally weaken it — and they have a long-term effect. Children from broken families find it harder to build permanent marriages themselves. They have a tougher time excelling at school; avoiding crime; finding intimacy in relationships; and holding steady employment. And the list of problems goes on.

None of this information is new. None of it is secret. The only remarkable thing is *how little positive effect it's had* on the unraveling of American family culture. The evidence hasn't changed anything. In other words: *We know better* . . . but too few people seem to care. And when people do care, they can't agree on what to do about it.

Meanwhile, the legal definition of marriage continues to be challenged — as with the homosexual "civil unions."

The lesson here is pretty simple. The day is gone when Catholics in the United States could count on the Christian instincts of our public culture.

We still think of ourselves as a more or less Christian people; more than 90 percent of Americans still pray and describe themselves as believing in God; and American church attendance is still very high by Western standards. But the *content* of our experience has changed a lot. We claim to be more “spiritual” . . . but less formally religious. God, as *The New York Times* reported in 1997, has become “decentralized” because the “new breed of worshiper [looks] beyond the religious institution for a do-it-yourself solution.”

What this means is that *communities* of faith — which have the solidarity and resources to turn their moral beliefs into public influence — are slowly being replaced by unconnected individuals who “want to reshape religion for themselves” and who experience God in a narrowly crafted, private way.

As a result, the power which traditional Christian belief always had in shaping American culture is fading. And with it goes the trust Americans once had that our civil environment would be at least neutral if not friendly — to our faith.

**How do we change that? How do we build a civilization of love?**

**The central mission of the Catholic Church is to help parents in fulfilling their role as the primary educators of their children, by providing the necessary means for the moral, spiritual, and intellectual formation of the children.**

When a husband and wife accept the responsibility of parenthood, they become partners with God in creation. Parenting includes not only the temporal well-being of a child, but most especially, it calls for the spiritual nurturing of the child. Parents must regard their children as *children of God* and respect them as *human persons*. Showing themselves obedient to the will of the Father in heaven, they educate their children to fulfill God’s law. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2222).

The very act of parenting, calls the parents to be the primary educators. This concept has been supported and advocated by the Church. “Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children.” *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).

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.

Parents are responsible for the education of their children and have the right to *choose a school* which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible, parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (2229)*.

God ordained the family to be the place where the life of Christ, *life in abundance*, takes root in the human heart and spreads outward to embrace the world. God ordained the family to be the image of His own love, the community of love within the Trinity . . . and to be the *school of love* which soul by soul, generation by generation, builds up the Church and advances her work of salvation.

The council said that pursuing the missionary vocation we all share requires us to live a "profound Christian life." For families, that means committing yourselves to the *particular vocation* of marriage and the family.

Now, the Church has plenty of resources to help you achieve that, but I've always heard that the quickest way to lose an audience is to tell them to read a document. So I won't. Instead, since I'm your guest, and you still have a generous spirit. . . I'm going to tell you to read *four* documents. Not today, but let's say within the next six months . . . and then maybe you can come to St. Anthony Claret Parish, and I'll give you a test.

I don't want you to just read them, by the way. I want you to think and pray over them.

So, four things to pray over — all of them very easy to read.

First, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.

In Latin, the title is *Gaudium et Spes*. It means "Joy and Hope," and it comes from the first line of the document: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish, of the men

of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish, of the followers of Christ as well.”

If you're looking for a manifesto for your life as a Catholic — this is it. *Gaudium ET Spes* isn't a “good” read . . . it's a *wonderful* read. But for our purposes, try to focus on Nos. 47-52, which deal especially with the dignity of marriage and the family. The council says that “the well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life” (47). When you look at so many of the problems in Western societies, the truth of this passage becomes pretty obvious, doesn't it?

Later the council says, “Marriage and married love are by nature ordered to the procreation and education of children. Indeed, children are the supreme gift of marriage and greatly contribute to the good of the parents themselves” (50).

The second document builds on the first. Read John Paul II's apostolic exhortation from 1981, *On the Family . . . Familiaris Consortio* is the Latin title. It describes *marriage* as the beginning and basis of human society. It describes *the family* as the first and vital cell of society. And it also shows why the family *cannot* be an enclave and *cannot avoid* an active role in humanizing and Christianizing civil culture.

The Pope writes, “It is from the family that citizens come to birth, and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself” (42).

In other words, the family is powerful. The family drives those issues which are most intimate to civil society. Therefore, any attempt to “redefine” family, or to disconnect the family from the social regulation of pornography, abortion, homosexual behavior and similar issues will *inevitably hurt* civil society.

The third document builds on the other two. In his 1994 *Letter to Families (Gratissimam Sane)*, John Paul II writes, “. . . how indispensable is the witness of all families who live their vocation day by day [and] how urgent it is for families to pray. . . (5). Why? Because “. . . the family is the center and the heart of the civilization of love . . .” and “. . . only if the truth about freedom and the communion of persons in marriage and the family can regain its splendor, will the building of the civilization of love truly begin . . .” (13).



Fourth and final document, *The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World. Christifideles Laici* in Latin. It sounds awkward, but I think this is one of the best written and most important Church documents of the century. It's a kind of constitution on the dignity, nature and need for lay leadership in the Church and especially in the world.

Listen to this from No. 40: "The lay faithful's duty to society primarily begins in marriage and the family. . . It is above all the lay faithful's duty to make the family aware of its identity as the primary social nucleus, and its basic role in society, so it might itself become always a more active and responsible place for proper growth and proper participation in social life. In such a way, the family can and must require from all, beginning with public authority, the respect for those rights which in saving the family, will save society itself."

What do we mean when we say that parents are the primary educators of their children? We mean everything.

1. We mean that parents begin to teach their children from the moment their children are conceived and born.
2. We mean that parents teach their children during the children's infancy and childhood.
3. We mean that parents are the first, and most important and indispensable teachers of their children.
4. We mean that unless the children are taught by the parents, the children will be getting only a substitute education.

All of this we mean when we say that parents are the primary educators.

But we mean much more.

After all, there is a primacy in what the children are taught. They can be taught how to walk and to talk. They can be taught how to read and write. They can be taught how to eat and drink and take care of their things. They can be taught arithmetic and spelling, and history and geography. All of those things they can be taught and should be taught.

But what they mainly need is to know why God made them; why they are on earth at all; why they are in this world; that they are here in this life in order to prepare and train themselves for the world to come.

In a word, children are to be taught that their short stay here in time is only a preparation for the world that will never end. They are to be trained for heaven.

Having said this, we are now in a position to get into the principal message I wish to share with you. It can be stated in a single all important statement: "Under God, parents are the first in time, first in authority, first in responsibility, first in ability, and first in dignity to educate their children for eternal life."

This brings us face to face with the *gravest* duty of believing Catholic parents. They must be convinced that their primary responsibility as parents is to prepare the children that God gave them for eternal life.

Yes, parents are the primary teachers of their children in all that pertains to the children's lives here on earth.

But that is not all. That is *not* primary!

What *is* primary and the parent's most fundamental duty is to prepare their children for eternity. Parents *must*, and the word is *MUST*, teach their children from birth on the following:

1. God created us to know, love, and serve Him in this life, in order that our souls may reach heaven.
2. Parents must teach their children that *everything* in this life is to be *only* a means of leading us to our heavenly destiny.
3. Parents must teach their children that, while everything in this life is intended by God to lead us to heaven, not everything is to be used in the same way.
4. Some of the persons, places, and things in our life are to be enjoyed.
5. Other person, places and things are to be endured.
6. Other persons, places, and things are to be avoided. Why? Because they can easily lead us to sin.



7. And finally, there are persons, places and things that God asks us to surrender. It is an invitation from God to sacrifice what we like in order to express our greater love of God.
8. Parents must teach their children that they have a fallen — I stress the term fallen — human nature. We are not naturally prone to do what God wants but what we want.
9. Parents must teach their children that if they are going to cope with their natural tendencies to pride, lust, anger, envy, greed, avarice, and gluttony they need the constant help of God's grace.
10. Parents must teach their children that to obtain the necessary light to know God's will and the necessary strength to do it, they need to pray and receive worthily the sacraments of the Church.

All of this is locked up in the simple statement: *Parents are parents for eternal life.* God gives them children *in* this world, but not for this world.

Parents, in God's plan, are to conceive and give birth to, and nurture and educate their children for life after bodily death.

After all, the only purpose that God has in having them become parents here on earth, is that they might raise families for everlasting life in heaven.

Parents must always keep this vision clearly in their minds. "*We are fathers and mothers of children for heaven.*" Our one hope is to be at rest in heaven with our families, our children and grand-children and great, great grand-children, in the everlasting City of Jerusalem which is our heavenly home.

Of course this will not be easy. Of course parents with this faith-vision will be criticized, even ostracized. Of course parents will have to give up many things that the modern world has provided in such profusion, for their own and their families' enjoyment here on earth. But the price is worth it. When Christ told us: "Take up your cross daily and follow me," He was speaking not only to individuals in general, but especially to parents.

To be the primary educators of their children for eternal life is not easy for parents. It never has been since the dawn of Christianity. But in today's world, intoxicated with its own pride, addicted to its own pleasures, indoctrinated in its own

propaganda that only temporal life exists and eternal life is a mirage — to become parents of eternal life demands *heroism*.

But let us not be afraid. Christ told us, "Have courage, I have overcome the world." So can we parents, provided we believe that the Son of Mary is the Son of the Eternal God; provided we trust that His promises to us will certainly be fulfilled; and provided we love God so much that no sacrifice is too great to bring our families with us, to that everlasting home for which we were made.

### **Prayer**

Jesus, Mary, Mother of the Holy Family, St. Joseph, obtain for all Catholic parents the grace to raise their children for a heavenly eternity.

Mary, teach us parents to do everything which your Divine Son tells us to do. If we do, we shall be united, not only as families. We shall join the Family of the Most Holy Trinity.

Make us parents courageous and firm and clear in understanding — that we are the primary teachers of our children — to prepare them for that final graduation on the first day of a heavenly eternity. Amen