

## Pure Biology? Effective Chastity Education

**ISSUE:** How can parents determine whether a particular “sex education” program will effectively teach their children the virtue of chastity?

**DISCUSSION:** One of the most challenging issues parents encounter today is teaching their children the true meaning of sexuality. How can parents evaluate whether a chastity program will help them form their children in virtue?

To determine whether such a program is faithfully and effectively assisting the parents, there are six useful questions, based on a wealth of Church teaching on the subject, that should be asked. These questions should be considered particularly in light of *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family* (TMHS), published in late 1995 by the Pontifical Council for the Family.

1. Does the program itself call for strong parental involvement? Does it respect the rights of both the parents and the child? (TMHS 113, 120, 145).
2. Is the program designed for use in a coeducational setting? Trying to teach chastity in such a setting violates the child’s privacy and modesty, and simply is counterproductive (TMHS 127).
3. Does the program respect the different phases of development? In particular, does the program violate the child’s years of innocence (i.e., “latency” or pre-puberty stage) by presenting explicit, biological information prematurely? (TMHS 64, 65, 75, 78, 83).
4. Does the program recognize that the primary obstacle to chastity is not ignorance but sin? Does the program seek to form saints or to inform sinners? (TMHS 122-23; Catechism, no. 407).
5. Does the program include graphic illustrations or have other aspects that offend modesty and chastity? (TMHS 126, 127, 133, 139, 143).
6. Are the Church’s moral teachings believed and communicated by the teacher? Are safeguards in place to ensure that the teacher does not dissent from Church teaching in sensitive marriage and family issues? (TMHS 116, 117, 120, 135, 145).

The implementation of sex education programs in Catholic schools throughout the country is a complex, divisive issue in the Church in our time. Since parents are the first and most important educators of their children, it is essential that they understand the teachings of Christ and His Church as they bear on this difficult issue.

### Whose Responsibility Is It?

It is clear from Vatican II that parents are primarily and principally responsible for the education of their children. In fact, in reaffirming this constant Church teaching, the Council provided that “[t]he role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute” (*Gravissimum Educationis* 3).

The parents’ primary role with respect to education in marital love in particular is repeatedly confirmed by papal and conciliar teachings. Note, for example, the following passage from Vatican II:

It is imperative to give suitable and timely instruction to young people, *above all in the heart of their own families*, about the dignity of married love, its role and its exercise; in this way they will be able to engage in honorable courtship and enter upon [a] marriage of their own (*Gaudium et Spes* [GS] 49, emphasis added).

Conversely, the Church recognizes that parents may call upon the Church, and especially the Catholic school, to assist in the work of sex education. However, this assistance may not in any way usurp the primary role of the parents:

Sex education, which is a basic right and duty of parents, must always be carried out under their attentive guidance, whether at home or in educational centers chosen and controlled by them. In this regard, the Church reaffirms the law of subsidiarity, which the school is bound to observe when it cooperates in sex education, by entering into the same spirit that animates the parents (*Familiaris Consortio* [FC] 37).<sup>1</sup>

In *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, the Pontifical Council for the Family affirms the primary and fundamental role of parents in chastity education. “Other educators can assist in this task, but they can only take the place of parents for serious reasons of physical or moral incapacity” (TMHS 23). As Pope Pius XI wrote earlier this century:

In this extremely delicate matter, if, all things considered, some private instruction is found necessary and opportune, from those who hold from God the mission to teach and who are [in] the grace of state, every precaution must be taken. Such precautions are well known in traditional Christian education....<sup>2</sup>

*The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* is full of references affirming parents as the primary educators of their children, particularly on matters such as chastity formation (note especially nos. 23, 41, 47, 145, 146, 148; cf. Catechism, nos. 2221-31).

The role of the Catholic school is subordinate, then, to that of the parents, and subject to the parents’ attentive guidance and control. Parents should be empowered to fulfill their duties, and not pressured to delegate them.

Everyone must observe the right order of cooperation and collaboration between parents and those who can help them in their task. It is clear that the assistance of others must be given first and foremost to parents rather than to their children (TMHS 145).

On the one hand, Catholic educators are too frequently faced with children whose parents have wrongly abdicated personal responsibility for their children’s education. On the other hand, Catholic parents who take seriously their duties feel as though their “basic right” to educate their children is trampled upon by the way many sex education programs are implemented. This latter difficulty is admittedly worsened by differences over the appropriateness of the program’s subject matter and teaching methods. However, regardless of the merits of a particular program, the parents’ primary role must be accepted by parents and respected and fostered by educators. This perspective assuredly points to a proactive, parent-based approach. Parents may need assistance, but not replacement.

Concretely, “the rights of parents are violated if their children are compelled to attend classes which are not in agreement with the religious beliefs of the parents...” (*Dignitatis Humanae* 5). A program that is faithful to Church teaching will provide parents the liberty to decide—without coercion or negative repercussions—whether their children will participate (TMHS 117, 120). As Cardinal Gagnon, then President of the Pontifical Council for the Family, commented in 1990:

It may well be that a particular bishop or even a conference of bishops judges that a sex education course be offered in the Catholic school.... However,... no ecclesiastical or civil authority may legitimately mandate that every pupil in the school take such a course, even though this course may seem to them to be completely beneficial to the children.... [If it] is not in agreement with the moral and religious convictions of certain parents, it is the right of these parents, and the obligation of the Catholic school to respect this right, to have their children excused from the sex education class.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Human Condition**

As a result of original sin, we as a human family have lost our friendship with God and thereby are in need of salvation, which is offered to all through Jesus Christ. Through Baptism, our children have indeed become “new creations” (2 Cor. 5:17). However, a key truth of faith that is readily confirmed by our experience is that even the baptized retain an inclination to sin called *concupiscence*, which at root refers to the weakened, frail state of our human nature. This weakness and division we find in ourselves is described by Saint Paul in Romans 7:14-25 (cf. GS 10, 13).

At the same time, we recognize and affirm the excellence of human freedom. Since our nature is wounded but not destroyed, freedom is still a characteristic of an authentically human act (Catechism, no. 1745). We are able to choose that which is truly good.

An understanding of our redeemed, yet wounded, nature is the necessary starting point for communicating sexual morality in our Catholic schools (cf. TMHS 122-23). Although Catholic educators may frequently draw upon the insights of non-Catholic and even secular educators, we must turn to Christ and His Church for the fullness of truth when it comes to the human person and the human condition.

In particular, two worldviews foreign to Catholic teaching continue to surface in many sex education circles. (For a broader discussion representative of these two philosophies, see *Veritatis Splendor* [VS] 32-33.)

One view (the “it’s only natural” school) posits the goal of sex education as “helping young people to become comfortable with their sexuality.” This approach necessarily fails because it presents sex in a narrow and incomplete way by focusing only on the natural or biological aspects, while ignoring the supernatural dimension as designed by God.

Another view, more prevalent in public education, is that promiscuity cannot be avoided, so we need to “cut our losses” by making sure nonmarital sex is at least “safe” and infertile. Contraception (and, as a “backup,” abortion) is the answer.

These false worldviews undermine the virtues of self-control and generosity that are necessary to lead a chaste life. They also fail to recognize that the only realistic and practical solution to unwanted pregnancy and disease is chastity. We must dispel the “safe-sex” myth.

A successful chastity program must find the balance between recognizing the universal tendency to become unchaste and affirming a teen’s ability, with God’s grace, to choose to be chaste. The young person must not only learn to fight temptation, but also to nurture a life of prayer that will allow him or her to receive the grace of purity (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19-20).

### **The Goal: Education in Chastity**

From the preceding discussion of the effects of original sin, it should be clear that the principal requirement for chastity is divine grace, not mere information. Any presentation on the moral formation of youth must have a pervading emphasis on prayer, and especially the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. If we want to be faithful to God and resist temptations, we must grow in self-knowledge and discipline, remain obedient to God’s commandments, develop the moral virtues, and persevere in prayer (Catechism, no. 2340).

Chastity is a gift of grace, the fruit of spiritual effort. As Catholics we must teach our youth that they need to be wise and humble concerning their sexuality, and to take advantage of all available spiritual helps, including a vibrant devotion to Mary, Virgin Most Chaste (cf. Catechism, no. 971). The goal of chastity education is to enable the child to embrace his or her vocation in life lovingly and generously, and thereby grow in holiness.

In the Rite of Marriage, the couple is asked: “Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and His Church?” The second half of this question simply means that parents must commit themselves to help their children claim their heavenly inheritance. What is needed, then, is not a separate-track sex education course, but rather a strengthening of the religion course that will cover in a thoroughly Catholic way, and in a manner always appropriate to the age of the child, the Sixth and Ninth Commandments. Such an approach would indeed be education in chastity, providing the strongest doctrinal context while avoiding presentations that lose sight of this important goal (cf. Catechism, nos. 2337-56, 2514-33).

Aside from the merits of a particular sex education program, it seems odd to many parents that their children, with amazing technical accuracy, can identify male and female body parts and diverse modes of contraception, yet know precious little of Jesus Christ and especially His moral teachings.

Here, of course, we must again acknowledge the parents’ primary responsibility for the child’s religious and moral formation, and widespread deficiencies of such formation at home are at the root of the current problems with “sex education.” *Calling parents to their proper duty must be a primary concern of Catholic educators. Strong families are the most effective means of fostering a living faith in the next generation. Such a faith will lead not only to chastity, but to the goal of chastity education: holiness.*

## Graphic Illustrations

There is a formidable, unbroken line of Church documents promulgated this century that rejects an overly biological approach to sex education. This approach turns the program, in the crudest sense, into a “how-to” course. At the risk of sounding old-fashioned, should it not be a “how to wait until marriage” course?

Illustrative of this magisterial concern are the following two quotes from Pope John Paul II:

Purely “biological” knowledge of the functions of the body as an organism, connected with the masculinity and femininity of the human person, is capable of helping to discover the true nuptial meaning of the body, only if it is accompanied by an adequate spiritual maturity of the human person. Otherwise, such knowledge can have quite the opposite effect; and this is confirmed by many experiences of our time.<sup>4</sup>

[T]he Church is firmly opposed to an often widespread form of imparting sex information dissociated from moral principles. This would merely be an introduction to the experience of pleasure and a stimulus leading to the loss of serenity—while still in the years of innocence—by opening the way to vice (*Familiaris Consortio* [FC] 37).

As TMHS points out, not only should no material of an erotic nature be presented, but also “no one should ever be invited, let alone obliged, to act in any way that could objectively offend against modesty or which could... offend against his or her own delicacy or sense of privacy” (TMHS 127; cf. 133).

There are several additional concerns raised by parents throughout the country. Some courses do not account for the fact that children progress at different rates. A coeducational setting, as is increasingly the norm for our Catholic schools, is an inappropriate setting for the type of information that is being communicated. There is the further concern that many sex education programs violate the child’s “latency” (i.e., prepuberty) period by presenting explicit, biological information prematurely.

These considerations—which are not meant to be exhaustive—should motivate us to reexamine the objectives of a sex education program to the extent it ventures beyond moral formation into biological and physiological issues. In this regard, the document *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1983, is particularly noteworthy:

Some school textbooks on sexuality, by reason of their naturalist character, are harmful to the child and the adolescent. Graphic and audio-visual materials are more harmful when they crudely present sexual realities for which the child is not prepared, and thus create traumatic impressions or raise an unhealthy curiosity which leads to evil. Let teachers think seriously of the grave harm that an irresponsible attitude in such delicate matters can cause in pupils (no. 76).

Many Catholic school teachers are sincere in their desire to promote chastity, but these programs inevitably have the opposite effect. This is because using such a program is like trying to put out a fire with a bucket of gasoline. From a merely practical standpoint, it is legitimate to ask why, during the past quarter century, the more graphic programs have been associated with increases in premarital sex, divorce, sexually transmitted disease, contraceptive use, abortion, etc., instead of diminishing these problems.

## Sex Is Sacred

There is a false presumption held by some and perpetuated by others that classical Catholic teaching holds that sex is bad or evil. In contrast, there is a modern view that regards sex as good and healthy. In reality, Catholic teaching has always considered sex as not merely good but *sacred*, which is why it is reserved for a committed marital covenant (Catechism, nos. 2360-63) that images the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32). Just as it would be a sacrilege to take the Eucharist outside and eat it with a Coke, so too taking sex outside of marriage is sacrilegious and results in gravely sinful activity (Catechism, nos. 2380-2400; cf. VS 79 *et seq.*).

## Teaching the Teacher

Parents, in sending their children to Catholic schools, have the right to insist that the teachers, particularly those involved in moral formation, are “outstanding for their correct doctrine and integrity of life” (canon 803 §2; cf. GE 8). Unfortunately, that has not been the recent experience of many faithful, concerned parents. Conversely, many

faithful religious educators have not had the support of parents who are likewise committed to sound Catholic doctrine.

Surveys report that at least fifty percent of American Catholics reject some aspect of the Church's teaching on sexual morality. Even assuming the average Catholic school teacher is twice as likely to be faithful, that still leaves one fourth of all Catholic school teachers with a serious problem when it comes to education in chastity. Why would a youth, driven by so many different voices and impulses, look to the Church as the one sure guide to faith and morals when the teacher is not convinced of that fact?

This brings us back to the central role of the parents. Even the best of programs are limited. The most critical element of a child's spiritual formation, including chastity education, takes place at home, in the "domestic Church." This is the place where the child not only receives instruction, but experiences firsthand how Christian love manifests itself in the family. Therefore, the primary focus must be on the formation and education of parents. That way, parents are placed in a positive, active role in their children's education, and are not marginalized or left with the role of "critic" or "censor" of a school program. This empowerment of parents is not only best for their children, but also will frequently lead to a deepening of their own chaste commitment to Jesus Christ and His Church.

### **Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion**

1. Why is the issue of "sex education" or "chastity education" in schools such an important issue today? Why does the issue seem to cause such sharp differences of opinion? What can I do to foster greater understanding of the Church's teachings concerning chastity education?
2. (For parents) How do I, through word and example, foster the virtue of chastity in my children? What are my family's rules on dating or courtship? On entertainment choices? On modesty?
3. There are, unfortunately, "chastity" programs used in some Catholic schools that do not seem to meet the criteria set forth by the Church in TMHS. Appendix II provides a protocol for effectively addressing such issues. As a parent, what options do I have when my children are required to attend such programs? How can I seek redress without allowing my frustrations to make the situation worse?

<sup>1</sup> See also Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, Vatican translation (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1994), no. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter On the Christian Education of Youth *Divini Illius Magistri* (1930), no. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Private correspondence dated February 12, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> General Audience (April 28, 1981).

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