

Separation of Church and Home?

The Right to Prepare Children for the Sacraments

ISSUE: Who has the right to prepare a child for the sacraments of Confession, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist? Who should make the final determination as to whether the child is ready to receive?

RESPONSE: Both pastors of souls and parents have obligations and rights in the preparation of children for the sacraments. If they fulfill their obligations according to the intentions of the Church, their roles complement each other.

DISCUSSION: The preparation of children for the sacraments of Confession, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist is an act of catechesis. The preparation should not merely give information, but rather form the child so he will desire the sacraments and receive them with proper reverence and devotion. The preparation for these sacraments will become the foundation of the child's spiritual life and life in the Church. Because the salvation of souls and the good of the Church is at stake, both parents and pastors have invested interest in the preparation of children for the sacraments. Each has distinct roles that complement the actions of the other. To better understand this issue, we must understand the obligations, rights, and roles of parents and pastors, and the authority invested in each by God Himself.

The Obligation to Educate

The obligation of parents to educate their children is well-protected by the Church. In Vatican II's *Declaration on Christian Education* [*Gravissimum Educationis* (GE)], this obligation of natural law is both protected and explained:

As it is the parents who have given life to their children, on them lies the gravest obligation of educating their family. They must therefore be recognized as being primarily and principally responsible for their education. The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute (GE 3, footnote omitted).¹

In his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (FC), Pope John Paul II further explains:

The right and duty of parents to give education is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is *original and primary* with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and it is *irreplaceable and inalienable*, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others (FC 36).²

The Church has continually re-affirmed this obligation in various documents since Vatican II, including in the *Charter of the Rights of the Family* (Article 5) and the *Code of Canon Law*. However, parents are not the only ones responsible for the education of their children. While they have a primary duty, they do not have a *sole* duty.

By divine, positive law, the Church herself has the innate obligation to educate and, more specifically, to provide catechesis. Our Lord gave the apostles the explicit command, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mat. 28:19-20; c.f.: Mk. 16:15). As explained in *Gravissimum Educationis*:

Education is, in a very special way, the concern of the Church, not only because the Church must be recognized as a human society capable of imparting education, but especially it has the duty of proclaiming the way of salvation to all men, of revealing the life of Christ to those who believe, and of assisting them with unremitting care so that they may be able to attain to the fullness of that life (GE 3, footnote omitted).

Unfortunately, situations arise within the Church that put parents and pastors at odds with each other. These situations are unfortunate because they seem to put natural and divine law obligations at odds. God is the author of both the natural obligation of parents and the divine obligation of the Church. Because He cannot contradict Himself, these obligations are not opposed but rather compliment each other.

Proper Roles in Catechesis

The obligation of the Church in catechesis is rooted in her divine mission to restore all things in Christ (c.f.: Eph. 1:4-5, 10; *Lumen Gentium* 2, 3, 20). This restoration does not usurp the natural order, but rather exposes the will of God intended from the beginning and provides the grace to live accordingly. Thus, the obligation of the Church in catechesis does not usurp the parents obligation to educate and form their children in the faith, but rather it complements their role by assisting them with the necessary guidance and means to promote the sanctity of children. In short, the obligation and role of parents are rooted in the fact that they are parents, while those of the Church are rooted in her divine mission to teach and sanctify.

Possessing the authority of Christ Himself, bishops have an obligation to ensure that proper catechesis is available for all. As noted in canon 773 of the *Code of Canon Law*:

There is a proper and serious duty, especially on the part of pastors of souls, to provide for the catechesis of the Christian people so that the faith of the faithful becomes living, explicit and productive through formation in doctrine and the experience of Christian living.³

As noted in later canons, the Church does not expect pastors of souls to carry out this duty apart from the role of parents. Canons 774 and 776 provide clear explanation:

Canon 774§1: Under the supervision of legitimate ecclesiastical authority this concern for catechesis pertains to all the members of the Church in proportion to each one's role.

§2: Parents above others are obliged to form their children in the faith and practice of the Christian life by word and example; godparents and those who take the place of parents are bound by an equivalent obligation.

Canon 776: In virtue of his office the pastor is bound to provide for the catechetical formation of adults, young people and children, to which end he is to employ the services of the clerics attached to the parish, members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life, with due regard for the character of each institute, and lay members of the Christian faithful, above all catechists; all of these are not to refuse to furnish their services willingly unless they are legitimately impeded. The pastor is to promote and foster the role of parents in the family catechesis mentioned in can. 774§2.

Regarding the particular concern of preparation for the sacraments, the law provides:

Canon 777: In accord with the norms established by the diocesan bishop, the pastor is to make particular provision:

- 1° that suitable catechesis is given for the celebration of the sacraments;
- 2° that children are properly prepared for the first reception of the sacraments of penance and Most Holy Eucharist and the sacrament of confirmation by means of a catechetical formation given over an appropriate period of time;
- 3° that children are more fruitfully and deeply instructed through catechetical formation after the reception of First Communion.

This canon does not demand that the pastor provide the preparation himself, but only that he makes certain that proper preparation and continued formation is given the child. This is consistent with canons 890 and 914, which address preparation for the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Eucharist respectively.

In canon 890, the Church notes that “parents and shepherds of souls, especially pastors, are to see to it that the faithful are properly instructed to receive [Confirmation] and approach the sacrament at the appropriate time.” This

canon does not say what each must do, but clearly notes the responsibility of both parents and pastors to be involved. However, canon 914 provides a more clear distinction between the role of the parents and the role of the pastor.

Canon 914: It is the responsibility, in the first place, of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as of the pastor to see that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the divine food as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession; it is also for the pastor to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet who have not reached the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed.

When understood in the context of the other canons noted, the roles of parents and pastors of souls are not in conflict, but in harmony. Because they are parents, their obligation to educate is primary and inalienable. This obligation includes the right to choose whether to delegate certain responsibilities of education to others or not. If they choose not to delegate their responsibilities, their choice must be respected.

However, because he is the Vicar of Christ in the diocese, the bishop has an obligation to make sure proper catechesis is given both in the home and within religious education programs. Without usurping the parents' rights, the bishop has an obligation to provide suitable catechisms, proper training for catechists, and ensure that materials and methods used do not offend against faith and morals (c.f.: canons 775, 780, 827). Importantly, he should recognize the parents' primacy and respect their right to prepare children at home. To assist them in their endeavors, he should make available to them the necessary materials for proper catechesis. Most importantly, the duty of testing the child to determine his readiness to receive the sacraments belongs to the pastor or his delegate, not to the parents.

Unity of Church and Home

In virtually every citation in which the Church affirms the obligation and rights of parents to educate and catechize their children, she also affirms the obligation of the Church to do the same. This can not be seen as conflicting, but rather as complimentary roles. The teaching of the Church on this matter and the discipline established in law demand that parents always provide proper catechesis for their children. Even if the child is enrolled in a Catholic school or religious education program, the parents must remain the primary educators responsible for the catechesis of their children. Furthermore, pastors of souls must fulfill their obligations by encouraging and supporting the parents' natural role. They do this by providing necessary guidance, suitable materials, and properly testing the child before he receives sacraments for the first time. Further, if the parents choose to delegate their responsibility to other educators, the pastor must see to it that those who provide catechesis are themselves properly formed and using suitable materials and methods. Above all, parents and pastors must respect each others' roles and foster mutual collaboration in the formation of children. In this way, the future of the Church is secured and the obligations insisted upon by Christ are fulfilled.

If a conflict occurs between your role as a parent and the role of the pastor in this matter, there are several things you can do to address your concerns. First, pray. Offer the sufferings for the sanctification of your family. Second, study the matter. Carefully consider the actions and statements of your pastor or bishop as well as your own desires in light of Church teaching. It may be helpful to contact a third party to gain helpful insights and information. If you contact Information Services [(800) 693-2484], we will gladly help by providing information or making referral to someone with the proper expertise to help. Our Lay Witness Protocol has helped many people find proper resolution during conflicts with Church authorities. Finally, when you approach your pastor or bishop to address the matter, do so in charity according to the example of the saints. The example you provide will itself help form your children.

¹ Translation of Vatican II cites taken from: Austin Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (North Port, New York, Costello Publishing Co.) 1986.

² Vatican translation published by St. Paul Books and Media, Boston, 1981.

³ Translation of canons taken from: *Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC, Canon Law Society of America) 1983.

Summary of Obligations and Rights

Parents

- 1: Natural obligation to educate and form their children in the faith.
- 2: Right to provide catechesis and prepare their children for the sacraments.
- 3: Right to delegate the task of catechesis without loss of the primary obligation noted in no. 1.

Pastors of Souls

- 1: Innate obligation to provide catechesis.
- 2: Must assist parents by providing guidance, suitable materials for their use, and testing the child for readiness to receive the sacraments.
- 3: Obligation to provide suitable catechists to provide necessary instruction when parents fail in their task or delegate responsibilities.

RECOMMENDED READING

Holy Bible

The Documents of Vatican II

Catechism of the Catholic Church (Paperback and hardback available)

Code of Canon Law

Pope John Paul II, "The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (*Familiaris Consortio*)"

Pope John Paul II, "On Catechesis In Our Time (*Catechesi Tradendae*)"

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