

Can Home-schooling work?

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We often hear home-schooling ridiculed, as if it ought to take second place to a school education. We often see home-schooled children who are well behaved, but academically challenged, in one or in several areas. Not infrequently we see home-schooled children who have social and behavioral problems. Are these necessary consequences of home-schooling? Is it a second rate arrangement that really cannot work in practice, and that ought not to be attempted?

The role of the family in the education of children cannot and must not be underestimated. The answers to all these questions are to be found in the Church's Magisterium, which teaches us not only the principles, but also the moral and practical conclusions that follow from them. As Pope Pius XI points out in his encyclical *On the Christian Education of Youth*: "The first and necessary element in this environment, as regards education, is the family, and this precisely because so ordained by the Creator Himself. Accordingly that education, as a rule, will be more effective and lasting which is received in a well-ordered and well-disciplined Christian family; and more efficacious in proportion to the clear and constant good example set, first by the parents, and then by the other members of the household" (Dec. 31, 1929).

Not only possible but necessary

This is a fundamental statement, for it indicates that home schooling is not only possible, but that it is even necessary, and this in the plan of God the Creator Himself. There can be no education of children that does not have its foundation in the home. Home schooling is consequently of divine institution, of the natural law,

nor can there be any substitute for it, and especially not the state, nor the state run school. For in the same encyclical Pope Pius XI goes on to deplore the immorality of the totalitarian, communistic regime in Russia, that, breaking the natural law, steals children from their parents to pervert them with atheism, godlessness, and hatred.

Can we accept that the family, in theory necessary for education, is in practice unable to give this education, so that the school or the Church or the state must in some way take its place? To create such a dichotomy, to make such an opposition between the thesis (schooling at home) and the hypothesis (practically speaking, it is not possible) would be in fact to fall into a form of evolutionary Hegelianism, according to which schooling at home, formerly possible, would be now outmoded and outdated. The Church's teaching is the direct opposite. Homeschooling is consequently not only possible, but also the condition for an education that is effective and lasting. It is this environment that determines more than anything else the character, convictions, principles and morality of a man, and if it be not for good, then it will certainly be for bad, following the natural inclination of fallen human nature.

But what about the observation that home schooled children not infrequently fail in achieving satisfactory academic levels, in manifesting respect for authority and in developing good social and communications skills, and sometimes even fall into rebellion against the Church, religion and their parents along with the moral disorders that follow as a consequence? Is this a consequence of home schooling?

Not in the slightest! The Pope himself gives the answer, when he points out the conditions for successful home-schooling, conditions that are very infrequently not fulfilled. The first requirement is that the family be “well ordered” and “well disciplined”. This is a requirement of the natural order, necessary because grace builds upon nature, and the supernatural education in the Faith, catechism, sacrifice and the love of God consequently builds upon the practice of natural virtue and presupposes it.

Discipline

If Aristotle was correct when he gave this goal for education, “The true aim of education is the attainment of happiness, through perfect virtue”, then clearly without natural virtue there is no happiness nor any education. This means temperance, sacrificing one’s personal whims, putting the common good of the family above one’s personal preferences. It means working hard, living an ordered life, with a schedule for rising, going to bed, chores, study, and family activities, with everything in its place. It means the discipline of a child’s disordered inclinations be regular and firm discipline, whether it concern eating, speaking out of turn, playing games, performing chores, studying in a systematic way, or any other aspect of life that requires a temporary sacrifice of self-will. I call this discipline natural virtue, for it is done for a natural motive, namely to prepare a child to succeed in his life, to bring about harmony in the home, to draw the best out of a child’s potential. In itself such natural virtue is not necessarily directed by charity, nor motivated by the eternal salvation of the soul. Yet without it there can be no truly Christian education, and the practice of supernatural virtue becomes practically impossible, whether it be the dependence on the Church of the Catholic Faith, or the supernatural obedience to parents and superiors for the love of God, or the offering of sacrifices, especially hard work and study, for the greater glory of God.

Many of today’s parents, not having received the natural order and discipline in their own home life that was one taken for granted, are not able to pass it on to their children. Hence, despite the best of intentions, their home-schooling is very defective. The children fall behind, do not learn the spirit of self-sacrifice, nor that of obedience. The subsequent lack of interior self-

discipline can make them regret and complain about their home-schooling and the opportunities that they may have missed out upon, including the possibility of obtaining a higher paid and more professional job.

It is consequently imperative for home-schooling parents to instill order in the family, as well as self-discipline themselves. There must be a fixed schedule, with a time to rise, a time for prayers and breakfast, a time to start classes. None of this should be subject to improvisation or the changes of a whim, a caprice, a trip, shopping. Moreover, the inevitable interruptions of family life - sick babies and the like - must also be controlled, so that they do not break down the order and discipline of school age children. This means that the parents must set in motion a manner of handling unforeseen circumstanc-



es that they not become emergencies and crises, disturbing the order of family life. The larger the family the more difficult this becomes, and the more necessary it is to have the cooperation and help of older brothers and sisters, grandparents, friends and others to ensure this regularity. The willingness to accept help is in general a sign not only of humility but also of the value of regularity and discipline.

The family and the Church

The second requirement for home-schooling to be effective and long-lasting is that it be "Christian". By this the Pope does not simply mean that the family members be baptized, but that their life together as a family be penetrated by the Catholic Faith, that it be directed towards eternal salvation. This concerns the practice of supernatural virtue, which is the ultimate goal of all the order and discipline that parents will strive to implement in the family. Here the assistance of the Church is essential, not can it be considered an optional extra, for it has the God-given right to educate in the supernatural domain, as the family does in the natural order. It is very much upon the harmony of the relationship between the family and the Church, through its priests and religious, that the success of Catholic home-schooling depends. Pope Pius XI continues: "The Church therefore is the educational environment most intimately and harmoniously associated with the Christian family...So admirable too is the harmony which she maintains with the Christian family, that the Church and the family may be said to constitute together one and the same temple of Christian education" (ibid.). Consequently, the Church cannot possibly be opposed to home schooling. Its role is to complete, in the supernatural order, by the innumerable resources at its disposal, the work of the parents.

Just as the Church cannot be an effective educator of children without the support of their parents, so likewise parents must acknowledge that they need the Church's help, that all the circumstances in a child's life might work together to create a real and supernatural world view, form true morality, and promote submission to the truth. Parents who belittle the role of the Church, who think that they can teach religion by themselves, who refuse to ask the religious, the priests, or the Church to teach their children

catechism, miss out on a great asset. The limitation of the teaching of religion to the parents alone has not infrequently provoked a narrow-minded view of religion, and sometimes even rebellion against what is seen to be simply a parental choice. It is consequently within the parents' best interests to appreciate the educational environment of the Church, in which there is an "inexhaustible fecundity of educational works ... how marvelous, how incomparable is the Church's maternal providence!" (ibid.)

Good example

The final requirement for efficacious home-schooling is "clear and constant good example". We all learn primarily by example, and this in the supernatural domain, as well as in the natural order. It is for this reason that it is the crucifixion of Our Divine Savior Himself that is the perfect lesson for our own self-sacrifice. Since children depend primarily on their parents, it is from them first of all that they have a right to expect the good example, of natural discipline, of mutual self-sacrifice and love one for another, of true devotion in performing their religious duties, or harmony in the home. It is the failure of one or both parents that is the cause of the frequent failure of home-schooling. To a lesser extent the bad example of others, such as older siblings, grandparents and other relatives and friend, can undermine the value of true education. It is of the utmost importance that home schooling families take great care that their children are surrounded by consistent and harmonious good example for their earliest years, that by such example true virtue be learned, imitated and imprinted into their souls.

Home-schooling can and certainly does work, but like anything else, depending on being done correctly, with the necessary natural and supernatural resources, and in particular order and discipline in the home, cooperation with the Church and its priests, and a consistent good example. God will certainly bless those families who leave no stone unturned to ensure that these three conditions are met, who seek out traditional priests, in whom they can have trust and confidence, and this whether they are performing the schooling at home, or whether they are able to use traditional Catholic schools to support them in this great and ambitious endeavor.