

“FAMILY LIFE AND THE LOVE OF LEARNING”
PRESENTED AT THE NEW ENGLAND CATHOLIC HOME SCHOOL CONFERENCE
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This talk begins with a simple premise: nothing short of the complete family being engaged in learning will secure a proper education. When I say “complete” family, I do not mean every living member of the family—although that may be the case—age remains a determining factor. By complete I mean the three natural elements of the family: Father, mother, and child. I have in my sights, as you shall see, the commonly absent father.

Behind this premise is a simple principle: Education is communal. I say it is communal because that which deals with the formation and perfection of a child, that which draws him to adulthood, is drawing him to the greater perfection of his humanity. And since man is, as Aristotle, Cicero, and St. Thomas Aquinas tell us, a political or social animal, we must never neglect the communal dimension of education.

Independent work, individual talent, and personal responsibility must remain central, but these things are only possible within the context of a communal environment. At the very least, in education there is a standard set by another, the evaluation given by another, the works done by others; we are always aware of others when we learn, even when we learn or work quietly alone.

The order of man is always communal, we are always enmeshed in a world, created and built: The Catholic sees this in the spiritual order. A created world implies a Creator. But more to our point, the world of men is filled with the signs of their acts.

Now to the matter of homeschool. There are several personal reasons why I am speaking on this topic today. First, I am concerned with the rising individualism one finds wormed into our literature on homeschooling. By individualism, I do not mean fruitful individual initiative or due responsibility; I do not mean a strong and firm character. Rather I mean something negative: the spirit that says “I shall not serve.” It is a spirit that grows from, I contend, the Protestant dominance of homeschooling and the anti-cultural Sixties radicalism that can be said to be its other parent.

Second, I believe that it is dangerously common to find a destructive isolation, especially for the mother in home schooling families, and—therefore—a spirit that will be corrosive of good family life. I have never seen this recognized honestly and addressed.

Third, my personal experience and ongoing participation in homeschooling—within a large homeschooling parish (at one point) and within my own family—encourages such reflection. Of course, I cannot divorce my reflections upon homeschooling as a parent, or more accurately as a father, from a concern for the place of the father in an authentic Catholic homeschooling. The mother, of course, may—for social and economic reasons—be the chief instructor within the little school of the family. But families will soon come to grave peril if fathers remain disengaged or other families are not sought out and some degree of inter-family education attempted.

I know that this talk will be controversial, but it is meant to provoke the audience into a consideration of what the essential elements of authentic Catholic homeschooling would be, and further, to ask a question which may be emotionally difficult for many: is homeschooling the single Catholic approach to a child’s education. Some argue so. I do not believe either history or the teaching of the Church support this exclusivity. I am concerned that through the virtuous and needed path of homeschooling, families are being drawn into an ideology, a shadow image of Catholic culture, Catholic education, and the family itself.

I. Education as a social activity.

The assertion that education is social is, in today's climate, controversial.

By the expression—"education as a social activity"—I do not mean something so simple as the "socialization" of students, which critics of homeschooling throw out at us... the old argument that if John and Mary do not have an opportunity to eat baloney sandwiches on the playground with 300 students and talk about "Hannah Montana" they will grow up to be deviants. (Sometimes the argument is more sophisticated, usually not). "The value of Socialization" is usually a code for the regimented ethic of pop culture. That has no virtue and is of no importance to my thought.

I mean something much more radical and initially more difficult, perhaps, for homeschoolers to accept.

Stated positively: education is for the perfection of the child, and the child is perfected for a life in society. Thus, education should look beyond the family.

Stated more controversially: I mean that the common approach to homeschooling is inherently dangerous, because it may go against what—in fact—ancient western tradition and the Catholic Church herself teach about the education of the young. And what they teach, in fact, is that it really should not be done in the home, at least not for long, except during a time and place of crisis.

For many, perhaps the majority of Catholics, they are now in a time and place of crisis. Still, I am attempting to establish the norms of education first. Only when that is established can we evaluate the forms of education. Let us consider three Church pronouncements.

First, Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical on education, *Divini Illius Magistri*:

"Education is essentially a social and not a mere individual activity... The family is an imperfect society, since it has not in itself all the means for its own complete development; whereas civil society is a perfect society, having in itself all the means for its particular end."

Second, the Second Vatican Council's document on Education, *Gravissimam Educationis* affirms this social goal of education:

Education, the fathers wrote "is directed toward the formation of the human persona in view of his final end and the good of that society to which he belongs and in the duties which he will, as an adult, have a share."

Most recently, the Church's *Compendium of Social Doctrine* states:

"Parents are the first educators, not the only educators, of their children. It belongs to them, therefore, to exercise with responsibility their educational activity in close and vigilant cooperation with civil and ecclesial agencies." The Compendium goes on to describe the "primary importance" of parents working with "scholastic institutions" in the education of their children.

Now, all these documents, as many of you know, have wonderful sections setting forth the principles by which we do educate our children as faithful Catholics. The documents clearly allow, and in some instances may encourage, homeschooling (although, of course, no document mentions or indicates any awareness of such a phenomenon). The documents, what is more, are critical of any form of education

that jeopardizes the child's moral and spiritual development. In fact, I believe the first document by Pius XI calls into question the legitimacy of Catholics supporting government sponsored schools.

Nevertheless, I firmly believe that is essential to keep in mind a simple truth: homeschooling also can become a destructive ideology. Homeschooling in this nation was spear-headed by hippies in the 1960s and has largely been embraced by Protestants; some 95% of homeschoolers are Protestants. The literature and materials have a tone that rest well with American Protestants. More alarming, homeschooling has risen side-by-side with Home churching. The rather old banner that reads "Non serviam" ("I shall not serve") has long been unfurled by those who do not wish to recognize the sovereignty of Christ in the temporal or in the ecclesiastical order. Homeschooling is not rooted in the western tradition, nor—as the above mentioned documents illustrate—in the Catholic tradition. It is a proper response to a crisis within society and—we must be very sad to admit—within some quarters of the Church.

By analogy, war—justly pursued—is a legitimate response to a threat to a community's life. Yet war is not a norm, even if it is regularly present or must be sustained for generations. Again, by analogy, what I am calling for is a sort of "just war theory" of homeschooling. Afterall, we are engaged in the defense of hearth, home, and the families entrusted to us. Should we not have carefully thought out principles, rooted in Natural Law, Scripture, and the Catholic educational tradition?

I personally see no end to the crisis that calls for homeschooling; and I am glad that the principles of Catholic education allow it and allow it be a vehicle for the good.

Nevertheless, homeschoolers need to take steps to ensure homeschooling preserves the goal of traditional teaching: the perfection of the person for God's glorification and for his living a life of service and sanctification in human society.

Again, the "burn-out" and "isolation" and perception of inadequacy so common to homeschooling parents should be recognized as the natural response to stress in the face of crisis. In an ironic voice, I can say that this stress point to something "unnatural" about the total education of the child at home. Homeschooling calls for a heroic life, but the Church has never, ever held that it is necessary for parents to lead a heroic life in the pursuit of simple natural things.

The recognition that homeschooling is an emergency measure, in itself, should offer much need assistance to parents, especially mothers, who labor in the often exhausting task of being the principal, cafeteria staff, gym coach, bus driver, hall-monitor, and (lest we forget) teacher of every subject.

It is good to keep in mind that biology and vocation do not always overlap. I have a vocation to marriage. That has borne fruit in children. I have a vocation to teach. That vocation has borne fruit in a life as a college professor. But the parenting of children does not secure the teaching vocation. My having participated in the creation of a son or daughter does not, in itself, authorize or prepare me for the teaching of Geometry or History or Latin or any particular subject. This essential point is forgotten or avoided in much of our literature. That we have children does not endow us to be grammarians.

I make three recommendations to support or reanimate our commitment to the communal nature of education:

1. Frequent Mass attendance. Daily is wonderful, but in many diocese it is not an option, and in our car-dominated society often (ironically) impossible.
2. The formation of family educational cells (shared teaching, shared projects, swapping of class, regular art shows and contests between families; and pageants for the high holy days.) As in most stressful

endeavors, when the burden is shared it grows light. The homeschooling family, thus, can and should become the new foundation of the revitalization of Catholic schools.

3. A commitment to seeking stable co-operative meetings and classes within parishes when possible.

The key here is to maintain a positive desire to unite with other kindred families in the educational act (even if circumstances or prudence do not allow it). Education must remain communal in intent, if it is to remain true to natural law and Catholic teaching.

As an aside or coda to this first section, let me again state that my wife and I homeschool and that I believe that homeschooling can be filled with many joyful moments and many graces (in addition to being a good way to form the child intellectually and spiritually). My own experience of teaching my children Latin, History, Catechism, and Natural History has been very rewarding. What is more, it has deepened my love for my children and my own appreciation and gratitude for my vocation as a father. My analogy of “just war theory,” is thus perhaps imperfect, but such a shocking analogy may be necessary to make us think again about our actions in this foundational area. Good parenting, even with intact and wholesome schools present, will always involve the parents in the education of their children.

II. The paternal side of homeschooling.

This part also is controversial.

Consider the expression: “*home*-schooling”. This is not complicated. The first word is “home.”

Now, look to your right and to your left and quickly calculate the percentage of mothers versus the percentage of fathers at this conference.

Education (especially at home) must involve the father, for the father is the head of the household. In a real sense—like the priest—he acts *persona Christi*. This is not some new idea; St. Paul makes this point in the famous passage in Ephesians describing the headship of the husband.

Family endeavors without the father are like parish endeavors without a priest: possible, sometimes ordinary, but fraught with peril if that absence becomes normative or if the father’s role is supplanted or abandoned. If anyone is unclear as to the Christian grounding of the father’s role in education, he needs to read *The Book of Proverbs*—at the very least. And Luke is precise and clear that under the tutelage of his earthly father, Our Lord, “increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.” (2.52) And again, St. Paul in describing the Christian family states clearly that the father is to “bring [his children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (6.4). In his *Exhortation on St. Joseph*, John Paul II, clearly shows that the silent Joseph had no need to speak, since Scripture was abundant enough and that one of his proper duties was fulfilled in overseeing the education of Our Lord.

It is odd that the father is so absent in modern education. When we turn to the pagans, the old pagans, we find that they are quite clear on the father’s role: he is to oversee directly or through tutors the early education of his children—and, indeed, of his own wife. I recommend to you the text entitled *Economics* by Xenophon. Xenophon was a student of Socrates and less prolific author than his classmate Plato. The Greek word “economics” means “law of the household” and this treatise details extensively with the care a husband must take to choose a wife well and to educate here well. If he fails in either, the household will fail and he will be miserable. Again, remember Proverbs: “Who can find a good wife? She is more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her and he will have no lack of gain... She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”

The Catholic exemplar of a homeschooling father is St. Thomas More. Although we should be clear, More hired tutors as his life in court became more demanding and did not “homeschool” in the modern sense. Nevertheless, the daily attention he gave to examining his children and to warmly guiding their teachers is admirable.

“No one,” More said in a letter to his children “is dearer to me by any title than each of you by that of scholar”

And in a long letter to William Gonell, one of their tutors, More set out carefully the principles of their education: it was to be in the liberal arts, with the goal of placing virtue first and academic knowledge second. The two were to be tied together through the study of the pagan and Christian classics, Euclidean geometry, Latin and Greek, but virtue and technical knowledge were not equal. Virtue was always the master.

As most of you know, from either reading about More, or from the wonderful movie, “A Man for All Seasons”, the fruits of this education was not simply an stunning level of academic achievement (recall Margaret More speaking fluently in Latin and Greek with King Henry VIII), it was a dogged constancy in the Catholic faith. More’s children—though they did not suffer the martyrdom of blood—kept the faith, while the vast majority of those educated at Oxford and Cambridge cast away their spiritual patrimony for the cheap pottage of a lecherous king. More’s family life provides an example, though isolated, of education based around family life, as a counter to the prevailing trends in a society. More importantly, it provides an excellent example for husbands and fathers for the deep concern a father should have for the education of his children.

Again, let me make three recommendations for restoring the father to his proper role.

1. Fathers must set a good example as a learner, if not a teacher. He must be perceived as reading Scripture and good, wholesome literature. If children—especially boys—do not see their father reading, how will the mother succeed in getting the children to read? If the father never writes a letter to friends or family, why would a child? If a father has no aspiration or energy to do anything for his mind in the evenings or on the weekends, why would a child every think that his mind, his imagination, his reason, is a glory above all creation?
2. The father must monitor significant parts of his children’s education. I say monitor because our (so-called) developed economy exhausts him and takes him so far away from the household that it is difficult that he can teach anything as part of the regular curriculum. Nevertheless, he must find the strength to review their work and evaluate it fairly—not flatter or give false praise; children hate the learned-hypocrisy of the workplace. They want honest advice. They want fathers to be just what they are: superior to them in authority.
3. The father must instruct the mother. This may be the hardest thing. Fathers who entirely absent themselves from how the curriculum is designed, what method is used, what tests are given, how the day is structured, how money is spent on education, what level of catechesis is achieved, fathers who do this have effectively divorced themselves from the family.

Again, most fathers do not have the luxury of being home regularly. The healthy reaction to this would be to seek ways of changing that situation. Since he cannot teach and instruct daily, he must exercise his headship in at least regularly giving guidance and making decisions about the education of the children.

I recognize this as a grave and very difficult recommendation, but if a carpenter can take steps to ensure his son grows “in wisdom and in stature,” dare we find exceptions for the modern male?

III. “The Love of Learning.”

Most of us here today and our friends involved in homeschooling are engaged for reasons beyond the formation of their children. That is to say, our children, and the purity of their imaginations, souls, and bodies, is at the forefront of our actions, but we are also supportive and involved because we see the need for wider reform within society and hold that homeschooling may have a part to play.

Western civilization and the Catholic Church do provide one sterling example of a kind of home-based schooling in their history prior to the modern period. There was another time of darkness, when the traditional order fell apart and it became necessary to withdraw to the quiet of country homes and marginal communities to keep education and virtue alive.

I refer to Western monasticism, in particular Benedictine monasticism, which grew out of the aristocratic households of the late Rome world. While Benedictine monasticism never made elite distinction a badge of honor, it did emerge from those minor aristocratic families who were seeking educational and cultural peace in the midst of a mad and violent world.

The opening lines of the Rule of St. Benedict are modeled on certain sections of Proverbs which express the authority of the father in educating his child:

“Listen, my son, to the teachings of a master and bend the ear of your heart: with a good will receive and with a good will faithfully follow fulfill the instructions of your loving father.”

The Benedictine educational method—if we can call it that—was distinct from the modern, and even the later medieval, method. It never desired classrooms, intense lectures, and scientific and systematic regimentation. It was always small and conversational and the language that it used emphasized experience, over information; and it anchored the activity of its instruction in desire and wonder.

The flavor of monastic teaching can be sampled in a line of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Commenting on the difficult question of a student to master a good text, Bernard stated that “fervor alone can teach; it can be learned only through experience. Those who have experienced it will recognize this. Those who have not experienced it, may they burn with desire not so much to know as to experience.”

A desire...not so much to know as to experience. What might this mean? How can it guide the homeschooling parent of our age? Let me illustrate the meaning analogously by a passage taken from Rudyard Kiplings, *Captains Courageous*, an adventure story about Harvey Cheyne, a pampered boy who falls from an ocean liner and is rescued by Gloucester fishermen who keeps him aboard their ship for a summer and teach him the hard, but wondrous ways, of late 19th century fishermen. The scene I am about to read marks a sort of conversion. Harvey, stung by jelly fish, refuses to give up his first fish, but like his companion Dan struggles at sea to reel in a massive halibut.

Harvey's knuckles were raw and bleeding where they had been banged against the gunwale; his face was purple-blue between excitement and exertion; he dripped with sweat, and was half blinded from staring at the circling sunlit ripples about the swiftly moving line. The boys were tired long ere the halibut, who took charge of them and the dory for the next twenty minutes. But the big flat fish was gaffed and hauled in at last.

"Beginner's luck," said Dan, wiping his forehead. "He's all of a

hundred."

Harvey looked at the huge grey-and-mottled creature with unspeakable pride. He had seen halibut many times on marble slabs ashore, but it had never occurred to him to ask how they came inland. *Now he knew; and every inch of his body ached with fatigue.*

Under this approach to learning, wherein a yearning for experiencing reality more deeply is awoken, there must come a moment when a child is driven not by vain-glory, or the psychological need for a letter grade, or trinkets, or obedience, but rather because he is filled with wonder and desire.

The rich young man in Kipling's tale knew what halibut was: a fish, edible and from the ocean; and yet he possessed nothing true, no real knowledge of fish or fishing until that moment when he was hot with the bodily desire to have that fish to master it and bring it in from the sea. Parents need to make learning like that.

Plato and St. Augustine, before St. Benedict, had explored the nature of desire and education. Only the lover of wisdom had any hope of attaining it. They were sure of that. Augustine was consistent and clear in his education vision (which Benedict accepted) there was no true knowledge without love. Love—the spiritual movement of the whole person towards something because it is perceived to be good in and of itself.

Such learning (driven by love) is not quite the higher, metaphysical learning that a good student advances to in College: by metaphysical learning I mean the careful study of the causes of things and the principles order in the world. The love and yearning must also, in the education of the young, never be shorn from basic skills (such as good spelling, penmanship, and arithmetic) or strong moral discipline (which is needed to provide ballast to the zeal of a young imagination), and a healthy physical regime (let us never neglect the body or forget the old maxim about the dwelling place of a sound mind).

But at a fundamental level, the love and wonder of learning must be present. For the ancients: the foundational level of learning involved music and poetry on the one hand, and gymnastics on the other. The Benedictine continuation of this remained. Chant and liturgical prayer and study balanced by manual labor. This combination is interesting. It points to a necessary anchoring of the student in the real, in the senses, and a balance between the interior and the exterior. The world is experienced, not simply studied with detached analysis. Scripture or Literature is not simply read quietly at a desk; it is embodied and chanted aloud. The outer world is not reviewed through texts books; the body is exercised, tested, and matter is brought under perceptible and rational co-ordination by the human mind.

This is very different than either the conventional school student, shackled to his desk; or many a homeschool child sitting on a sofa and memorizing a periodic table or preparing for a quiz in biblical history by looking over the bold section titles of the last chapter he read.

Again, I end this section with three recommendations:

1. Reading—especially poetry, literature, and Sacred Scripture should be done aloud and in performative fashion.
2. *The world* should be experienced abundantly, not data, not computers, not internet sites, but the world—out of doors.

3. The parents must be visible participants in their own “love for learning.” Again, this emphasizes a point made earlier. If the parents are noted for their love—their desire—for learning, then their children will be good students; if parents are observed as being supportive—but not filled with desire—for learning, then their children will persist obediently for a time, but slide into mediocrity; if parents show no desire for learning, their students will be failures, find the endeavor hypocritical, and only come to learning by accident and through some other authority charismatic power.

If you find this last point hard to follow, simply replace the idea of learning with marriage or the spiritual life.

In the natural order of things, a stream can only rise as high as its source. Children must not see education about the mere conquest of data and statistics. That will not inspire them to the nobility of learning. They must see it as intensely personal and filled with wonder, which Aristotle tells us is the beginning of all true knowledge.

To conclude, let me return to my premise: nothing short of the complete family being engaged in learning will secure a proper education.

The Church is quite clear that “the fundamental dimension of human experience” is found in the family “thanks to the endless dynamism of love.” (*Compendium*, 221 ff). The family is the school of love. It is the place in which children learn and adults remember that love is the cornerstone of the two great commandments—the glory of God and the service of one’s fellow man. This should be the cornerstone of an authentic Catholic educational vision, whether it is enacted at home or in a school.