

A Just War Theory of Homeschooling

by William Fahey

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Given the increasing popularity of homeschooling among faithful Catholics, it is vital that those who practice it -- or are thinking about trying it for their children -- have a fully Catholic understanding of the family and the nature and meaning of education. Without it, their good intentions can go astray, following the exaggerated individualism of the culture instead of the mind of the Church.

Some enthusiasts claim that homeschooling is the Catholic approach to a child's education, but neither history nor the teaching of the Church supports this exclusivity. Though homeschooling is an important and virtuous pursuit, some families are drawn to it through a mistaken ideology -- a shadow image of Catholic culture, Catholic education, and the family itself.

Catholic and Western tradition have always held that education is communal. Since man is a political or social animal -- as Aristotle, Cicero, and St. Thomas Aquinas tell us -- we must never neglect the communal dimension of education. Nothing short of complete family engagement -- father, mother, and child -- in the learning process will secure a proper education. Families may come to grave peril if fathers remain disengaged from their children's education, or if other families are not sought out and some degree of inter-family education is attempted.

Of course, by this I do not mean something so simple as the "socialization" of students, which critics of homeschooling often throw at us -- the old argument that if John and Mary do not have an opportunity to eat bologna sandwiches on the playground with 300 students and talk about Hannah Montana, they will grow up to be social deviants. The "value of socialization" is usually a code for the regimented ethic of pop culture, which has no virtue and is of no importance.

I mean something much more radical and (perhaps initially) more difficult for homeschoolers to accept: that education is for the perfection of the child, and the child is perfected for a life in society.

Stated more controversially: The common approach to homeschooling today is inherently dangerous, because it may go against what our entire Western tradition and the Catholic Church herself teach about the education of the young -- that education 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, it is important to establish the norms of education, from which we can examine its various forms.

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.

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 person 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.

All these documents have wonderful sections setting forth the principles by which we educate our children as faithful Catholics. The documents clearly allow, and in some instances may indirectly encourage, homeschooling without mentioning it specifically. What's more, they are critical of any form of education that jeopardizes the child's moral and spiritual development.

Nevertheless, it is essential to keep in mind a simple truth: Homeschooling can also become a destructive ideology.

Contrary to the Catholic understanding of education, there is a rising individualism that is worming its way into our literature on homeschooling. Homeschooling in this nation was spearheaded by the hippies of the 1960s and has largely been embraced by Protestants; some 95 percent of homeschoolers today are Protestants, and the tone of the literature and materials often reflects that make-up.

More alarming, homeschooling has risen alongside home-churching. The "Non serviam" banner has long been unfurled by those who do not wish to recognize the sovereignty of Christ in the temporal or ecclesiastical order. Homeschooling at all levels is not rooted in either the Western tradition or -- as the documents mentioned above 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 long periods. What I am calling for is a sort of "just war theory" of homeschooling. After all, we are engaged in the defense of hearth, home, and the families entrusted to us. Should we not also have carefully thought-out principles of education rooted in natural law, Scripture, and the Catholic tradition? Should we not also have an objective for this struggle beyond the solitary education of a child?

I see no end to the current crisis that calls for homeschooling, and I am glad that the principles of Catholic education allow it and encourage it as a vehicle for the good. Nevertheless, homeschoolers need to take steps to ensure that their education program preserves the goal of traditional teaching: the perfection of the person for God's glorification and living a life of service and sanctification in human society.

The recognition that homeschooling is itself an emergency measure should offer much needed 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. What's more, the feelings of isolation and inadequacy so common to homeschooling parents should be recognized as the natural response to stress in the face of crisis. They point to something "unnatural" about the total education of the child at home: Homeschooling calls for a heroic life, but the Church has never held that it is necessary for parents to lead a heroic life in the pursuit of simple, natural things.

Biology and vocation do not always overlap. I have a vocation to marriage, which has borne fruit in children; and a vocation to teach, which 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. By natural law and Church authority, I have a right to see to the proper moral education of my children -- but that I have children does not endow us to be grammarians. My right to secure an education does not mean I have infused talents as an educator or rights to a teaching vocation.

Recalling and pursuing the communal dimension of education will do much to curb the tendency towards ideology. The following are three recommendations to support or reanimate our commitment to the communal nature of education:

1. Frequent Mass attendance. (Daily Mass is wonderful, but in many circumstances it is not an option.)
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 lighter. 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. It goes without saying that Catholic families should pray for the restoration of Catholic schools; Catholic families should aspire to the noble role before them: the seed bed of schools. Again, consider

Pius XI:

Since, however, the younger generations must be trained in the arts and sciences for the advantage and prosperity of civil society, and since the family of itself is unequal to this task, it was necessary to create that social institution, the school. But let it be borne in mind that this institution owes its existence to the initiative of the family and of the Church, long before it was undertaken by the State.

My wife and I homeschool, and I know personally that homeschooling can be filled with many joyful moments and graces (in addition to being a good way to form the child intellectually and spiritually). My own experience of teaching my children Latin, history, the 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.

Thinking of homeschooling as a "just war" pursuit is perhaps dramatic, but the analogy may be necessary to make us take another look at 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.

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