

(English translation)

Rome (Vatican), 12 October 2000

Evangelization of Children

Ecclesiastical Authorities, Civic Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme proposed for this part of our congress (the evangelization of children) is most important for our children, for families, for the ecclesial community and for civil society itself. In fact, transmitting Gospel values to the new generations is equivalent to building a society in which there is greater solidarity and higher ethical standards today; above all, it lays the foundations for this to continue in the future as well.

The Gospel can be transmitted in a number of ways.

I will limit myself here to speaking of what I know, that is, the experience of Gospel education with the children of the Focolare Movement over which I have the honour of presiding.

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“Education” intended as “a journey towards an objective” in the religious, moral, behavioural, cultural and social fields, is provided by different agents who often work in collaboration with one another. These are, first of all, the parents and the family, then nursery and elementary schools, the Church community with its various environments and experts in formation, other informal groups, and the means of social communication.

I would like to limit this reflection of ours to the family.

How can parents and families carry out most effectively their mission as educators?

First of all, by using to the best of their ability the special pedagogical resources of parenthood, resources potentiated by their personal experience and by the cultural patrimony offered by their social context. This is the first and irreplaceable educative tool which all parents possess by nature.

However, there is also a wider and higher perspective. Christian parents believe that their child enters into the existential dimension as a “project of immortality”. God’s plan for the human person is a life that begins weak and helpless, that grows and develops through interaction with other persons and with creation, that overcomes death and enters into the everlasting novelty of the divine condition, becoming and living as a “child of God”.¹ Such was the human adventure of Christ. In order to live it, he needed to be “welcomed and helped to grow”² by a simple and poor family, as John Paul II said; “simple and poor”, yes, but surely in possession of those spiritual and human resources which made them a suitable *environment* for the formation of that Man.

Each family must believe in the love of God, who not only gives the gift of life but also prepares for each of his children the environment in which to grow and the way to follow.

But what is the way? We know it: “I am the way,” affirmed Jesus himself. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6).

Ultimately, to educate a child means to help him or her encounter Jesus.

The words, “Let the children come to me...” (Mk. 10:14) is a sublime synthesis of the Gospel’s method of education towards a formation which is not only religious but fully human.

Could it be that it was easier to meet Jesus two thousand years ago? I don’t know... The history of salvation goes on and Christ continues to be with us, as he promised. He promised to be present in different ways and these are points of contact between him and the family.

¹ Cf. L. Macario, *L’educazione religiosa*, in N. Galli (a cura di), *Vogliamo educare i nostri figli*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan, 1985, p. 272.

² John Paul II, Angelus December 26, 1999, “*L’Osservatore Romano*”, December 27-28 1999, p. 9.

I would like to examine briefly two of these ways which are particularly suited to the reality of the family.

One way Jesus is present is found in that well-known and explicit declaration of his: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). Therefore, he is present where people are united, which means, according to many Fathers of the Church and the traditional interpretation of the magisterium, being united in him, in his will, that is, in mutual love which is his commandment.³

Now, can a family, can a couple fulfil that condition for which, according to Origen, Christ is "attracted and called"⁴ to be present among them?

Everyone recognizes that the family is already an interlacing of love, of human love which links the father to the mother; the two of them to their children; the children to their parents, the children among themselves and then with aunts, uncles and grandparents and then the aunts, uncles and grandparents with nieces, nephews and grandchildren. Now if the family also draws from the divine love offered by the Christian life, that divine love infused in hearts by the Holy Spirit, then Christ can truly be in their midst, potentiating as well the grace of the sacrament of matrimony.

Parents who love one another in this way bring Jesus into the home.

How can we describe this human-divine love, this "Gospel love"? In practice, how can we love as Jesus wants us to love?

We must really focus our attention and try to understand what, in a sense, we could call Christ's *art of loving*. It is demanding.

It is a love that *loves everyone*.

It is a love that is *the first to love*.

It is a love that *loves always*, which never ends.

It is a love that enters into the reality of the other person, which *makes itself one* with the other person.

Finally, it is a love which sees and loves Jesus *in the other, in any other person*, according to his words: "You did it for me" (Mt. 25:40).

If husband and wife love one another and love others in this way, always starting over, knowing how to die to themselves out of love for the other, their mutual love, which brings the Teacher into the home, attracts the children.

Children naturally tend to imitate the behaviour of their parents.

If this is so considering the family only from a human viewpoint, what could happen when the parents are imbued with the grace of the sacrament and the mystical presence of Jesus himself among them?

I have the fortune of receiving many letters from children, because the youth sector of our Movement also include the very young; and I notice the spontaneous educative action, so to speak, of a family that seeks to live out this love based on the Gospel.

Betty, a six-year-old from Milan writes to me: "Yesterday Daddy asked me to go down to the cellar to get the wine. The staircase was dark and I was afraid. I prayed to Jesus and I felt that he was close to me. Sometimes I talk with Jesus. The other day I was in my room doing my homework and I began to talk with him. I told him many things and I didn't want to stop talking to him. You know, when I make an act of love, I feel something beautiful inside, like someone who pays me a compliment and who says 'thank you' to me. I think it's Jesus."

³. Cf. C. Lubich, *Scritti Spirituali /3, Tutti uno, Città Nuova* 1989, p. 173 e seg.

⁴. *Commento al Cantico*, 41, p. 13, 94B.

And a French mother writes to me: “Before putting them to bed, I kneel down on the carpet with the two older children. Last night, Ruth pointed out to me that David, the youngest, kept on playing. “Let him be,” I said, ‘it’s his way of praying.’ So we recollected ourselves to say our evening prayers. When we opened our eyes again, David was beside me with his hands folded. ‘You see,’ said Catherine, ‘if we love, Jesus teaches him too’.”

Another presence of Jesus, significant for the theme we are dealing with, is in his word. Jesus is present in his word.

With regard to our spiritual experience we can say, as we often repeat, that we were “born with the Gospel in our hands” and we go ahead in the same way. We choose a phrase at a time and we put it into practice in our daily lives for a month. In this way our life becomes “evangelized” and immersed in God, who is *completely* present in each fragment of his word.

With this very simple pedagogical technique of gradualness and fullness, God led us to living a strong educative and spiritual experience, one that is in continual expansion. It is an experience which involves our families too and the families of the communities that gather around the focolares and which share our own spiritual adventure.

In these families, just as they break up bread for the little children every day, they must also *break up* the Gospel. How? Just as we adults do. As I said, we take one sentence every month, with a commentary approved by the Church that is comprehensible to everyone, and we try to live it out during the small and big events of the day, almost vying with the children in a holy and joyful spirit of competition. If in the evening, Mom and Dad share episodes of how they were able to live as Christians on that day, the children will naturally do the same and tell their own experiences. These are moments in which responsibility and reciprocity wonderfully weave together family relationships.⁵

Children who grow up in families like these are spontaneously formed day after day in a mentality that is in conformity with the Gospel, which will lead them to view persons and situations as Jesus, in line with his way of thinking. They will learn to see humanity as the large family of the children of God, to use the things of this world with a pure heart and a spirit of solidarity. They will have a proper hierarchy of values which will always guide them in life.

Certainly, they too will have their trials and periods of crises and searching. Especially as adolescents and in the early years of their youth, we will have to deal with their rejection and protesting, but no attitude, however serious, should block or turn off our charity towards them. The art of loving which Jesus taught us will indicate the way to “make ourselves one” in every way possible during the various stages of their growth. It will put on our lips the right words of advice, it will always keep us open to dialogue and to sharing in their interests. We will learn to “waste time” with our children, we will succeed in making them our friends and winning their confidence.

But even if the rejection persists, we will always keep the door of our home open, and we will recognize in our suffering a trace of the suffering of Christ crucified who also lived the abandonment on the part of everyone, even on the part of the Father. And we will accept it as he did, remaining serene.

We know, however, (and many experiences confirm this) that all the values instilled in them will remain because in the most important moment of their lives, when the foundations of one’s personality and character are laid, they had the great fortune of meeting Jesus, present in the midst of their parents and present in their lives through his word.

⁵. Cf. G. Milan, *Disagio adolescenziale e strategie educative*, Cleup Padova 1999, pp. 56 e segg.