

PASTORAL LETTER

ON PARENTS' CATECHISM

by

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To All Beloved Parents, Diocese of Surigao!

Greetings and Peace in the Lord!

On this Happy Feast of the Holy Family let me convey to you a matter of utmost importance and concern in our Diocese: the religious education of our children; and by children I mean not only our teenage youth, but also (and more especially) our children of pre-school age.

Allow me to state the problem in brief questions. Who will teach our children the life our Lord Jesus Christ wants us to live? Who will teach them the truths of our faith? Who will teach them prayer and the way of eternal salvation? In brief, who will teach them Catechism?

The fast and traditional answer to all these is the Church. But who is the Church? The Church is the Christian community! We are the Church.

Last October 16, our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, wrote a Pastoral letter to all the Bishops, priests, and faithful of the entire Catholic Church on this important concern of teaching Catechism to children. In this letter he discusses among many others the various ways and methods of imparting Catechism especially to children; in the parishes, in the school, and in the families.

In this letter he singles out the family as having a special character in the task of catechizing children. He calls the family "the irreplaceable" agent of teaching children the truths of our faith and of Christian living. He writes: "The family's Catechetical activity has a special character, which is in a sense irreplaceable. This special character has been rightly stressed by the Church particularly by the Second Vatican Council. Education in the faith by parents, which should begin from the children's tenderest age, is already being given when the members of a family help each other to

grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words but which perseveres throughout a day-to-day life lived in accordance with the Gospel." In concluding this section on family catechetical apostolate the Holy Father writes: "There cannot be too great an effort on the part of Christian parents to prepare for the ministry of being their own children's catechists and to carry it out with tireless zeal."

Notice the special obligation of teaching imposed on parents.

Following the lead of our Holy Father, I would like to address my appeal in this letter to you our Catholic parents. To you I would like to address a solemn reminder of the truth which has always been taught in our Church; that in the important matter of the faith, you parents, are the first teachers of your children. And being the first catechists of your children, you are the ones entrusted by the Lord with the gravest obligation. And a happy but perhaps onerous discovery for you: You are the most effective teachers of your children. And for no other reason than that you are parents, i.e. the givers of their lives.

1) **Parents are the first catechists of their Children.** It has always been a constant teaching of the Church that you parents are the first ones-obligated by divine law to teach and train your children in the way of Christian living. This is evidenced by the very natural fact that they are with you in the tenderest and most pliant age of their lives. Thus no priest, or sister, or catechist (however high or professional their training may be) can take your place or equal you in teaching your children in the faith. Why? Because no one in this whole wide world is more loved and trusted by your children than you. For your child there cannot be another Nanay or Tatay. For this, the Holy Father calls your role as parent-catechists irreplaceable. The most that priests, sisters, and catechists can do is supplement what you give your children at home. Our Holy Father writes, "Family Catechesis precedes, accompanies and enriches all other forms of Catechesis."

2) **Parents, the most effective teachers of their children.** It is a common consensus among educators and psychologists that the most receptive and effective age for education is between the year 3 - 7. As they say the child's mind at this stage receives impressions like wax and retains them like marble. The child's mind at this age is most receptive either to good or evil. In brief, it is the best time for laying the foundations of a man's life. And it is precisely the time when the child is with you, day and night, hour after hour, and drinks that knowledge from you in much the same way as he draws his nourishment from you. At this age, the parents,

and especially the mother, set up values and attitudes and patterns which will last and in whose light all later experiences in adult life will be interpreted and evaluated. Thus it is not just mere jargon to say that the best training of a child is at the "university of mother's knee". It is not merely poetry this saying so often quoted which says: "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."

Thus if you fail to do your duty at this early age, big damage will be done to your child's personality, a damage which the Church or school will find very difficult to repair later.

Because of all this, I will state again that you dear parents, are entrusted by God with this gravest obligation. When a child is born to you, God addresses you these words: "Take this child and nurse him for me." (Exod., 2, 9) You are the stewards and guardians of your children. You are not free to do with them whatever you like. A strict accounting will be demanded of you on judgement day.

Thus, my dear parents, with regards to your grave duty of Catechizing your children, I would like to exhort you in the Lord: Do away with that attitude which lightly dismiss this obligation by saying "Ah that's not for me. The priests and sisters will take care of that. That's their duty anyway. And also the schools. What do we have schools, even Catholic schools for?" This is a wrong attitude. Even if we have a whole army of priests and sisters, even if all our schools were Catholic Schools to which you can send all your children, still this will not free you from this grave obligation of teaching. For, to repeat, all the other agencies, no matter how efficient and sufficient, can only supplement what you give in the classrooms of your living rooms in your homes.

If you are gravely obligated by the Lord to give your children ample nourishment, clothing and shelter, how much more are you obligated to give your children adequate spiritual nourishment. If no parent, in his right senses, can say he is freed from the obligation of feeding his offsprings, there should be no parent who can say he is exonerated from giving spiritual nourishment to the same. As the soul is above the body, so much higher is your spiritual obligation towards your children.

Now I am saying all this to instill in you the conviction: that you are the first and the most effective teachers (catechists) of

your children in the faith. You will perform this duty, I believe, if this conviction is deeply rooted in your soul. Realize this therefore, and act according to this conviction: Be your own children's catechists.

Take on, therefore, the obligation to prepare your children for First Holy Communion. Prepare them even long before they receive this most Blessed Sacrament and follow them up likewise after. Both of you, together with your children, in the quiet of your homes, read Holy Scriptures during quiet evenings, explain and discuss with them the meaning of the sacraments, the significance of the great liturgical feasts and seasons e.g. Christmas, Lent, Pentecost, etc. Above all pray regularly and perseveringly together as one family around the family altar. And remember this task is not for a month or a year but will last until your children can stand on their own in adult life.

The Church will help in facilitating this task for you, but let her be only your helper. Aids like pamphlets and booklets will be made available to you. These will help you on such vital needs like **What** and **How** to teach. Seminars of small groups will be conducted to help you understand and use these aids. I strongly suggest that you allot the necessary time for this. It would be tragic if you have all the time to attend to the farm, go to the office or to fish, etc., but no time to prepare yourselves to fulfill one of your gravest and noblest duties towards your children. Attend therefore these seminars. Church helpers cannot do much without your hearty participation.

Many of you today are painfully aware of the breakdown of your families, e.g. that your children do not obey you anymore, that they consort with the devil of drinking and gambling together with their barkada. Don't you think that these children of yours precisely seek the unhealthy companionship of their barkada, because earlier they never experienced the healthy companionship at home, particularly with their parents? Do not the youth also complain against you saying that you have even no time to talk to them? Is this not also painfully true?

I believe you can solve this by establishing intimate and loving relations with them right at their tenderest age. One of the best ways of doing this is by being their teachers and guides at an age when the devil of vice and barkada-system has not yet crept in. As you teach them, listen also to them, for being

listened to contributes very much to their self-esteem and confidence which lead to maturity. Above all teach Christ, His way, and His truth. Do this by word of mouth but most effectively through your own good example, the witness of your authentic Christian life. The Holy Father calls this a teaching without words, without which teaching thru words would be empty and futile.

Conclusion: By doing so, joy and love in the home will be your great reward. For what better achievement can you as parents strive after than a happy christian family where peace and love abide, where all the members live after the likeness of the Holy Family. This will be your shining crown now and in heaven with our Father where all the members will regroup again around Him in the great and final homecoming.

Then the promise of Scriptures will be fulfilled in you. "They that instruct many unto justice shall shine as the stars for all eternity." (Dan. 12, 3)

God bless you and all your beloved children at home. May the Spirit of the Lord guide you and give you the grace and strength to fulfill this your noble task.

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