

# Handing on the Faith

## A Newsletter for families

May 2016

Number 38

### **Amoris Laetitia (Part II)**

Following on from last month's newsletter I will continue with a commentary on some of the ideas contained in Chapter 7, 'Towards a Better Education of Children', of Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia*.

Last month, I described the Pope's ideas about the purpose of education and the role of parents. The Pope saw moral education and education in freedom as essential parts of a real education.

### **The educational role of family life**

The Pope has previously underlined the significance of the Incarnation taking place within a family. Jesus was born into an ordinary family and lived and grew up within that family. *"The family of Nazareth urges us to rediscover the vocation and mission of the family, of every family."*

Much of what one learns as a child within one's family remains throughout the whole of one's life. Many likes and dislikes, opinions and mannerisms can be traced to childhood experiences at home. The family is not though the only influence on a child's development. The Pope pointed out that *"Sad to say, some television programmes or forms of advertising often negatively influence and undercut the values inculcated in family life."* The Pope returns to the issue of children's exposure to TV and electronic devices a number of times in this chapter. Right at the start he asks parents to consider *"what they want their children to be exposed to, and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time."* Later on he says that *"The educational process that occurs between parents and children can be helped or hindered by the increasing sophistication of the communications and entertainment media."* They can improve communication or ironically create a disconnect within the family. They can help those living apart to feel as if they are living together but conversely cause those living under the same roof to live separate lives. This 'technological disconnect', the Pope says, *"exposes them more easily to manipulation by those who would invade their private space with selfish interests."*

The following aims for controlling the use of screen time of any sort, be it TV, PC, iPad or smart phone, have proved helpful if not always easy to achieve:

- No screens before school or in the early evening before homework/revision/music practice is done.
- No screens during dinner (which will help all those at table to be aware of the needs of others and engage with the family conversation).
- Have a clear routine for when screens can be used and not used. The amount of time could be earned, for example, by doing jobs and for good behaviour. You could think of a few specific behaviours you want to encourage and reward although looking for co-operation not perfection. At the beginning you may need to be do a bit of micro-managing to foster good habits but the aim is that your children start to internalise the behaviours you are trying to encourage such that they live them even when there is no reward or you are not there.
- If screen time is used as a reward then there needs to be a "use it or lose it" rule to avoid them banking a large amount of time to be used on screen in one sitting. Long sessions at a computer or a screen aren't good for their mood, cognitive functioning (concentration) or muscles.
- Establish drop zones, a central charging station, where devices are put when not supposed to be used and over night and even an hour before bedtime.
- Adults have to set an example as children learn from what they see rather than from what they are told. If parents are on-line at home then it is good to make sure the children know why – quite often it will be relating to household chores, for example paying bills.
- Don't resort to screens when the conversation flags.
- Use online time productively oneself and hope to get kids interested (for example, maths games or learning a foreign language).

- Avoid resorting to screens when in restaurants or queues in order to keep peace. This may have a short term benefit but longer term can be detrimental. It is good for children to learn how to entertain themselves rather than simply being consumers of entertainment provided by others. Learning how to deal with moments of frustration or boredom will develop their resilience and the ability to work on their own and get 'down to things' when they are older.
- Have conversations rather than screen time.
- Screen-based homework should be done in a family room with the child's back to you.

And possibly the most important of all of the aims:

- No screens in any bedrooms

Having said all of this, no teen is likely to want to have their phone taken away, at say 9pm, when Skype, Whatsapp, Facebook or whatever conversations are in full flow. The "fear of being offline" (FOBO) is a real issue for many children. When a child is upset with having screen time switched off empathise... but stand firm. Don't try and reason with arguments about the importance of sleep they won't be listening.

For the Pope one of the crucial tasks of families is to provide an "education in hope" which could be translated as "teaching them how to wait". This can be difficult in a society which tells us that we can have everything now, no need to wait, just put it on the credit card (your own or your parents'). If children don't learn this lesson they can develop the vice of wanting it all now and seeing their freedom weakened rather than strengthened. If they do learn it then they will learn self-mastery and detachment from their impulses. *"When children realize that they have to be responsible for themselves, their self-esteem is enriched. This in turn teaches them to respect the freedom of others...In a healthy family, this learning process usually takes place through the demands made by life in common."*

#### **Learning social skills**

The Pope also points out that the family is the "primary setting for socialisation since it is where we first learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another and live as one." Children within families learn to think about the others, be concerned about them and show them affection, escaping in this way from a

harmful self-absorption. The experience of living day by day and side by side with parents and siblings helps children mature and learn how to get along with others in spite of their differences. This includes in times of difficulties such as illnesses which can teach important lessons. Children should see that the ill person is a treasure and learn from the care and affection with which the ill person is treated. As the Pope says *"An education that fails to encourage sensitivity to human illness makes the heart grow cold; it makes young people 'anesthetized' to the suffering of others, incapable of facing suffering and of living the experience of limitation."* This could be a good lesson to try and teach during this Year of Mercy. One of the corporal works of mercy is visiting the sick *"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for ... I was sick and you took care of me..."* (Matt 25: 36)

#### **Opening up the family**

The family cannot be a closed community as this would hinder the maturing of the children who have to learn how to thrive as practicing Catholics in an environment which, when not indifferent can be hostile. Children are not greenhouse plants who could not survive among their peers who may have very different ideas and lifestyles to them. In fact, it is not a matter to educating them simply to survive but to want to win souls for Christ. The Pope, in a recent audience, reflecting on the parable of the lost sheep, talked about the importance of going in search of the lost sheep and never giving up: *"We should reflect on the parable often, for in the Christian community there is always someone who is missing and if that person is gone, a place is left empty. Sometimes this is daunting and leads us to believe that a loss is inevitable, like an incurable disease. That is how we run the risk of shutting ourselves in the pen, where there won't be the odour of the sheep but the stench of enclosure! And Christians? We must not be closed in or we will smell like stale things. Never! We need to go forth, not close in on ourselves, in our little communities, in the parish, holding ourselves to be "righteous". This happens when there is a lack of the missionary zeal that leads us to encounter others. In Jesus' vision there are no sheep that are definitively lost, but only sheep that must be found again."* If this missionary zeal along with good doctrinal formation and a solid piety can be inculcated in our youth then they will be well prepared to go out in search of their lost brothers and sisters.