

Handing on the Faith

A Newsletter for families

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Starting 2016 with a desire for peace

In his message for the annual World Day of Peace on 1 January, the Pope reminds us again that

Solidarity, as a moral virtue and social attitude born of personal conversion, calls for commitment on the part of those responsible for education and formation.

I think first of families, which are called to a primary and vital mission of education. Families are the first place where the values of love and fraternity, togetherness and sharing, concern and care for others are lived out and handed on. They are also the privileged milieu for transmitting the Faith, beginning with those first simple gestures of devotion which mothers teach their children.

In a way this sums up the purpose of these newsletters: to encourage parents, and others involved in educating children, in their vital task of being the first evangelizers of their children.

Virtues needed by parents

It would be a truism to say that parents need all the virtues but some are more important than others. In his end-of-year address to the people who work in the Vatican, the Pope set out a list of virtues that he felt were needed by people in their position. A lot of what he said translates very easily to the role of parents. The Pope used the word MISERICORDIA as an acrostic, then for each letter of the word he gave two virtues ending up with a list of 24 virtues. Rather than go through them all, I'll just highlight a few here. The full text of the speech can be found [here](#).

Missionary spirit

Faith is a gift, yet the measure of our faith is also seen by the extent to which we communicate it. All baptized persons are missionaries of the Good News, above all by their lives, their work and their witness of joy and conviction.

This reminds us that passing on the Faith is more to do with children *seeing* how their parents live out the Faith than in giving doctrine classes—although these are also important. If children see that their parents really believe and live the consequences of their faith

to the full, they will be much more likely to follow in their footsteps. And this *really believing* implies living according to the teachings of Christ and his Church; being men and women of prayer; being joyful; being at the service of others; carrying out at least some corporal work of mercy on a regular basis.

Suitability

This entails personal effort aimed at acquiring the necessary requisites for exercising as best we can our tasks and duties with intelligence and insight. It also represents our human response to divine grace, when we let ourselves follow the famous dictum: "Do everything as if God did not exist and then put it all in God's hands as if you did not exist". It is the approach of the disciple who prays to the Lord every day in the words of the beautiful Universal Prayer attributed to Pope Clement XI: "Conduct me by your wisdom, restrain me by your justice, comfort me by your mercy, defend me by your power. To you I desire to consecrate all my thoughts, words, actions and sufferings; that henceforth I may think only of you, speak of you, refer all my actions to your greater glory, and suffer willingly whatever you appoint."

Parents need to always try to improve in how they are carrying out their task, at the same time as relying on God's grace to fill in for any deficiencies. Ideas for improvement can come from listening to one's spouse and children and reflecting on what they say. A daily examination of conscience is also a useful means to help us improve.

Spirituality

Spirituality is what nourishes all our activity, sustaining and protecting it from human frailty and daily temptation.

A lively relationship with God, through prayer, the Eucharist and reading the Word of God provides the backbone of all service, particularly that of parents. The temptation is to think that one does not have time to pray or to go to Mass other than on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. In point 448 of *Furrow*, St Josemaria wrote:

You haven't been praying? Why, because you haven't had time?

But you do have time. Furthermore, what sort of works will you be able to do if you haven't meditated on them in the presence of the Lord, so as to put them in order? Without that conversation with God, how can you finish your daily work with perfection? Look, it's as if you claimed you had no time to study because you were too busy giving lessons... Without study you can't teach well.

Prayer has to come before everything. If you understand this and don't put it into practice, don't tell me that you have no time: it's simply that you don't want to pray!

And, as Pope Benedict wrote in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*:

The saints—consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta—constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbour from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others... In the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta we have a clear illustration of the fact that time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract from effective and loving service to our neighbour but is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service. In her letter for Lent 1996, Blessed Teresa wrote to her lay co-workers: "We need this deep connection with God in our daily life. How can we obtain it? By prayer."

Humanity

Humanity is what embodies the truthfulness of our faith; those who renounce their humanity renounce everything. Humanity is what makes us different from machines and robots which feel nothing and are never moved. Once we find it hard to weep seriously or to laugh heartily—these are just two signs—we have begun our decline and the process of turning from "humans" into something else. Humanity is knowing how to show tenderness and fidelity and courtesy to all.

Pope Benedict wrote in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*:

The earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion.

Christians have a role to play in humanising society which, without God, would otherwise tend towards

severity and coldness in relationships and focus on strict justice rather than compassion. This starts within the family, where children learn how to deal with their siblings, parents and other family members with generosity, kindness and affection, having seen their parents doing the same.

Innocuousness

Innocuousness makes us cautious in our judgments and capable of refraining from impulsive and hasty actions. It is the ability to bring out the best in ourselves, in others and in all kinds of situations by acting carefully and attentively. It consists of doing to others what we would have them do to us.

St Josemaria gave the following advice to parents:

I recommend being calm with your children. Don't hit them because you feel like it. The children get angry, you become annoyed. You suffer because you love them very much and, besides, you have to calm down afterwards. Be patient. Scold them when you are no longer angry and when you're alone with them. Don't humiliate them in front of their brothers and sisters. Reason with them a little, so that they realize they ought to act in another way because in that way they can please God.

Openness

Openness is honesty and rectitude, consistency and absolute sincerity with regard both to ourselves and to God. An honest and open person does not act virtuously only when he or she is being watched; honest persons have no fear of being caught, since they never betray the trust of others. An honest person is never domineering like the "wicked servant" (Mt 24:48–51), with regard to the persons or matters entrusted to his or her care. Honesty is the foundation on which all other qualities rest.

One could say that this is the aim of all character building, both for ourselves and for our children. Simeon, the old man who encounters the Holy Family at the Presentation in the Temple (Lk 2:25–38), is one of my favourite minor characters of the Gospels and a great model of the upright man.

Practicing and teaching sincerity is a challenge, as we are all tempted to show ourselves off in a better light than we deserve; even at times trying to fool ourselves. As the saying goes: *The world's best business would be to buy people for what they are worth and sell them for what they think they are worth.* We all have work to do there!