

The Role of the Family in Promoting Education

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As my husband and I have not been blessed with children, my professional involvement in promoting and developing schools has been as a ‘spiritual parent’. Perhaps this fact has led me to have an objective appreciation of the role of parents in education. I refer to the great dynamic created when parents are motivated to make their role as educators a top priority.

I thank the Founder of Opus Dei for opening my eyes to the beauty of being a mother in spirit, which in turn has illumined for me the profound truth of Pope John Paul II’s observation that, “the educator ‘begets’ in a spiritual sense”¹. Josemaría Escrivá’s advice to married couples not blessed with children has heartened me time and again over the years when my hopes of physical motherhood went unfulfilled. His advice to see in this situation that God was asking something more of my husband and me, something bound up with the care and education of other people’s children, has been a consolation and an inspiration.

My appreciation of the role of parents as educators really began when my husband and I, as young teachers, compared notes about the very different Sydney schools we knew. Our work with our pupils was clearly limited by a lack of communication between teachers and parents. Not only did we both experience lack of motivation in parents to communicate with teachers, but that both government and non-government schools did not encourage this. For a teacher interested in educating the whole child, this limitation was professionally frustrating. Whenever I took the initiative to communicate with a pupil’s parents, my effort

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families*, 16.

had positive effects but it was not normal practice for a teacher to take such initiative.

It was a revelation in 1978 when I visited schools in Europe inspired by the Founder of Opus Dei. I began to appreciate the natural dynamic that exists between home and school and to see that this must be harnessed for optimum results in educating a child.

Not only did my experience in Europe show me how parents could become responsible educators of their children, but also the heights to which awareness of their role could take some inspired parents. This included making enormous sacrifices to establish schools that reflected their role and were a service to other parents and to society. The Founder of Opus Dei made reference to the strength of the bonds of fraternity, commenting on a verse of Sacred Scripture: “a brother helped by a brother is like a walled city”². Beyond this, in the effort to pursue a common ideal, families grow in fruitfulness, spirit of service, respect and understanding. In this way, the true meaning of fraternity results in the idea of a common educational service: parents being educated by other parents³. It was unforgettable to meet several of the original founders of such schools in Spain who had personally known the Founder of Opus Dei and who spoke of the vision he inspired in them and of their early efforts, together with teachers similarly inspired, to make that vision a reality.

These pioneers passed on Josemaría Escrivá’s original inspiration. These parents realized that it was up to them to start such schools for their children, as this is part of their responsibility in providing for the education of their children. They suggested that in future years, as we toiled to establish similar independent initiatives in Australia, we should return again and again to the ideal we had discovered, lifting our gaze as to a star in the heavens. They also spoke of the great worth of promoting the idea of parents as educators even to those who might not ultimately choose the schools we offered.

A consequence of parents taking their role as educators seriously was the support this provided for teachers. Teachers became partners with parents in teamwork and could see their own authority as ‘delegated’ to them on trust. Furthermore, the focus on parents as the first educators of character in children respected the parameters of teachers’ professional work and empowered them to focus more effectively on their pedagogical task. It encouraged teachers to become educators who could complement parents in forming children in virtue. It challenged teachers to grow in virtue. This was an answer to the professional

² *The Way*, 460.

³ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families*, 16.

frustration which dedicated teachers everywhere experienced in all kinds of schools.

These schools, inspired by the Founder of Opus Dei, which recognized that parents are the first protagonists in education, followed by teachers, then students, deepened my conviction about the importance of tapping into ‘parent potential’. In considering this new approach to the educative community, I began to realize that here was a means of helping parents everywhere, in all kinds of schools, to discover their fundamental competence as parents. This emphasis on parents went to a universal truth which Pope John Paul II would later express in 1994, the Year of the Family, when he said, “(Parents) are educators because they are parents”⁴.

1. FAMILY AND SCHOOL: A JOINT PROJECT

In a school, the parents are the most important element, followed by the teachers and then the pupils. The order of priority within the school community recommended by the Founder of Opus Dei challenged the child centred approaches to learning that had begun to dominate teacher training in Australia. The vision which the Founder of Opus Dei gave to parents of their role as educators, encompassed a close working relationship within a unique triangle of communication that personalized education and united parents, teachers and pupils. This personalizing of education, as a consequence of the message of the Founder of Opus Dei, would become increasingly important as society itself became depersonalized.

An outstanding feature of these schools was the service parents volunteered in various aspects of school life. This included serving on school management bodies, contributing to parent formation sessions, caring for the parents of their children’s class in times of hardship, encouraging family spirit, organizing fund-raising activities and assisting at extracurricular and sporting activities. I knew that in all schools many parents volunteered assistance but that it often began and ended with external activities. These schools were different because they reminded parents that as the first educators of their children, their primary focus must be on that task. All other involvement in the life of the school was valuable but of secondary importance.

The really dynamic element I witnessed in these schools in Europe, and later in Asia and America, then in Australia, was the way parents grew personal-

⁴ *Ibidem*.

ly through taking their role as educators seriously. They were able to foster a genuine solidarity of family to family. In Australia it has been especially gratifying to see newer parents learn from more experienced parents to contribute to parent formation activities, to foster friendships and co-operation, and to organize practical assistance for other families in testing situations such as family illness or new births.

The nature of the parent-to-parent dynamic arising from the common vision inspiring these schools cannot be overemphasized. Over the more than twenty years since the first of these schools opened in Australia the enthusiasm and conviction of parents for the foundational ideals has been the best means of 'selling' the schools to prospective parents. The fact that parents in other Australian cities, in neighbouring New Zealand, and recently in Singapore, have requested the advice of our organization Pared (Parents for Education Foundation) about setting up similar schools, highlights the enduring universal appeal of the idea of parents as educators and its power to harness human hearts and minds for a profound task.

The Sydney schools inspired by the Founder of Opus Dei have witnessed the emergence of a genuine 'culture of life' as defined by John Paul II⁵. One recent example of this among many came from a mother at the newest of the three schools, who converted to Catholicism with her husband and two children after two years' enrolment. Commenting on the impact of the school on her family, this mother said that she felt as though they had come more to a family than to a school. Such examples have their dynamic origin and their potential development in the possibilities opened up by the specific understanding of the educational community about which Josemaría Escrivá spoke.

2. THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE FAMILY

These years of experience have enabled us to see for ourselves that the participation and the influence of families in the public sphere through the development of initiatives for freedom in education, has great potential for enriching education and society.

In 1979, I was fortunate while in Europe to attend an international congress on the family in Rome where, thanks to the attendance of my husband and me, the five continents were represented. As we were professionally inexperienced, from a far distant country, and not parents ourselves, it was an education

⁵ See for example JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*.

to be surrounded by wonderful couples from North and South America, Asia and Africa, who had had long experience in family initiatives inspired by the Founder of Opus Dei. We were especially delighted to discover that several Asian countries in Australia's geographical neighbourhood, such as Japan and the Philippines, had adapted the ideas to their cultures. It was time for Australia to experience them!

The experience of parents in Ireland in establishing similar schools was especially valuable because the cultural, legal and social frameworks there were similar to Australia's. Visiting Dublin during 1979 provided an opportunity to see first hand how the philosophy of education inspired by the Founder of Opus Dei had adapted itself to a different culture but maintained the essential focus on parents as first educators. It was also invaluable to attend several meetings in Dublin homes with the Irish school promoters to see how the ideals of parent-focused schooling could be marketed in a social context similar to Australia's.

Once back in Australia, armed with a vision, conviction and a modest bank loan, my husband and I with several committed parents and professional educators set about adapting Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer's ideals to Australia. For two years we worked to lay the foundations. In promoting the first school of this type in Australia, I was privileged to visit many parents, mostly strangers, in their homes, and to speak seriously with them about their hopes for their children, about the nature of the schools we proposed and about the meaning of education. Time after time, I remembered the advice of the school founders in Spain that it was always profoundly worthwhile speaking to parents about education even if ultimately they did not choose the schools we were offering them.

Over twenty years have passed since I first visited a school inspired by Josemaría Escrivá and in that time his inspiration has taken firm root in Australian soil. The initial enrolment has grown steadily from seventeen pupils in 1982 to over one thousand in 2002. This is only a small beginning for Australia, but it is a beginning.

The not-for-profit corporation established by a handful of individuals, PARED, now operates three schools with a fourth on the horizon. PARED has also established Family Education Australia which runs parenting courses in Sydney and in several other capital cities and acts as a natural promotional source for the schools.

The vision of parents as educators, inspired by Blessed Josemaría, is a light for Australian society. This is very important because our society has become confused about the nature and role of the family. The PARED schools have attracted a significant number of non-Catholic and even non-Christian parents, including several of the Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu religions. This is proof that the ideals the Founder of Opus Dei inspired can unite very different people in a common

vision and a great common task and is a very promising sign for Australia's future and contribution to education in the Asian region.

The ideals underpinning the PARED schools have been communicated to many individuals outside the schools, including politicians, academics and bureaucrats in government, in banking and finance and in educational bodies. More recently, the PARED Foundation has participated in national conferences on the family and made submissions to government on topics related to parenting and the family/school relationship. Individuals in both school and university education have requested information from PARED on parents as educators. Several of the schools' senior staff members have made significant contributions to professional teaching bodies, journals and newspapers on the role of parents and teachers as educators and in character development.

An important area where PARED is contributing in Australia is in the debate about parental rights and freedom in education. Blessed Josemaría also spoke about the importance of defending freedom in this area as follows:

“The right to found educational centres is only one aspect of freedom in general. I consider personal freedom necessary for everyone and in everything that is morally lawful. Hence, every person or association in a position to do so should have the possibility of founding centres of education under equal conditions and without unnecessary obstacles [...] That is why I consider autonomy in teaching necessary: autonomy is another way of saying academic freedom”⁶.

These ideas inspired us to work with people from other countries, to establish and develop OIDEL, an international organization based in Geneva that promotes the right to education and academic freedom.

Historically, it has been largely thanks to the Catholic Church's commitment to choice in schooling and its efforts on behalf of parents, that there is both a nominal recognition of the right of all parents to choice in schooling and significant government financial support for this in Australia today. Thirty-one percent of Australian children attend non-government schools and this figure is increasing. The amount of government funding for non-government schools, although not equal to that of government schools, has certainly facilitated PARED's initiatives. However, this is threatened by increasingly outspoken ideologues and politicians who argue that parents do have a right to choice in schooling but not the right to government funding of that choice.

⁶ *Conversations*, 79.

Pope John Paul II has also pointed out that in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the State has a responsibility to give assistance to parents in the education of their children, but that the parents always have the 'fundamental competence' in this area⁷. It follows from natural principles that educational systems should be centered on the family and allow for freedom of initiative and choice. These allusions go to the heart of the debate in Australia in which PARED takes a keen interest. It touches one of the most fundamental issues in the life of a democracy, namely parental rights in education. It is not a matter, as some say, of taking from the public school to give to the private school. Rather, it is a case of overcoming the obstacles faced by families in providing the education they want for their children, insofar as these hinder effective freedom of initiative and choice.

The funding of parental choice in schooling is an issue that affects all parents and in Australia it is increasingly vital that both government and non-government school parents become more aware of their rights and responsibilities in education and defend the freedom of all. In this endeavour, thanks to the Founder of Opus Dei's inspiration, PARED is poised to make a worthwhile contribution.

From the outset, the PARED schools have participated in the public debate in defence of freedom in education and taken opportunities, in solidarity with other schools and educational groups, to promote ideals of freedom in education based on parental rights and the principle of subsidiarity. In 2001, for example, PARED presented written and oral submissions to a state government review of non-government schools, emphasizing the rights of parents in education as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and describing our experience of parent involvement in promoting and creating schools. Various parents of the PARED schools also made submissions as private citizens.

In 2001, PARED was invited by the peak organization representing non-government parents in New South Wales to speak about parents as educators and promoters of parental rights in schooling. That body is composed of parents of long established, prestigious non-government schools. Several of the non-Catholic parents expressed the wish that their own school communities might adopt similar approaches to PARED's. Here again we witness the universal appeal of the ideals Josemaría Escrivá first inspired in parents over fifty years ago.

Promoting parents as educators in Australia is also a counter to the consumer mentality that proposes that someone other than parents will educate children. Within both the government and non-government school sectors there are

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families*, 16.

many parents who are content to let others educate their children, either the government school, which does it virtually for free, or the non-government school, to which parents pay substantial fees. The empowering vision of parents as the first, most important educators of children can inspire a new generation of parents to want more than materialistic solutions to the challenge of parenting.

Ultimately, one of the greatest fruits of the Founder of Opus Dei's vision of parents as educators, is the much-needed opportunity it gives to reinforce the role of the family as the basis of society. PARED's other key initiative, Family Education Australia, has successfully offered courses for parents of very young children in several capital cities in Australia and is reaching out to a wider market of parents. Its potential is great. Young, idealistic couples, some of whom have experienced their parents' divorce, are increasingly hungry for knowledge of, and encouragement in, their task as parents.

PARED maintains an informal affiliation with similar schools and educators around the world, in particular in the United States, Spain, Ireland, Japan, the Philippines, and more recently, Singapore and Kenya. It is convinced that the natural reality that parents are the key protagonists in education must be re-discovered within Australia and in all cultures as part of the re-building of stable societies. The impetus for new parent initiatives based on the inspiration of Blessed Josemaría can be carried forward by parents from very different ethnic, socio-economic and religious backgrounds, united in the common conviction that they are the first educators of their children.

For Australia, the role of parents as educators and as promoters of educational initiatives is increasingly important. With the breakdown of marriage and the family unit, with the loss of parental authority and with a growing view of the child as a product rather than as a unique person with human rights, the emphasis on parental responsibility and parental leadership in education can play a vital role in social rejuvenation. Parental involvement in education ultimately means strengthening the family in Australia since as Pope John Paul II has pointed out, the future of humanity passes by way of the family⁸.

I have been privileged to see Josemaría Escrivá's ideas about parents as educators take root in my own country. Australia is culturally and geographically far away from where those first parents established family schools, yet the light of that initiative has reached a long way. I believe the vision for parents that the Founder of Opus Dei inspired has the potential to greatly enrich education and society in my own country and answers a key challenge confronting the new millennium, namely, the affirming of the value and rights of the human person.

⁸ Cfr. *Letter to Families*.

I close with some words of Blessed Josemaría in which he described the essence of families who became imbued with the light of Christ and were capable of changing the world and which, thanks to his influence, I now see in Australia: “Families who lived in union with Christ and who made him known to others. Small Christian communities which were centres for the spreading of the Gospel and its message. Families no different from other families of those times, but living with a new spirit, which spread to all those who were in contact with them. This is what the first Christians were, and this is what we have to be: sowers of peace and joy, the peace and joy that Jesus has brought to us”⁹.

⁹ *Christ is passing by*, 30.