



CATHOLIC HOMESCHOOLING

ARLINGTON DIOCESE POSITION PAPER

Spring 2003

Dear Friends in Christ:

The Church has long recognized that parents have the primary responsibility for passing on the faith to their children. This task begins with the birth of each child. As children grow, however, and this task becomes more complex, the Church offers a variety of programs to support the parents' efforts.

Over the years, the Church has fostered a number of means for assisting parents: wonderful Catholic schools, CCD programs, family or home-based catechetical programs, and a host of other diocesan religious education efforts. These programs have proven very effective in helping parents fulfil their right and duty of education.

A relatively new phenomenon is found among parents who choose to provide their children with homeschooling. These parents vary in the extent to which they provide education at home. Some provide the full curriculum; others offer only catechesis. While these guidelines are applicable to a wide range of educational experiences, the primary focus is on those parents who have chosen to provide their children's catechesis in the home.

Homeschooling is a gift to the Church for it adds another dimension to the teaching apostolate. We offer this booklet as a source for information on Catholic homeschooling in the Diocese of Arlington—and a guidebook for cooperation between parishes and families. Its purpose is to encourage, to assist, and to support the homeschooling effort within the local Church.

We look forward to a future of mutual support as the Church and her families enter a new millennium. The ministry of total Catholic Education can only be enhanced by the positive dynamism that Catholic homeschoolers bring to the Church.

Sincerely,

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PART I. What is Homeschooling?

Because of its newness, Catholic homeschooling is sometimes misunderstood and misrepresented. The majority of Catholic parents who homeschool their children do not want to be seen as separating themselves from the Church's teaching mission, but as an integral part of the apostolate of Catholic education. Parents who have elected to homeschool their children have made a generous commitment of time, effort and energy. They recognize the totality of such a commitment and have accepted the fullness of its responsibility.

The details of homeschooling life vary from home to home. A study group established by the Diocese of Baltimore in 1996 concluded that it was impossible to make general conclusions about Catholic home educators. The group, which was itself made up of homeschooling families and education leaders, spent several months studying issues of concern to local Catholic homeschoolers and trying to find the best ways the Church could affirm and assist homeschoolers in their life and work.

The terms "homeschooling" and "home education" are used to describe the work of parents who have undertaken, to any degree and for any length of time, the formal religious or academic formation of their children—work which has been traditionally carried out in institutional classrooms.

In that light, a key issue for homeschooling is the topic of catechesis: the means and methods that Catholic families use to pass on the faith. Home-catechized families have been found to fall into five general categories:

- Families who provide academic and religious instruction at home, based on parental choice of material;
- Families who provide academic and religious instruction at home and also use parish CCD classes;
- Families who send their children to public school and use a parish-based or parish-supplied curriculum for religious education;
- Families who send their children to public school and provide religious instruction at home, based on parental choice of material;
- Families who send their children to public school and agree to provide religious education at home because of a scheduling conflict with parish CCD classes.

The first two groups make up the great majority of families who identify themselves as homeschoolers. Some of these Catholic home educators do not belong to a support group, Catholic or otherwise; and as a whole they reflect the Catholic population in general, varying in their practice of the faith.

PART II. Foundations of Catholic Homeschooling

As the American Bishops wrote in their pastoral letter *To Teach As Jesus Did*, catechesis “is a perennial task and joy for the Church of Jesus Christ...[Yet] rarely if ever has it been more pressing a need, more urgent a duty and more ennobling a vocation.” Most recently, over the past decade, we have witnessed an emergence of a new—yet traditional—way of teaching the faith to the young: through Catholic home education.

THE PARENT AS PRIMARY EDUCATOR

“Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children,” says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2223). “They bear witness to this responsibility first by *creating a home* where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity and disinterested service are the rule. The home is well-suited for education in the virtues.” In his 1994 *Letter to Families*, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Parents are the first and most important educators of their own children, and they also possess a fundamental competence in this area; they are educators because they are parents” (16).

Catholic home educators have taken this teaching literally and taken it to heart. They have responded generously with their time, attention, and love, giving their days over to the personal care and tutoring of their children. Yet they do not labor alone. The community of faith finds order in the principle of subsidiarity, according to which “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1883). The principle of subsidiarity dictates that parents receive proper assistance from the Church in this, their task of education. “For parents by themselves are not capable of satisfying every requirement of the whole process of raising children, especially in matters concerning their schooling... Subsidiarity thus complements paternal and maternal love and confirms its fundamental nature, inasmuch as all other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities *in the name of the parents, with their consent*, and to a certain degree, *with their authorization* (*Letter to Families* 16). The Church, at the Diocesan and Parish levels, should in no way hinder parents from exercising their option to homeschool. If the local Church can assist the family in any way, she should. This duty of the Church was expressed by the U.S. bishops in *To Teach as Jesus Did*: “While it was relatively easy in more stable times for parents to educate their children and transmit their values to them, the immense complexity of today’s society makes this a truly awesome task. Without forgetting, then, that parents are the first to communicate the faith to their children and to educate them, the Church must make a generous effort today to help them to fulfill their duty.” Thus the generosity shown by homeschooling

parents should inspire in pastors and educators an equal impulse to generous service. It should be noted, however, that while parents are the primary educators, their interpretation of doctrine can never supersede the legitimate teaching authority set over them in the Church.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHING CHURCH

Catechesis is the work of the whole Church, but the Church's members have different responsibilities (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae* 16). Parents are their children's primary educators, but not their only educators. The teaching Church is the guarantor of the soundness of Christian doctrine—the revealed truth that comes from Jesus Christ—whenever that doctrine is conveyed. Parents are obligated to fulfill their duties, as are priests and bishops, and *all must cooperate* in this single endeavor to educate in Christ's name. There is no other authentically Catholic way to teach except in union with the Pope and one's Bishop. "Because of their charge, pastors have, at differing levels, the chief responsibility for fostering, guiding and coordinating catechesis" (*Catechesi Tradendae* 16).

The details of homeschooling life vary from home to home. The uniqueness of family life will correspond to the experience of homeschooling. Homeschooling or home education can be described as the work of parents who have undertaken, to any degree and for any length of time, the formal religious or academic formation of their children, work that has been traditionally carried out in institutional classrooms.

EDUCATION AND COMMUNION

Though all things living fall with the loving interest of the Church, it is not within the scope of this document to examine the many issues surrounding academics in home education. The Church's primary concern in education is catechesis.

The authority of parents and pastors has sometimes come into conflict because of the wide variety of readings of current diocesan policies for sacramental preparation. Homeschooling families should not be unduly burdened in sacramental years. In general, if they are providing their children regular and thorough catechesis, they should not be required to attend additional parish religious education classes. The pastor, however, has the responsibility to evaluate readiness for reception of a given sacrament (cf. *Quam Singulari*), and he should clearly state for all parish families how he will determine that readiness. Again, this process should not be burdensome to the family or traumatic to the children, and the requirements home catechized children should be neither more nor less demanding than they are for other children. When service projects or other works are required, the parents may be entrusted to oversee the works.

Here it must be acknowledged that not all homeschoolers who are Catholic are providing adequate catechesis. The home-education movement is broad-based, and as it grows it takes in more Catholic adults who are not attending Sunday Mass and who may not be well-schooled themselves in Catholic doctrine. The children of such parents may not be dispensed from parish religious education programs simply because they are homeschooling. The pastor and his delegates are called upon to use discretion and prudence, so that the devout are not slighted because of the lax, and the lax are not further encouraged in their laxity. Furthermore, while parents are the primary educators, their interpretation of doctrine can never supercede the legitimate teaching authority set over them in the Church.

PART III. Homeschooling in the Church of Arlington

Home is where the school is for a growing number of families in the Diocese of Arlington. Estimates vary, and growth continues at such a pace that it is impossible to say how many local parents have discerned the vocation to home education. In our diocese, several support groups meet regularly serving the specific needs of homeschooling Catholics.

The Diocese of Arlington recognizes this movement as a gift to the Church. The popes of the twentieth century have called on parents to be primary educators of their children. Homeschooling parents have responded to this in a most comprehensive way, often making great sacrifices for the sake of their children's care. In doing this, they are exercising a right that comes from God; they are fulfilling a religious duty in a beautiful and sometimes heroic way. In their love for their children, their generosity, and their willingness to make great sacrifices for the sake of education, they offer an outstanding and exemplary witness in our parish communities.

Because of the newness of the movement, homeschooling is often not well known or understood in a community. This is sometimes the case in our parishes, where some homeschooling families feel as if they don't "fit" into parish life—they are neither typical Catholic school households nor typical CCD households. As a result, some feel reluctant to approach their pastor or director for religious education about assistance in sacramental preparation.

Some pastors, on the other hand, are unaware of the homeschooling phenomenon or are subject to misconceptions about it. Some, perhaps, see homeschooling as a movement of "protest" against their own efforts, although, for some homeschooling families, that is not the case. Many parents who choose home education do so because they have discerned it as a calling from God, because they enjoy the company of their children, and because they want to be there for the multiplication tables, just as they were there when baby took her first steps.

Within parishes, pastors and homeschooling families should have clear lines of communication, particularly in areas that are essential to the children's growth in faith. Especially at times of sacramental preparation, homeschooling families should feel as much a part of the parish as other families do, even though their children are not required to attend the same classroom formation as other children. The Church is made one in the sacrament, not in the educational technique or textbook.

The parish should share the local Church's catechetical and sacramental guidelines with homeschooling families. These guidelines follow the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as well as the Vatican's *General Catechetical Directory* and the U.S. Bishops' *National Catechetical Directory*, setting some minimum

expectations for catechesis at every grade level. The methods by which home educators meet these guidelines will vary greatly from home to home, and the Church respects this diversity. Some will follow packaged curricula; others will rely more on oral teaching, personal service, and primary texts such as the Bible, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *The Teaching of Christ* and the lives of the saints. The care of the Church is that her doctrine be taught in its completeness—comprehending the dimensions of worship, service and community—and that the methods and content of catechesis be age-appropriate and free from error in matters of faith and morals.

The following are the position statements of the Diocese on homeschooling:

- When properly undertaken, homeschooling is a valid ministry in the Church and makes a positive contribution to total Catholic education.
- Pastors have the canonical responsibility to insure the orthodoxy and completeness of home catechetical instruction.
- Homeschooling parents are to meet with the parish's Director of Religious Education to discuss their plans for catechesis, if they intend to include catechesis as part of their homeschooling efforts. Many parishes offer family catechesis programs that respect home catechesis while supporting the parents.
- The immediate catechesis for a sacrament is a freestanding program apart from any Catholic school or parish religious education program. This immediate catechesis involves the candidate, the candidate's parents and the parish community. Therefore, the homeschooling parents are to discuss with the Director of Religious Education how their children will be part of the parish's freestanding program for the immediate preparation and celebration of any sacrament.
- The Offices of Catholic Schools and Catechetics welcome participation of homeschooling parents to the annual Diocesan Education Institute and the Catechetical Conference. These opportunities will assist the parents in participating in workshops, as well as to explore educational materials that would be helpful in their overall ministry.
- The Diocesan Audio-Visual library will provide educational materials to homeschooling parents.

Among some other possibilities:

- The ability to enroll for selected classes in Catholic schools
- Use of school and parish facilities for athletics and other activities;

- Participation in league and intramural sports;
- Programs for children with disabilities and other special needs;
- The use of diocesan facilities for gatherings of families;
- Assistance from Catholic school teachers as evaluators to fulfill state requirements;
- Creating more effective means of communication, in official diocesan media and through the parishes.

PART IV. Catechesis and the Sacraments

RIGHTS, DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

What are the local Church's policies affecting home catechesis? What is required of students? of parents? of pastors? The following passages are drawn from diocesan documents and adapted for homeschooling families and their pastors.

Parents who wish to homeschool their children in religious education should schedule a meeting with a parish priest to discuss their plans for catechesis. Parishes, for their part, should make available to homeschooling parents any resources, such as textbooks and support materials, that the parish uses in religious education. Homeschooling families can elect to use these materials or other suitable materials of their own choosing. Though homeschooled children are expected to meet the same standards as other students (the published catechetical guidelines), they are not required to attend CCD or other classes. When service projects or other works are required, the parents may be entrusted to oversee the work.

In preparation for the sacraments, however, the children should attend rehearsals, and their parents should attend appropriate meetings for adults. All materials that parents choose for home catechesis should be sound in Catholic doctrine and in conformity with the published standards and teachings of the Church. Parents should review their educational materials with their pastor. It is the pastor whom the Church has called to work with parents to determine a child's readiness for reception of the sacraments. Both pastor and parent should be acquainted with the diocesan catechetical guidelines and the "Instrument for Evaluation of Catechetical Textbooks and Materials," promulgated to ensure texts' conformity with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Assistance in this important work is available through the Diocesan Office of Catechetics; please call 703/841-2519.

CONCLUSION

The fullness of Catholic education is predicated on the understanding that those who have been given the responsibility to teach accept the full scope of that responsibility in all of its dimensions. In matters of faith, all teachers are witnesses to the gospel message and pass on the living faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is the resource that guides our lessons and teachings.

It is understood that parents have options in how their children will be educated. It is the intent of the Diocese of Arlington to preserve the integrity of the parents' choice, as well as to nurture and establish open lines of communication.