

## Home Schooling and the Local Church

By

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### INTRODUCTION

Issues surrounding home schooling are a significant concern for the entire diocesan church. Because of the need for clarity in discussing the profound and fundamental issues surrounding home schooling, I will consolidate various definitions, canons and theological principles into this article for ease of reference. After analyzing these data, some conclusions will be suggested that will assist in ongoing dialogue between parents, pastors, diocesan staff and others interested in home schooling.

### WHAT IS HOME SCHOOLING?

It is important to understand what home schooling is and what it is not. Some people confuse family-centered catechesis (which may take place in the home) with home schooling, which it is not. For clarity, therefore, let me suggest the following descriptions of several forms of educational activity in the home.

- 1) **Total Home Schooling**: In this model parents take responsibility for the total education of their children in all subject areas, including religious education. This education takes place primarily in the home, with no particular catechetical connection to the parish. In this model, parents must coordinate their efforts with the local public school system to ensure all state requirements for home schooling are met.
- 2) **Home Schooling - Religious Education**: In this model children attend a public school and parents take total responsibility for the religious education of the children. In this model, sacramental preparation is handled either by the parents or by the parish.
- 3) **Educational Enrichment in the Home**: This is the model most parents use to some degree. Parents are active in the school and parish religious education programs and ensure that the implications of these curricula are lived and practiced in the home. School and religious education programs find their source and their fulfillment in family activities at home.
- 4) **Family-Centered Catechesis in the Home**: Family-Centered catechetical programs exist in many forms, from parish programs in which all family members come to the parish for separate programs

provided for various age groups, to programs involving multi-generational catechesis. Some of these programs are also offered for delivery at home. *These are parish programs taught by the parents at home.*

## REVIEW OF CANONICAL AND CATECHETICAL LITERATURE

### Introduction

Church teaching on the specific topic of home schooling, as described above, is silent. Nonetheless, magisterial teaching is rich regarding the role of parents as the prime educators of their children in faith, the role of the bishop and the diocesan church in catechesis, and the role of the community and the common good of all the faithful in the overall process of handing on the faith.

Three major sources will be reviewed in this section. First, the Code of Canon Law, not only because of the obvious legal implications, but because it codifies much of the church's conciliar and post-conciliar teaching until 1983. That is to say, the canons use as their sources magisterial teaching up to and including Vatican II. Various canons are also developed using post-conciliar teaching contained in papal encyclicals and other documents.

Second, we will examine Pope John Paul II's *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979), once referred to as "the charter for the new catechesis." Other similar documents exist, of course; this document is selected both because of its overall magisterial significance and because it represents faithfully the key concepts involved in this matter. Third and finally, we will consider teachings contained in the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis*.

### Code of Canon Law: Overview

The organization of the *Code* is significant, since various canons concerning catechesis and the persons involved in it are found in widely-dispersed sections of the *Code*. In order to appreciate them fully, one must have an understanding of the intent of the section in which they are found. The *Code* is divided into seven Books. The pertinent canons reviewed are from Book II: The People of God; Book III: The Teaching Office of the Church; and, Book IV: The Office of Sanctifying in the Church. Book II first addresses the obligations and rights of all the Christian faithful, followed by those obligations and rights pertaining to the lay Christian faithful. Then, specific canons pertaining to the clergy and the hierarchical structure of the church are provided. Book III offers canons on the Ministry of the Word, with sections on catechesis and Catholic

education. Finally, Book IV provides specific canons on the sacraments and the catechetical issues related to their proper celebration.

### 1. The Obligations and Rights of all the Christian Faithful

From the outset, it will be helpful to know exactly how canon law understands the terms *obligation* and *right*. Canon 223, which ends the section of the *Code* addressing the Obligations and Rights of All the Christian Faithful offers this insight: "In exercising their rights the Christian faithful, both as individuals and when gathered in associations, must take account of the common good of the Church and of the rights of others as well as their own duties toward others. In the interest of the common good, ecclesiastical authority has competence to regulate the exercise of the rights which belong to the Christian faithful" (c. 223, §1, 2; underlining added). Canonical rights, therefore, are never absolute, but are contingent upon the common good of the People of God; furthermore, the ecclesiastical authority of the Church may regulate the exercise of rights in order to assure the common good.

The 1917 Code referred to Rights and Obligations; the 1983 Code reverses the order and speaks of Obligations and Rights. When clarification was sought on this point during the revision of the Code, the Code Commission responded that the ordering was not significant, since both rights and obligations come from the sacraments. In this sense, then, some rights flow from obligations; at other times, obligations flow from rights.

Rights. . . give rise to obligations. When the common good calls for one to exercise a right, there is an obligation to do so. Similarly, one person's right produces a corresponding obligation in others to respect that right. Moreover, when one has an obligation to provide something for others, those others have a right to that service. Thus when the Code requires sacred ministers to preach (c. 767) or to provide the sacraments to those who seek them properly (c. 843), it is only expressing the reverse of the right to word and sacrament that is common to all the faithful (c. 213). . . . The common good always regulates the exercise of rights. Rights in this sense are not absolute but relative, for their exercise must respect the rights of others and the conditions needed for all to achieve their fulfillment (*The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, 137 - 138).

With this in mind, let us begin our review of the pertinent canons. Under the canons pertaining to ALL the Christian faithful, we find the canon which spells out the right of all the faithful to a Christian education:

*Canon 217: The Christian faithful since they are called by baptism to lead a life in conformity with the teaching of the gospel, have the right to a Christian education by which they will be properly instructed so as to develop the maturity of a human person and at the same time come to know and live the mystery of salvation.*

It is from this basic right to Christian education enjoyed by all the Christian faithful that other rights and obligations emerge: parents have the obligation and right to educate their children, and the Church has the obligation and right to coordinate the catechetical enterprise, to establish schools and other institutions to assist the Christian people in exercising their right to a Christian education. But all of these flow from this fundamental right of all the Christian faithful to Christian formation and education.

## 2. The Obligations and Rights of the Lay Christian Faithful

The subsequent canons provide the obligations and rights of the lay Christian faithful. Canon 226 addresses the obligation of the married lay faithful to build up the people of God, and then addresses the subsequent obligation and right to educate their children:

*§1: Lay persons who live in the married state in accord with their own vocation are bound by a special duty to work for the upbuilding of the people of God through their marriage and their family. §2: Because they have given life to their children, parents have a most serious obligation and enjoy the right to educate them; therefore Christian parents are especially to care for the Christian education of their children according to the teachings handed on by the Church.*

Two things are of particular note here: 1) the prior and primary responsibility of the married lay Christian faithful is the same as mentioned in Canon 223 above: the building up of the People of God, the common good; it is from this basic obligation that the rest of the canon emerges; 2) by stressing that Christian parents have an obligation and right to educate their children “according to the teachings handed on by the Church,” the Church is reminding

parents that they have the obligation to teach truth, not personal opinion or personal interpretation of the truth. The education provided must present the teachings of the church in all their richness. The children have that right, as already seen in Canon 217.

### 3. The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church: Particular Churches

It is crucial to understand the role of the bishop in the life of the Church, and in particular, his obligations and rights with regard to leadership (*munus regendi*), teaching (*munus docendi*) and sanctifying (*munus sanctificandi*).

*Canon 375, §1: Through the Holy Spirit who has been given to them, bishops are the successors of the apostles by divine institution; they are constituted pastors within the Church so that they are teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship and ministers of governance. §2. By the fact of their episcopal consecration bishops receive along with the function of sanctifying also the functions of teaching and ruling, which by their very nature, however, can be exercised only when they are in hierarchical communion with the head of the college and its members.*

Of particular importance is the reminder that bishops are more than mere social leaders: they hold their office through the action of the Holy Spirit and serve as successors to the Apostles "by divine institution." Furthermore, Canon 381, §1 states: "A diocesan bishop in the diocese committed to him possesses all the ordinary, proper and immediate power which is required for the exercise of his pastoral office except for those cases which the law or a decree of the Supreme Pontiff reserves to the supreme authority of the Church or to some other ecclesiastical authority." The official commentary on this canon states:

The first paragraph of this canon reaffirms a noteworthy point of conciliar teaching on the episcopal office: the bishops govern their churches as vicars and ambassadors of Christ, not as vicars of the Roman Pontiff (LG 27). Accordingly, they have all the power necessary for the exercise of their pastoral office by divine right; such a power has an existence of its own apart from the papacy (CD 8a). This power is ordinary, i.e., related to his office; immediate, i.e., directly exercised over those entrusted to his care without an intermediary; and proper, i.e., exercised in his own name. This power of the bishop, which is

operative in legislative, judicial, and administrative matters is not confined to the sphere of government; it is operative throughout the whole range of the Church's work, which includes the threefold office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing.

With regard to catechesis and specifically the religious formation of children, we find that the bishop holds an immediate power for ministry; that is, it requires no intermediary. The bishop is the prime teacher of all persons within his diocese by divine right. With this right comes the obligation to exercise that right and the obligation for others to recognize and respect that right. The role of the bishop as teacher is further expounded by Canon 386, §1:

*The diocesan bishop is bound to present and explain to the faithful the truths of the faith which are to be believed and applied to moral issues, frequently preaching in person; he is also to see to the careful observance of the prescriptions of the canons concerning the ministry of the word, especially those concerning the homily and catechetical formation, so that the whole of Christian doctrine is imparted to all. §2. Through suitable means he is strongly to safeguard the integrity and unity of the faith to be believed while nevertheless acknowledging a rightful freedom in the further investigation of its truths.*

#### **4. The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church: Parishes, Pastors and Parochial Vicars**

Canon 515 describes how a parish is established within the particular (diocesan) church; specifically, the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop. Canon 519 further develops the description of the pastor:

*The pastor is the proper shepherd of the parish entrusted to him, exercising pastoral care in the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share; in accord with the norm of law he carries out for his community the duties of teaching, sanctifying and governing, with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful.*

With regard to teaching and sanctifying, the appropriate canon is Canon 528, §1:

*The pastor is obliged to see to it that the word of God in its entirety is announced to those living in the parish; for this reason he is to see to it that the lay Christian faithful are instructed in the truths of the faith, especially through the homily. . . and through the catechetical formation which he is to give. . . he is to take special care for the Catholic education of children and of young adults. . . .*

Completing the pastor's responsibilities under the tri-munera is Canon 529, (which addresses his functioning in governance) §2:

*The pastor is to acknowledge and promote the proper role which the lay members of the Christian faithful have in the Church's mission by fostering their associations for religious purposes; he is to cooperate with his own bishop and with the presbyterate of the diocese in working hard so that the faithful be concerned for parochial communion and that they realize that they are members both of the diocese and of the universal Church and participate in and support efforts to promote such communion.*

Of particular interest is the injunction that the pastor is to stress to the faithful the importance of the common good, in this case described as parochial communion and the realization that they are part of the larger (diocesan and universal) Church. The parish is not an independent, autonomous entity; it is an integral element of the local (i. e., diocesan church). In the words of *Lumen Gentium* 26: "In each altar community, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, a manifest symbol is to be seen of the charity and 'unity of the mystical body, without which there can be no salvation.' In these communities. . . Christ is present through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is constituted."

##### 5. The Teaching Office of the Church

At the very beginning of this section of the *Code*, we are reminded that catechesis is the overall responsibility of the diocesan bishop:

*Canon 773: There is a proper and serious duty, especially on the part of pastors of souls, to provide for the catechesis of the Christian people so that the faith of the faithful*

*becomes living, explicit and productive through formation in doctrine and the experience of Christian living.*

Note that “pastors of souls” refers to diocesan bishops and the pastors they appoint. The bishop, as the prime teacher of the faith in his diocese, is particularly responsible for the catechesis of all persons within the diocese so that, *through doctrine and the experience of Christian living*, their faith will become living, explicit and productive. The supervisory role of the bishop and pastor is further addressed in the next canon:

*Canon 774, §1: Under the supervision of legitimate ecclesiastical authority this concern for catechesis pertains to all the members of the Church in proportion to each one's role. §2. Parents above others are obliged to form their children in the faith and practice of the Christian life by word and example; godparents and those who take the place of parents are bound by an equivalent obligation.*

Of particular concern in this canon is the responsibility of each member of the Christian community for the catechesis of others. Parents in a special way are called to leadership in the formation of their children. *This obligation and right applies to all parents, no matter which tools, methods, and other instruments are used to assist them in this task.* In other words, this canon does not mandate home schooling as a preferred method of fulfilling their parental obligation. Furthermore, the entire canon flows from the realization that all of the community's shared responsibility for catechesis is exercised *under the supervision of legitimate ecclesiastical authority.*

How the bishop is to exercise this authority is addressed in the next several canons:

*Canon 775, §1: While observing the prescriptions of the Apostolic See it is the responsibility of the diocesan bishop to issue norms concerning catechetics and to make provision that suitable instruments for catechesis are available, even by preparing a catechism, if such seems appropriate, and by fostering and coordinating catechetical endeavors. §2. It is within the competence of the conference of bishops, with the prior approval of the Apostolic See, to see to it that catechisms are issued for its territory if such seems useful. §3. There can be established within the conference of bishops a catechetical office whose principal task would be to furnish assistance to the individual dioceses in catechetical matters.*

There are no restrictions placed on the bishop's obligation to issue catechetical norms for all persons within his diocese. This is seen as a responsibility of the bishop regardless of catechetical methods or structures employed (i.e., schools, religious education programs, home schooling, ministry formation programs).

The pastor shares in this catechetical responsibility.

***Canon 776:** In virtue of his office the pastor is bound to provide for the catechetical formation of adults, young people and children, to which end he is to employ the services of the clerics attached to the parish, members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life, with due regard for the character of each institute, and lay members of the Christian faithful, above all catechists; all of these are not to refuse to furnish their services willingly unless they are legitimately impeded. The pastor is to promote and foster the role of parents in the family catechesis mentioned in Canon 774, §2.*

The obligation and right of parents in the religious formation of their children is affirmed within the broader context of the overall catechesis of members of the parish. It is worth repeating that ***all parents***, regardless of the methods used, are obliged to provide family catechesis.

Canons 777 and 779 highlight the specific obligations of the pastor:

***Canon 779:** In accord with the norms established by the diocesan bishop, the pastor is to make particular provision: 1 ° that suitable catechesis is given for the celebration of the sacraments; 2 ° that children are properly prepared for the first reception of the sacraments of penance and Most Holy Eucharist and the sacrament of confirmation by means of a catechetical formation given over an appropriate period of time; 3 ° that children are fruitfully and deeply instructed through catechetical formation after the reception of First Communion. . . ."* **[Notice again that this entire canon flows from the notion of catechetical norms established by the diocesan bishop for the catechesis of all members of the parish. No allusion is made to any person or group of persons (e.g., parents) who are exempted from these norms.]**

***Canon 779:** Catechetical formation is to be given by employing all those helps, teaching aids and instruments of social communication which appear to be more effective in enabling the faithful in light of their characteristics, talents, age and conditions of life, to learn the Catholic teaching more fully and practice it more suitably.*

By enjoining on all the use of any and all means which will render catechesis more effective, the law seems to challenge everyone involved: clergy, parents, teachers, and administrators. No one means will be sufficient unto itself.

Canon law also provides for the preparation of all who are involved in catechesis. If parents are home schooling as it is traditionally understood (models one and two above), they are fulfilling their catechetical responsibility in a highly specialized manner and need to be concerned with their own preparation as catechists:

***Canon 780:** Local ordinaries are to see to it that catechists are duly prepared to fulfill their task correctly, namely, that continuing formation is made available to them, that they acquire a proper knowledge of the Church's teaching, and that they learn in theory and in practice the norms proper to the pedagogical disciplines.*

The importance of this canon to home schooling is particularly enlightening: it places the responsibility for the preparation of all catechists, including parents, in the hands of the diocesan bishop. Being a parent does not automatically give a person the skills necessary to effectively and accurately impart the religious formation demanded by the Church (see cc. 794 - 795 below).

Finally, in addressing Catholic Education, canon law specifically addresses the responsibility of parents, not only to educate their children, but also to choose the most appropriate means and institutions available to them. In exercising these rights, of course, there is a concurrent obligation to select those elements of educational assistance which present Catholicism in truth and in fullness.

***Canon 793, §1:** Parents as well as those who take their place are obliged and enjoy the right to educate their offspring; Catholic parents also have the duty and the right to select those means and institutions through which they can provide more suitably for the Catholic education of the children according to local circumstances. §2. Parents also have the right to make use of those aids to be furnished*

*by civil society which they need in order to obtain Catholic education for their children.*

The canons continue by grounding the entire religious education enterprise in the mission of the entire Church to help all persons “arrive at the fullness of Christian life:”

***Canon 794, §1:** The duty and right of educating belongs in a unique way to the Church which has been divinely entrusted with the mission to assist men and women so that they can arrive at the fullness of the Christian life. §2. Pastors of souls have the duty to arrange all things so that all the faithful may enjoy a Catholic education.*

***Canon 795:** Since a true education must strive for the integral formation of the human person, a formation which looks toward the person’s final end, and at the same time toward the common good of societies, children and young people are to be so reared that they can develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual talents, that they acquire a more perfect sense of responsibility and a correct use of freedom, and that they be educated for active participation in social life.*

The challenge of these last two canons is profound; it is especially challenging when total home schooling is used. Clearly the teaching of the church is that all education is to lead to salvation by the integral formation of the entire human person, including education for the common good of society, physical, moral and intellectual development, responsibility and freedom, and for active participation in social life. How this rich and diverse education can be provided is of concern to the entire Church and not only the nuclear family. For this reason, numerous institutions have been established to assist the family, and for that we turn to canons 796 and 798:

***Canon 796, §1:** Among educational means the Christian faithful should greatly value schools, which are of principal assistance to parents in fulfilling their educational task.*

*§2: It is incumbent upon parents to cooperate closely with the school teachers to whom they entrust their children to be educated; in fulfilling their duty teachers are to collaborate closely with parents who are to be willingly heard and for whom associations or meetings are to be inaugurated and held in great esteem.*

*Canon 798: Parents are to entrust their children to those schools in which Catholic education is provided; but if they are unable to do this, they are bound to provide for their suitable Catholic education outside the schools.*

While it would never be suggested that schools, even Catholic schools, would or could take the place of parents in the education and formation of their children, it should be noted that the role of the Catholic school is considered the highest form of assistance available to parents. This is particularly apparent in Canon 798 with its direction that parents "are to entrust their children" to schools which provide Catholic education. It is only in the absence of such schools that parents are to provide Catholic education outside the schools.

## *6. The Code and The Sacraments*

The final sections of canon law to be reviewed are those regarding the sacramental preparation of Catholics. Notice the overall responsibility of the pastor in carrying out the sacramental catechesis addressed in these canons:

*Canon 851, 2: The parents of an infant who is to be baptized and likewise those who are to undertake the office of sponsor are to be properly instructed in the meaning of this sacrament and the obligations which are attached to it; personally or through others the pastor is to see to it that the parents are properly formed by pastoral directions and by common prayer, gathering several families together and where possible visiting them.*

*Canon 914: It is the responsibility, in the first place, of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as the pastor to see that children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the divine food as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession; it is also for the pastor to be vigilant lest any children come to the Holy Banquet who have not reached the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed.*

This last canon describes well the partnership which must obtain between parents and pastor. Notice that it is also the role of the pastor to judge the sufficient disposition of the candidate.

Lastly, in addressing the sacrament of marriage, Canon 1136 repeats the well-established parental obligation and right to educate their children when it

says: "Parents have the most serious duty and the primary right to do all in their power to see to the physical, social, cultural, moral and religious upbringing of their children."

Catechesi Tradendae (John Paul II, October 16, 1979)

This document is Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation which followed the conclusion of the International Synod of Bishops of 1977, which focused on catechesis, especially the catechesis of children and youth. While there are several critical catechetical themes discussed in the document, of particular interest for us are its teachings concerning the role of the parish and the family in catechesis.

First, it is significant that, from the beginning of the document, catechesis is described as a responsibility of the entire church: "Catechesis is intimately bound up with the whole of the Church's life" (#13). The pope continues by observing that "... the Church has always looked on catechesis as a sacred duty and an inalienable right. . . a duty springing from a command given by the Lord and resting above all on those who in the New Covenant receive the call to the ministry of being pastors (#14). Finally, the pope writes that:

Catechesis always has been and always will be a work for which the whole Church must feel responsible and must wish to be responsible. But the Church's members have different responsibilities, derived from each one's mission. Because of their charge, pastors [bishops] have, at differing levels, the chief responsibility for fostering, guiding and coordinating catechesis. . . . On another level, parents have a unique responsibility. . . . It would be one of the best results of the General Assembly of the Synod that was entirely devoted to catechesis if it stirred up in the Church as a whole and in each sector of the Church a lively and active awareness of this differentiated but shared responsibility. (#16)

In a chapter aptly entitled "The Task Concerns Us All," John Paul turns his attention to the various persons responsible for catechesis throughout the Church. He first reminds all bishops that "you are beyond all others the ones primarily responsible for catechesis, the catechists par excellence." (63) Next he turns his attention to priests, telling them that "the Church expects you to neglect nothing with a view to a well-organized and well-oriented catechetical effort. . . . All believers have a right to catechesis; all pastors have the duty to provide it. (#64)

After addressing men and women religious and lay catechists, the pope turns his attention to the settings in which catechesis takes place. He first speaks of the parish, for while "it is true that catechesis can be given anywhere," he wishes to stress that

the parish community must continue to be the prime mover and pre-eminent place for catechesis. . . . [T]aking into account the necessary diversity of places for catechesis (the parish as such, families taking in children and adolescents. . . ) it is supremely important that all these catechetical channels should really converge on the same confession of faith, on the same membership of the Church, and on commitments in society lived in the same Gospel spirit: 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father.' That is why every big parish or every group of parishes with small numbers has the serious duty to train people completely dedicated to providing catechetical leadership (priests, men and women religious, and lay people), to provide the equipment needed for catechesis under all aspects, to increase and adapt the places for catechesis to the extent that it is possible and useful to do so, and to be watchful about the quality of the religious formation of the various groups and their integration into the ecclesial community. (#67)

After the parish, in paragraph 68 the pope turns his attention to the family, whose special character which is, "in a sense", irreplaceable. Because "education in the faith by parents should begin from the children's tenderest age", and because it is given through the ways the family helps each other grow in faith through Christian witness and the celebration of the sacraments, it "precedes, accompanies and enriches" all other forms of catechesis. The pope writes that

there cannot be too great an effort on the part of Christian parents to prepare for this ministry of being their own children's catechists and to carry it out with tireless zeal. Encouragement must also be given to the individuals or institutions that, through person-to-person contacts, through meetings, and through all kinds of pedagogical means, help parents to perform

their task: the service they are doing to catechesis is beyond price.

Finally, in paragraph 69, John Paul turns his attention to the school: "Together with and in connection with the family" the school provides catechesis with possibilities that are not to be neglected." "The special character of the Catholic school, the underlying reason for it, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the education of the pupils."

Once again, it is possible to discern quite clearly the ecclesial responsibility of the entire Church for catechesis. While the family's unique responsibility and obligation for catechesis is recognized, it is nonetheless to be seen only in partnership with the larger Church, especially the parish which is described as the pre-eminent place for catechesis. What is irreplaceable in the family's catechesis is the day-to-day loving environment in which each member of the family is brought into closer communion with each other and with God; to be irreplaceable does not, however, mean that it is sufficient. Catechesis is a "shared, but differentiated" responsibility. Catechesis, we are reminded, is the responsibility of all, under the supervision of the diocesan bishop, the "catechist par excellence."

The challenge to those involved in home schooling, including pastors and bishops, is to ensure the integration and partnership of all catechesis within the overall catechetical enterprise of the parish and diocese.

### *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

Paragraphs 2201 - 2233 of the *Catechism* provide a beautiful catechesis on the nature and the role of the family. Citing scripture and various magisterial documents, especially Vatican II, the *Catechism* provides a compendium of teaching already reviewed in the *Code of Canon Law* and *Catechesi Tradendae*: namely that the family is truly a "domestic church," that it is the "original cell of social life," and that parents have a crucial role in the education of their children. This role applies to all parents equally, as discussed above, regardless of the means and methods parents choose to fulfill that role.

Paragraph 2209 states:

The family must be helped and defended by appropriate social measures. Where families cannot fulfill their responsibilities, other social bodies have the duty of helping them and of supporting the

institution of the family. Following the principle of subsidiarity, larger communities should take care not to usurp the family's prerogatives or interfere with its life.

Some home schooling literature has caused confusion by an incorrect interpretation of this paragraph, suggesting a relationship which should obtain between the family and the parish or diocese; namely, that the parish or diocese should only be involved in the catechetical formation of children when "parents cannot fulfill their responsibilities" or when parents choose to delegate these responsibilities to the parish or to the civil community (in the case of public schools). Unfortunately, this is a misunderstanding of the teaching offered. First, the Church (either in parochial, diocesan, or universal expressions) is not a "social body" in the sense intended by this paragraph. Christ is the Head of the Church, and we are all baptized into Christ, with all of our various gifts and responsibilities forming "one vine with many branches." The Church has a right and obligation for catechesis, as discussed above, which is every bit as real and profound as that possessed by families. The Church's participation and dialogue with families is not a usurpation or interference in the life of the family, but a natural extension of the very unity we share in Christ and the fellowship we share in caring for each other in Christ's name. To think of the Church simply as a "social body" in possible opposition to the family is to misunderstand the very nature of the Church as the People of God and the Body of Christ.

Another paragraph which is subject to misunderstanding is #2229: "As those first responsible for the education of their children, parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental." It is important to read this statement in proper context, which is found in Vatican II's Declaration on Christian Education, #6. Two points need to be stressed:

- 1) This paragraph refers to the right of parents to choose a school which corresponds to their own convictions *as Catholic parents* in contrast to a school which may not provide an environment in which Catholic values may be taught (a public school) or in which anti-religious teachings are taught.
- 2) It is assumed by this paragraph that a parent's "convictions" are in total conformity to the teachings of the Catholic church. The *Catechism* is not asserting here that all convictions are of equal merit or that all convictions best reflect the full teaching of the Catholic church.

