



4. To see in the family the first and essential place of education

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In his vision for a more meaningful and effective global education, Pope Francis identified the family as “the first and essential place of education”. This may seem an almost obvious statement, given that before he affirmed that, “Education is above all a matter of love and responsibility handed down from one generation to another”. However, in today’s world of increased materialism and consumerism the family is not always the central place where children and young people are taken care of, loved and educated. Family might not be a stable point of reference for them especially when they grow older and make their first steps in adulthood.

In order to understand how we as Catholic Action can support families in their duty to educate their children, it is important for us to understand the challenges that parents are facing in being a consistent source of education of their children. In these few minutes it is difficult to discuss this matter in the depth, instead, we are going to share our part of our experience as parents and list some of the challenges that young couples that we know and people that we meet at Catholic Action and at our place of work have to honour their responsibility towards their children. Some of these challenges are also our challenges as well.

First, as Church we are not managing to pass on enough the message that parents are co-creators with God. Our Catechism classes in our parishes, Sunday mass homilies, religion lessons at school and other messages are not managing to instil in us Catholics how honoured and grateful we as parents should be, in being part of the implementation of God’s plan!

Even we two, did not have this perspective and consciousness until some years ago, and it was after the birth of our children that we came in touch with this great vision that God has for us as parents. We were always taught that having children is an obligation that comes with marriage. Of course, like many couples we married because we loved each other so much that we wanted to give-up a part of us to gain so much in embracing each other. Our children are the fruit of that love and of our openness to new life. However, the awareness that being parents is not only “doing God’s will” but above all, “being partners in God’s will”

changes the perspective of being a parent. It puts every single sacrifice we make for our children on another level.

If people are helped more to internalise this wonderful reality, they will approach marriage and parenthood in a much more committed and generous manner, and they will be in a better position to embrace their responsibility as educators of their children.

Our parenthood and interactions with other people helped us reflect and understand another thing: our children are not our right, our possession, or our extension. They are created with all their dignity, as persons, and thus can never be our problem that take away our liberty, our career, our ambitions, but an opportunity to live our life in a more meaningful way, giving our all to them. However, we developed this mentality not due to our own merit, but because we were brought up in families where the needs of children had top priority and we had the example of our parents who did and still do many sacrifices for us.

Unfortunately, many people today are deceptively driven to believe that children steal away their freedom, career and wealth. With heavy heart we notice that even many Christian couples, by choice or by necessity, are spending so little time with their children and it is not the first time that we encounter people who regret not being present in the childhood of their children to the extent that when they grow up into young people, they do not even know them.

We must admit, that in the world we are living in, at times it is very hard to keep up with the responsibilities of being a parent. It can be difficult to patiently educate a child to be part of the small community called family. When we are tired, we are tempted to take a shortcut and be just administrators of our home instead of being parents. But we are convinced that the extra effort that we do to help our children develop a sense of belonging in our family, to understand that together with them we are constructing our family day by day, helps our children not only to bond with each other and with us, but also to develop a sense of responsibility towards the larger community, from a tender age. We believe that in this way we are not merely tending after the health and safety, and immediate needs of our children but we are guiding them towards their mission in life, to be of service to the community and perhaps for their parenthood.

Again, we arrived at this stage of our journey as parents thanks to many people we encountered in our lives, and mainly due to the formation and continuous support we receive from our Catholic Action community, both local and overseas. Many parents do not have the support and example of their family that guides them and not even any kind of affiliation that can help them reflect and to learn to be better parents. The reality shows that many people feel at a loss when they become parents.

As educators in Church schools, but also as member of Catholic Action, we believe that the Church and Catholic Action today have the mission to discern the kind of formation that we are giving to our children and young people. If we really believe that the family is “the first and essential place of education”, our parishes, our schools, our lay organisations must urgently orientate their effort to sustain and educate the parents of today and of tomorrow.

Our young people in Malta spend 11 years of their lives learning Religious Knowledge at school and at least 6 years attending Catechism for sacraments in their Parishes. Yet, our preparation to share our lives with others, to live as responsible citizens, to be a Christian in everyday life depends on other sources, and many people are not so lucky to be in touch with those “other sources” like exemplary parents, Catholic Action, and other opportunities within the community.

Many are those out there who are willing to do more for their children, who are striving to be good parents. Many others feel lost and disappointed with the false promises the world made to them. How much able are we as Catholic Action to present these people with a concrete alternative, based on the example of Jesus Christ? How much are we able to present his lifestyle as a concrete answer for our daily struggles, that render our lives not less strenuous, but more peaceful?