

The Mandatum and the Rights of Parents

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“In places where there is a Catholic school parents are obliged under the pain of mortal sin to send their children to it... And even if there is no school attached to the congregation of which parents are members, they would still be obliged to send their children to a parochial school, college or academy, if they can do so without great hardships either to themselves or to their children.”

- William Henry Elder, Archbishop of Cincinnati, 18 August 1904

What a difference a century makes! At the turn of the twentieth century, bishops, archbishops and cardinals were attaching the penalty of mortal sin to any Catholic parent who did not send their children to Catholic school. At the turn of the twenty-first century, America's bishops won't tell parents which putatively Catholic schools still conform to Catholic teaching. Worse, this refusal takes place despite the shocking fact, now common knowledge: Catholic students are more likely to keep their faith at a secular university than they are at many institutions that carry the title "Catholic". If this latest controversy somehow smells familiar, there's a reason.

The Church has two primary missions: to teach and to sanctify. The two missions are intimately bound together:

...One can likewise speak of a right: from the theological point of view every baptized person, precisely by reason of being baptized, has the right to receive from the Church instruction and education enabling him or her to enter on a truly Christian life...

-*Catechesis in our Time* #14, John Paul II

...Every Christian child or youth has a strict right to instruction in harmony with the teaching of the Church, the pillar and ground of truth. And whoever disturbs the pupil's Faith in any way, does him grave wrong, inasmuch as he abuses the trust which children place in their teachers, and takes unfair advantage of their inexperience and of their natural craving for unrestrained liberty, at once illusory and false.

- *On Christian Education*, #57, Pius XI, 31 Dec. 1929

For we who are baptized, correct instruction in the Faith is not a privilege – it is a right. Abuse is the infringing of a person's rights. Given the clear failure of many Catholic schools to pass on the Catholic Faith, the secrecy surrounding the mandatum in many dioceses is arguably a form of abuse. But we should be very clear: it is not just the student who is being abused.

In article 1631, the Catechism of the Catholic Church points out that holy matrimony introduces those being married into an ecclesial order. Indeed, Aquinas

implied that parents are not only equal to, but in a certain sense, greater than priests in regards to their relationship of service to their own children. After all, priests nurture only the spiritual life while parents are responsible for both the physical and spiritual, that is, parents are responsible for the body-soul unity of the person in a way priests are not. In fact, this is the basis for calling the family “the domestic Church.” Parents are the priests, their congregation is their own children. The very fact of sacramental marriage creates in the spouses rights and duties towards their children. Article 2221 tells us why in quite remarkable terms, “The fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the procreation of children, but must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation.”

This statement is well worth studying. Consider the phrase “conjugal love.” It is conjugal love, specifically, its physical expression in conjugal relations, which creates not only the child, but also the parents and their duties. This is a point worth dwelling on. We tend to define conception primarily as child-creation, but that isn’t true. Conception creates parents. Conception creates parental duties. It creates parental rights. It creates the rights and duties of the child. All of these are created at once, in the single act. But the catechism goes even farther. It points out that all of these creations - child, parent, rights and duties - are oriented towards a specific purpose. Conjugal love is not fully life-giving until the parents show their children how to love and serve God. When the child learns this, the parents have become fully parents.

Procreation is our participation in the creation of an immortal person, a person who will exist beyond time. But, says the catechism, the life-giving quality of married love, that is, the life-giving quality of sexual relations, cannot be reduced to just this. In a real sense, the act of sex is an act that becomes really life-giving only when the children we conceive learn to love and serve the God who brought them into existence through our human act.

The Pope has famously said, “Conjugal life becomes, in a certain sense, liturgical.” We can now also see that moral education and spiritual formation is, in a certain sense, embedded in the procreative sexual act. Conception, the existence of a child, is a natural consequence of conjugal love. The duty towards the moral education and spiritual formation of the child is a natural consequence of the child’s existence. Conjugal love results in sex which results in children which results in the parental duty and the child’s right to education. According to the catechism, each is a natural consequence so tightly intertwined with what precedes it that they can together be considered a single entity: fecundity.

And now we begin to see why the *mandatum* controversy sounds so familiar. Pope Paul VI, in *Humanae Vitae* #14, described contraception in this way, “Every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible.”

Moral education and spiritual formation are embedded in the sexual act, they are natural consequences of procreation. Pope Paul VI, in re-iterating the constant teaching of the Church, succinctly describes the problem in the *mandatum* controversy. Put simply, professors and bishops who refuse to verify authentic Catholic teaching are engaging in an activity remarkably similar to contraception.

The Bishops ensure that the authentic Catholic faith is transmitted to parents so that they, in turn, can pass it on to their children. Teachers and educators at all levels also assist in this process. The laity bear witness to that purity of faith which Bishops take pains to maintain.

- *World Synod Document on Bishops and The Ministry of the Word, 2001, #105*

The Church recognizes how education is supposed to work. Bishops are supposed to assist the parents. The parents – the primary educators – teach their children. But what if someone refuses to assist parents as they attempt to properly form their children in the Faith? This is indirectly referred to in the catechism as well:

Chastity presupposes respect for the rights of the person, in particular the right to receive information and an education that respect the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life.

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2344*

By now, we should not be surprised to find such interference mimics the decision to be unchaste. Given the way the actions of many unchaste priests were actively hidden, can we be surprised that so many heterodox professors are also being actively hidden? Education and conjugal fecundity are intertwined.

In *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, the USCCB quoted Thomas More, and held him up as an example for lay people to follow, even if it meant laity might “face a political penalty for living their public office in accord with their pro-life convictions”. St. Thomas More is indeed an excellent example to us, but perhaps it is time to consider how this remarkable lay person is himself an excellent example for every ordained man.

In “A Man for All Seasons”, a young man asks to marry More’s daughter. More replies, “The answer is no and will be no as long as you’re a heretic.” “Now that’s a word I don’t like, Sir Thomas,” replies the suitor. “It’s not a likeable word. It’s not a likeable thing,” replied the saint, unperturbed, as he sent the young man away.

A father, whether he be ordained by Holy Matrimony or Holy Orders, watches over his children and guards them from danger. We must continue to pray for our priests and bishops, that they may learn from the example of Saint Thomas More. Every one of us must be willing to pay the price to preserve the family and the Faith, no matter how high.

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