

AMORIS LAETITIA



Amoris Laetitia Family
Year 2021 - 2022

REFLECTION QUESTIONS CHAPTER 7

- 1. What challenges do we face in the education of our children?**
- 2. What can the parish community do to help families navigate these challenges?**
- 3. How do we move away from a 'virtual' culture to one that is rooted in personal and concrete interaction with the other, in order to promote lifegiving and sustainable relationships?**

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Office for Family and Life
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

TOWARDS A BETTER EDUCATION
OF CHILDREN

259. Parents always influence the moral development of their children, for better or for worse. It follows that they should take up this essential role and carry it out consciously, enthusiastically, reasonably and appropriately. Since the educational role of families is so important, and increasingly complex, I would like to discuss it in detail.

WHERE ARE OUR CHILDREN?

260. Families cannot help but be places of support, guidance and direction, however much they may have to rethink their methods and discover new resources. Parents need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to, and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time. Only if we devote time to our children, speaking of important things with simplicity and concern, and finding healthy ways for them to spend their time, will we be able to shield them from harm. Vigilance is always necessary and neglect is never beneficial. Parents have to help prepare children and adolescents to confront the risk, for example, of aggression, abuse or drug addiction.

261. Obsession, however, is not education. We cannot control every situation that a child may experience. Here it

remains true that “time is greater than space”.²⁹¹ In other words, it is more important to start processes than to dominate spaces. If parents are obsessed with always knowing where their children are and controlling all their movements, they will seek only to dominate space. But this is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy. Only in this way will children come to possess the wherewithal needed to fend for themselves and to act intelligently and prudently whenever they meet with difficulties. The real question, then, is not where our children are physically, or whom they are with at any given time, but rather where they are existentially, where they stand in terms of their convictions, goals, desires and dreams. The questions I would put to parents are these: “Do we seek to understand ‘where’ our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all, do we want to know?”²⁹²

262. Were maturity merely the development of something already present in our genetic code, not much would have to be done. But prudence, good judgment and common sense are dependent not on purely quantitative growth factors, but rather on a whole series of things that come together deep within each person, or better, at the very core of our freedom. Inevitably, each child will surprise us with ideas and projects born of that freedom, which challenge us to rethink our own

²⁹¹ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 222: AAS 105 (2013), 1111.

²⁹² Catechesis (20 May 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21 May 2015, p. 8.

ideas. This is a good thing. Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence. It involves forming persons who readily understand that their own lives, and the life of the community, are in their hands, and that freedom is itself a great gift.

THE ETHICAL FORMATION OF CHILDREN

263. Parents rely on schools to ensure the basic instruction of their children, but can never completely delegate the moral formation of their children to others. A person's affective and ethical development is ultimately grounded in a particular experience, namely, that his or her parents can be trusted. This means that parents, as educators, are responsible, by their affection and example, for instilling in their children trust and loving respect. When children no longer feel that, for all their faults, they are important to their parents, or that their parents are sincerely concerned about them, this causes deep hurt and many difficulties along their path to maturity. This physical or emotional absence creates greater hurt than any scolding which a child may receive for doing something wrong.

264. Parents are also responsible for shaping the will of their children, fostering good habits and a natural inclination to goodness. This entails presenting certain ways of thinking and acting as desirable and worthwhile, as part of a gradual process of growth. The desire to fit into society, or the habit of forgoing an immediate pleasure for the sake of a better and more orderly life in common, is itself a value that can then

inspire openness to greater values. Moral formation should always take place with active methods and a dialogue that teaches through sensitivity and by using a language children can understand. It should also take place inductively, so that children can learn for themselves the importance of certain values, principles and norms, rather than by imposing these as absolute and unquestionable truths.

265. Doing what is right means more than “judging what seems best” or knowing clearly what needs to be done, as important as this is. Often we prove inconsistent in our own convictions, however firm they may be; even when our conscience dictates a clear moral decision, other factors sometimes prove more attractive and powerful. We have to arrive at the point where the good that the intellect grasps can take root in us as a profound affective inclination, as a thirst for the good that outweighs other attractions and helps us to realize that what we consider objectively good is also good “for us” here and now. A good ethical education includes showing a person that it is in his own interest to do what is right. Today, it is less and less effective to demand something that calls for effort and sacrifice, without clearly pointing to the benefits which it can bring.

266. Good habits need to be developed. Even childhood habits can help to translate important interiorized values into sound and steady ways of acting. A person may be sociable and open to others, but if over a long period of time he has not been trained by his elders to say “Please”, “Thank you”, and “Sorry”, his good interior disposition will not easily come

to the fore. The strengthening of the will and the repetition of specific actions are the building blocks of moral conduct; without the conscious, free and valued repetition of certain patterns of good behaviour, moral education does not take place. Mere desire, or an attraction to a certain value, is not enough to instill a virtue in the absence of those properly motivated acts.

267. Freedom is something magnificent, yet it can also be dissipated and lost. Moral education has to do with cultivating freedom through ideas, incentives, practical applications, stimuli, rewards, examples, models, symbols, reflections, encouragement, dialogue and a constant rethinking of our way of doing things; all these can help develop those stable interior principles that lead us spontaneously to do good. Virtue is a conviction that has become a steadfast inner principle of operation. The virtuous life thus builds, strengthens and shapes freedom, lest we become slaves of dehumanizing and antisocial inclinations. For human dignity itself demands that each of us “act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within”.²⁹³

THE VALUE OF CORRECTION AS AN INCENTIVE

268. It is also essential to help children and adolescents to realize that misbehaviour has consequences. They need to be encouraged to put themselves in other people’s shoes and to acknowledge the hurt they have caused. Some punishments

²⁹³ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 17.

– those for aggressive, antisocial conduct – can partially serve this purpose. It is important to train children firmly to ask forgiveness and to repair the harm done to others. As the educational process bears fruit in the growth of personal freedom, children come to appreciate that it was good to grow up in a family and even to put up with the demands that every process of formation makes.

269. Correction is also an incentive whenever children's efforts are appreciated and acknowledged, and they sense their parents' constant, patient trust. Children who are lovingly corrected feel cared for; they perceive that they are individuals whose potential is recognized. This does not require parents to be perfect, but to be able humbly to acknowledge their own limitations and make efforts to improve. Still, one of the things children need to learn from their parents is not to get carried away by anger. A child who does something wrong must be corrected, but never treated as an enemy or an object on which to take out one's own frustrations. Adults also need to realize that some kinds of misbehaviour have to do with the frailty and limitations typical of youth. An attitude constantly prone to punishment would be harmful and not help children to realize that some actions are more serious than others. It would lead to discouragement and resentment: "Parents, do not provoke your children" (*Eph* 6:4; cf. *Col* 3:21).

270. It is important that discipline not lead to discouragement, but be instead a stimulus to further progress. How can discipline be best interiorized? How do we ensure that discipline is a constructive limit placed on a child's actions

and not a barrier standing in the way of his or her growth? A balance has to be found between two equally harmful extremes. One would be to try to make everything revolve around the child's desires; such children will grow up with a sense of their rights but not their responsibilities. The other would be to deprive the child of an awareness of his or her dignity, personal identity and rights; such children end up overwhelmed by their duties and a need to carry out other people's wishes.

PATIENT REALISM

271. Moral education entails asking of a child or a young person only those things that do not involve a disproportionate sacrifice, and demanding only a degree of effort that will not lead to resentment or coercion. Ordinarily this is done by proposing small steps that can be understood, accepted and appreciated, while including a proportionate sacrifice. Otherwise, by demanding too much, we gain nothing. Once the child is free of our authority, he or she may possibly cease to do good.

272. Ethical formation is at times frowned upon, due to experiences of neglect, disappointment, lack of affection or poor models of parenting. Ethical values are associated with negative images of parental figures or the shortcomings of adults. For this reason, adolescents should be helped to draw analogies: to appreciate that values are best embodied in a few exemplary persons, but also realized imperfectly and to different degrees in others. At the same time, since their

hesitation can be tied to bad experiences, they need help in the process of inner healing and in this way to grow in the ability to understand and live in peace with others and the larger community.

273. In proposing values, we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration the child's age and abilities, without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods. The valuable contributions of psychology and the educational sciences have shown that changing a child's behaviour involves a gradual process, but also that freedom needs to be channelled and stimulated, since by itself it does not ensure growth in maturity. Situated freedom, real freedom, is limited and conditioned. It is not simply the ability to choose what is good with complete spontaneity. A distinction is not always adequately drawn between "voluntary" and "free" acts. A person may clearly and willingly desire something evil, but do so as the result of an irresistible passion or a poor upbringing. In such cases, while the decision is voluntary, inasmuch as it does not run counter to the inclination of their desire, it is not free, since it is practically impossible for them not to choose that evil. We see this in the case of compulsive drug addicts. When they want a fix, they want it completely, yet they are so conditioned that at that moment no other decision is possible. Their decision is voluntary but not free. It makes no sense to "let them freely choose", since in fact they cannot choose, and exposing them to drugs only increases their addiction. They need the help of others and a process of rehabilitation.

274. The family is the first school of human values, where we learn the wise use of freedom. Certain inclinations develop in childhood and become so deeply rooted that they remain throughout life, either as attractions to a particular value or a natural repugnance to certain ways of acting. Many people think and act in a certain way because they deem it to be right on the basis of what they learned, as if by osmosis, from their earliest years: “That’s how I was taught”. “That’s what I learned to do”. In the family we can also learn to be critical about certain messages sent by the various media. Sad to say, some television programmes or forms of advertising often negatively influence and undercut the values inculcated in family life.

275. In our own day, dominated by stress and rapid technological advances, one of the most important tasks of families is to provide an education in hope. This does not mean preventing children from playing with electronic devices, but rather finding ways to help them develop their critical abilities and not to think that digital speed can apply to everything in life. Postponing desires does not mean denying them but simply deferring their fulfilment. When children or adolescents are not helped to realize that some things have to be waited for, they can become obsessed with satisfying their immediate

needs and develop the vice of “wanting it all now”. This is a grand illusion which does not favour freedom but weakens it. On the other hand, when we are taught to postpone some things until the right moment, we learn self-mastery and detachment from our impulses. When children realize that they have to be responsible for themselves, their self-esteem is enriched. This in turn teaches them to respect the freedom of others. Obviously this does not mean expecting children to act like adults, but neither does it mean underestimating their ability to grow in responsible freedom. In a healthy family, this learning process usually takes place through the demands made by life in common.

276. The family is the primary setting for socialization, since it is where we first learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another and live as one. The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live together in this greater home. In the family, we learn closeness, care and respect for others. We break out of our fatal self-absorption and come to realize that we are living with and alongside others who are worthy of our concern, our kindness and our affection. There is no social bond without this primary, everyday, almost microscopic aspect of living side by side, crossing paths at different times of the day, being concerned about everything that affects us, helping one

another with ordinary little things. Every day the family has to come up with new ways of appreciating and acknowledging its members.

277. In the family too, we can rethink our habits of consumption and join in caring for the environment as our common home. “The family is the principal agent of an integral ecology, because it is the primary social subject which contains within it the two fundamental principles of human civilization on earth: the principle of communion and the principle of fruitfulness”.²⁹⁴ In the same way, times of difficulty and trouble in the lives of family life can teach important lessons. This happens, for example, when illness strikes, since “in the face of illness, even in families, difficulties arise due to human weakness. But in general, times of illness enable family bonds to grow stronger... An education that fails to encourage sensitivity to human illness makes the heart grow cold; it makes young people ‘anesthetized’ to the suffering of others, incapable of facing suffering and of living the experience of limitation”.²⁹⁵

278. The educational process that occurs between parents and children can be helped or hindered by the increasing sophistication of the communications and entertainment media. When well used, these media can be helpful for connecting family members who live apart from one another.

²⁹⁴ Catechesis (30 September 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 1 October 2015, p. 8.

²⁹⁵ Catechesis (10 June 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 11 June 2015, p. 8.

Frequent contacts help to overcome difficulties.²⁹⁶ Still, it is clear that these media cannot replace the need for more personal and direct dialogue, which requires physical presence or at least hearing the voice of the other person. We know that sometimes they can keep people apart rather than together, as when at dinnertime everyone is surfing on a mobile phone, or when one spouse falls asleep waiting for the other who spends hours playing with an electronic device. This is also something that families have to discuss and resolve in ways which encourage interaction without imposing unrealistic prohibitions. In any event, we cannot ignore the risks that these new forms of communication pose for children and adolescents; at times they can foster apathy and a disconnect from the real world. This “technological disconnect” exposes them more easily to manipulation by those who would invade their private space with selfish interests.

279. Nor is it good for parents to be domineering. When children are made to feel that only their parents can be trusted, this hinders an adequate process of socialization and growth in affective maturity. To help expand the parental relationship to broader realities, “Christian communities are called to offer support to the educational mission of families”,²⁹⁷ particularly through the catechesis associated with Christian initiation. To foster an integral education, we need to “renew the covenant between the family and the Christian community”.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Cf. *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 67.

²⁹⁷ Catechesis (20 May 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21 May 2015, p. 8.

²⁹⁸ Catechesis (9 September 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 10 September 2015, p. 8.

The Synod wanted to emphasize the importance of Catholic schools, which “play a vital role in assisting parents in their duty to raise their children... Catholic schools should be encouraged in their mission to help pupils grow into mature adults who can view the world with the love of Jesus and who can understand life as a call to serve God”.²⁹⁹ For this reason, “the Church strongly affirms her freedom to set forth her teaching and the right of conscientious objection on the part of educators”.³⁰⁰

THE NEED FOR SEX EDUCATION

280. The Second Vatican Council spoke of the need for “a positive and prudent sex education” to be imparted to children and adolescents “as they grow older”, with “due weight being given to the advances in the psychological, pedagogical and didactic sciences”.³⁰¹ We may well ask ourselves if our educational institutions have taken up this challenge. It is not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving. In such a way, the language of sexuality would not be sadly impoverished but illuminated and enriched. The sexual urge can be directed through a process of growth in self-knowledge and self-control capable of nurturing valuable capacities for joy and for loving encounter.

²⁹⁹ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 68.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁰¹ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis*, 1.

281. Sex education should provide information while keeping in mind that children and young people have not yet attained full maturity. The information has to come at a proper time and in a way suited to their age. It is not helpful to overwhelm them with data without also helping them to develop a critical sense in dealing with the onslaught of new ideas and suggestions, the flood of pornography and the overload of stimuli that can deform sexuality. Young people need to realize that they are bombarded by messages that are not beneficial for their growth towards maturity. They should be helped to recognize and to seek out positive influences, while shunning the things that cripple their capacity for love. We also have to realize that “a new and more appropriate language” is needed “in introducing children and adolescents to the topic of sexuality”.³⁰²

282. A sexual education that fosters a healthy sense of modesty has immense value, however much some people nowadays consider modesty a relic of a bygone era. Modesty is a natural means whereby we defend our personal privacy and prevent ourselves from being turned into objects to be used. Without a sense of modesty, affection and sexuality can be reduced to an obsession with genitality and unhealthy behaviours that distort our capacity for love, and with forms of sexual violence that lead to inhuman treatment or cause hurt to others.

³⁰² *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 56.

283. Frequently, sex education deals primarily with “protection” through the practice of “safe sex”. Such expressions convey a negative attitude towards the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against. This way of thinking promotes narcissism and aggressivity in place of acceptance. It is always irresponsible to invite adolescents to toy with their bodies and their desires, as if they possessed the maturity, values, mutual commitment and goals proper to marriage. They end up being blithely encouraged to use other persons as a means of fulfilling their needs or limitations. The important thing is to teach them sensitivity to different expressions of love, mutual concern and care, loving respect and deeply meaningful communication. All of these prepare them for an integral and generous gift of self that will be expressed, following a public commitment, in the gift of their bodies. Sexual union in marriage will thus appear as a sign of an all-inclusive commitment, enriched by everything that has preceded it.

284. Young people should not be deceived into confusing two levels of reality: “sexual attraction creates, for the moment, the illusion of union, yet, without love, this ‘union’ leaves strangers as far apart as they were before”.³⁰³ The language of the body calls for a patient apprenticeship in learning to interpret and channel desires in view of authentic self-giving. When we presume to give everything all at once, it may well be that we give nothing. It is one thing to understand how fragile and bewildered young people can be, but another

³⁰³ ERICH FROMM, *The Art of Loving*, New York, 1956, p. 54.

thing entirely to encourage them to prolong their immaturity in the way they show love. But who speaks of these things today? Who is capable of taking young people seriously? Who helps them to prepare seriously for a great and generous love? Where sex education is concerned, much is at stake.

285. Sex education should also include respect and appreciation for differences, as a way of helping the young to overcome their self-absorption and to be open and accepting of others. Beyond the understandable difficulties which individuals may experience, the young need to be helped to accept their own body as it was created, for “thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation... An appreciation of our body as male or female is also necessary for our own self-awareness in an encounter with others different from ourselves. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment”.³⁰⁴ Only by losing the fear of being different can we be freed of self-centredness and self-absorption. Sex education should help young people to accept their own bodies and to avoid the pretension “to cancel out sexual difference because one no longer knows how to deal with it”.³⁰⁵

286. Nor can we ignore the fact that the configuration of our own mode of being, whether as male or female, is not simply the result of biological or genetic factors, but

³⁰⁴ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015), 155.

³⁰⁵ Catechesis (15 April 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 April 2015, p. 8.

of multiple elements having to do with temperament, family history, culture, experience, education, the influence of friends, family members and respected persons, as well as other formative situations. It is true that we cannot separate the masculine and the feminine from God's work of creation, which is prior to all our decisions and experiences, and where biological elements exist which are impossible to ignore. But it is also true that masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories. It is possible, for example, that a husband's way of being masculine can be flexibly adapted to the wife's work schedule. Taking on domestic chores or some aspects of raising children does not make him any less masculine or imply failure, irresponsibility or cause for shame. Children have to be helped to accept as normal such healthy "exchanges" which do not diminish the dignity of the father figure. A rigid approach turns into an overaccentuation of the masculine or feminine, and does not help children and young people to appreciate the genuine reciprocity incarnate in the real conditions of matrimony. Such rigidity, in turn, can hinder the development of an individual's abilities, to the point of leading him or her to think, for example, that it is not really masculine to cultivate art or dance, or not very feminine to exercise leadership. This, thank God, has changed, but in some places deficient notions still condition the legitimate freedom and hamper the authentic development of children's specific identity and potential.

PASSING ON THE FAITH

287. Raising children calls for an orderly process of handing on the faith. This is made difficult by current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today's world, where many people keep up a frenetic pace just to survive.³⁰⁶ Even so, the home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour. This begins with baptism, in which, as Saint Augustine said, mothers who bring their children “cooperate in the sacred birthing”.³⁰⁷ Thus begins the journey of growth in that new life. Faith is God's gift, received in baptism, and not our own work, yet parents are the means that God uses for it to grow and develop. Hence “it is beautiful when mothers teach their little children to blow a kiss to Jesus or to Our Lady. How much love there is in that! At that moment the child's heart becomes a place of prayer”.³⁰⁸ Handing on the faith presumes that parents themselves genuinely trust God, seek him and sense their need for him, for only in this way does “one generation laud your works to another, and declare your mighty acts” (*Ps* 144:4) and “fathers make known to children your faithfulness” (*Is* 38:19). This means that we need to ask God to act in their hearts, in places where we ourselves cannot reach. A mustard seed, small as it is, becomes a great tree (cf. *Mt* 13:31-32); this teaches us to see the disproportion between our actions

³⁰⁶ Cf. *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 13-14.

³⁰⁷ Augustine, *De sancta virginitate* 7, 7: PL 40, 400.

³⁰⁸ Catechesis (26 August 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 27 August 2015, p. 8.

and their effects. We know that we do not own the gift, but that its care is entrusted to us. Yet our creative commitment is itself an offering which enables us to cooperate with God's plan. For this reason, "couples and parents should be properly appreciated as active agents in catechesis... Family catechesis is of great assistance as an effective method in training young parents to be aware of their mission as the evangelizers of their own family".³⁰⁹

288. Education in the faith has to adapt to each child, since older resources and recipes do not always work. Children need symbols, actions and stories. Since adolescents usually have issues with authority and rules, it is best to encourage their own experience of faith and to provide them with attractive testimonies that win them over by their sheer beauty. Parents desirous of nurturing the faith of their children are sensitive to their patterns of growth, for they know that spiritual experience is not imposed but freely proposed. It is essential that children actually see that, for their parents, prayer is something truly important. Hence moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon. Here I would like to express my particular gratitude to all those mothers who continue to pray, like Saint Monica, for their children who have strayed from Christ.

³⁰⁹ *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 89.

289. The work of handing on the faith to children, in the sense of facilitating its expression and growth, helps the whole family in its evangelizing mission. It naturally begins to spread the faith to all around them, even outside of the family circle. Children who grew up in missionary families often become missionaries themselves; growing up in warm and friendly families, they learn to relate to the world in this way, without giving up their faith or their convictions. We know that Jesus himself ate and drank with sinners (cf. *Mk* 2:16; *Mt* 11:19), conversed with a Samaritan woman (cf. *Jn* 4:7-26), received Nicodemus by night (cf. *Jn* 3:1-21), allowed his feet to be anointed by a prostitute (cf. *Lk* 7:36-50) and did not hesitate to lay his hands on those who were sick (cf. *Mk* 1:40-45; 7:33). The same was true of his apostles, who did not look down on others, or cluster together in small and elite groups, cut off from the life of their people. Although the authorities harassed them, they nonetheless enjoyed the favour “of all the people” (*Acts* 2:47; cf. 4:21, 33; 5:13).

290. “The family is thus an agent of pastoral activity through its explicit proclamation of the Gospel and its legacy of varied forms of witness, namely solidarity with the poor, openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, including those most in need, commitment to the promotion of the common good and the transformation of unjust social structures, beginning in the territory in which the family lives, through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy”.³¹⁰ All this is an

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

expression of our profound Christian belief in the love of the Father who guides and sustains us, a love manifested in the total self-gift of Jesus Christ, who even now lives in our midst and enables us to face together the storms of life at every stage. In all families the Good News needs to resound, in good times and in bad, as a source of light along the way. All of us should be able to say, thanks to the experience of our life in the family: “We come to believe in the love that God has for us” (*1 Jn* 4:16). Only on the basis of this experience will the Church’s pastoral care for families enable them to be both domestic churches and a leaven of evangelization in society.