Pope St. John Paul II on Parents as the Primary Educators

A Sacred Responsibility and a Warning Against Government Overreach

By Jack Rigert

As our nation continues to debate parental rights in public education—from recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions such as *Mahmoud v. Taylor* and *Mirabelli v. Bonta* to practical policy initiatives like those proposed by the Thomas More Society—it is helpful to step back and ask a deeper question:

Why are parents the primary educators of their children in the first place?

For Catholics, the answer is found not merely in constitutional law, but in God's design for the family.

Few modern Church leaders spoke more clearly or passionately on this subject than Pope St. John Paul II. In his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) and his *Letter to Families* (*Gratissimam Sane*, 1994), John Paul II articulated a profound vision of the family that remains remarkably relevant today.

His teachings remind us that parental authority flows from the gift of life itself and carries an irreplaceable responsibility. They also provide a sobering warning about the dangers that arise when governments or institutions overstep their proper role.

Parents: The First and Foremost Educators

Pope St. John Paul II repeatedly affirmed what the Church has always taught: parents are not merely participants in their children's education—they are its primary architects.

Quoting the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, he wrote:

"Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it."
— *Familiaris Consortio*, 36

Years later, in *Letter to Families*, he deepened this truth:

"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."
— *Letter to Families*, 16

This competence does not arise from professional credentials, academic degrees, or government certification. It flows from the unique relationship established when a mother and father cooperate with God in bringing new life into the world.

Parents educate because they love.

For John Paul II, education is far more than the transmission of information or the mastery of academic subjects. True education is the gradual formation of the whole person in truth, virtue, freedom, and love. It is the patient process of helping a child become fully human.

The family, he taught, is the first and most important "school" of society—a place where children first learn love, sacrifice, justice, forgiveness, responsibility, and self-giving.

Long before a child enters a classroom, he or she has already begun learning life's most important lessons at home.

A Serious and Irreplaceable Responsibility

John Paul II never presented parental formation as optional or secondary. Rather, he described it as both a solemn obligation and an inalienable right.

In *Familiaris Consortio*, he wrote that the parents' educational mission is:

"Essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, because of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others."
— *Familiaris Consortio*, 36

The Holy Father taught that parents are called to create a family atmosphere "animated with love and reverence for God and others." This responsibility includes moral formation, spiritual formation, character development, and preparation for a life of authentic freedom.

He was especially clear regarding sexuality education. Parents, he wrote, possess "a basic right and duty" to provide this formation under their own attentive guidance.

Daily family prayer, visible witness to the faith, meaningful conversations, and active involvement in children's moral and intellectual development are not optional additions to parenting. They are essential elements of faithful parenthood.

No institution, no teacher, and no government program can fully replace the unique influence of a mother and father.

As John Paul II stated during a 1997 address:

"The parents are the first to have the right and the duty to educate their children in harmony with their convictions. Do not leave this right to institutions."

Warnings Against Government and Societal Overreach

While recognizing the legitimate role of schools and government, John Paul II consistently warned against excessive state intrusion into family life.

Central to his social teaching is the principle of subsidiarity—the idea that larger institutions should support families, not replace them.

He explained:

"By virtue of this principle, the State cannot and must not take away from families the functions that they can just as well perform on their own or in free associations; instead it must positively favor and encourage as far as

possible responsible initiative by families."
— *Familiaris Consortio*, 45

In *Letter to Families*, he issued an even stronger warning:

"Whenever the family is self-sufficient, it should be left to act on its own; an excessive intrusiveness on the part of the State would prove detrimental… and would constitute an open violation of the rights of the family."

He further insisted that families possess the right:

"To bring up children in accordance with the family's own traditions and religious and cultural values."

The Church, he said, "openly and strongly defends the rights of the family against the intolerable usurpations of society and the State."

These warnings are particularly relevant today.

When schools conceal significant information from parents, present contested ideological viewpoints without parental involvement, or treat parents as obstacles rather than partners, they risk crossing precisely the boundaries John Paul II cautioned against.

The family is not a creation of the state.

Rather, the family is a natural and God-given society possessing rights that exist prior to the state itself.

As John Paul II often taught, the family is a "sovereign society" with its own dignity, mission, and responsibilities.

A Message for Parents Today

Pope St. John Paul II's teaching is not abstract theology reserved for scholars or clergy. It is a direct call to mothers and fathers living in an increasingly complex culture.

Parents who remain actively involved in their children's education are not being "difficult," "divisive," or "extreme."

They are fulfilling a sacred vocation entrusted to them by God.

Recent Supreme Court decisions affirming parents' rights to notice, transparency, and accommodation demonstrate a remarkable harmony between constitutional protections and the Church's perennial wisdom.

The Holy Father's message remains one of hope and empowerment:

- **Embrace your vocation confidently.** You possess a fundamental competence no one else can replace.
- **Take your role seriously.** Your daily witness, prayers, conversations, and involvement shape your children's hearts more profoundly than any classroom.
- **Defend your rights courageously.** When policies undermine parental authority, speak with clarity, charity, and conviction.
- **Support policies that strengthen families rather than supplant them.**

Building a Civilization of Love

Pope St. John Paul II frequently reminded the world that:

"The future of humanity passes by way of the family."

When parents faithfully embrace their vocation as primary educators, they do more than shape their own children. They become agents of cultural renewal, helping to build what John Paul II famously called a "civilization of love."

Strong families create strong communities.

Strong communities create strong nations.

And faithful parents help secure the future of both Church and society.

May all mothers and fathers draw strength from the example and teaching of Pope St. John Paul II and live their vocation with the courage, tenderness, and fidelity he so beautifully modeled.

The Church stands beside you in this sacred mission.

Action Step

Parents and grandparents: take time this week to discuss with your children or grandchildren what it means to seek what is true, good, and beautiful. Pray together, read Scripture together, and never underestimate the power of your daily witness.

As Pope St. John Paul II reminded us, the future of humanity passes through the family.

And the battle for the next generation will be won one soul at a time.

Suggested sidebar or call-out box:

"Parents are the first and most important educators of their own children."
— Pope St. John Paul II, *Letter to Families*