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On the Urgent Task of Educating Young People

POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI

This letter of his Holiness Benedict XVI, dated 21 January 2008, was written to the faithful of the diocese and city of Rome. It is available on the Vatican website at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20080121_educazione.html.

Dear Faithful of Rome,

I thought of addressing this Letter to you in order to speak to you about a problem of which you yourselves are aware and to which the various members of our Church are applying themselves: the problem of education. We all have at heart the good of the people we love, especially our children, adolescents and young people. Indeed, we know that it is on them that the future of our City depends. Therefore, it is impossible not to be concerned about the formation of the new generations, about their ability to give their lives a direction and to discern good from evil, and about their health, not only physical but also moral.

Educating, however, has never been an easy task and today seems to be becoming ever more difficult. Parents, teachers, priests and everyone who has direct educational responsibilities are well aware of this. Hence, there is talk of a great "educational emergency," confirmed by the failures we encounter all too often in our efforts to form sound people who can cooperate with others and give their own lives meaning. Thus, it is natural to think of laying the blame on the new generations, as though children born today were different from those born in the past. There is also talk of a "generation gap" which certainly exists and is making itself felt, but is the effect rather than the cause of the failure to transmit certainties and values.

Must we therefore blame today's adults for no longer being able to educate? There is certainly a strong temptation among both parents and teachers as well as educators in general to give up,

since they run the risk of not even understanding what their role or rather the mission entrusted to them is.

In fact, it is not only the personal responsibilities of adults or young people, which nonetheless exist and must not be concealed, that are called into question but also a widespread atmosphere, a mindset and form of culture which induce one to have doubt about the value of the human person, about the very meaning of truth and good, and ultimately about the goodness of life. It then becomes difficult to pass on from one generation to the next something that is valid and certain, rules of conduct, credible objectives around which to build life itself.

Dear brothers and sisters of Rome, at this point I would like to say some very simple words to you: Do not be afraid! In fact, none of these difficulties is insurmountable. They are, as it were, the other side of the coin of that great and precious gift which is our freedom, with the responsibility that rightly goes with it. As opposed to what happens in the technical or financial fields, where today's advances can be added to those of the past, no similar accumulation is possible in the area of people's formation and moral growth, because the person's freedom is ever new. As a result, each person and each generation must make his own decision anew, alone. Not even the greatest values of the past can be simply inherited; they must be claimed by us and renewed through an often anguishing personal option.

When the foundations are shaken, however, and essential certainties are lacking, the impelling need for those values once again makes itself felt: thus today, the request for an education which is truly such is in fact increasing. Parents, anxious and often anguished about the future of their children, are asking for it; a great many teachers going through the sorrowful experience of their schools' deterioration are asking for it; society overall, seeing doubts cast on the very foundations of coexistence, is asking for it; children and young people themselves who do not want to be left to face life's challenges on their own are also asking for it in their inmost being. Those who believe in Jesus Christ, moreover, have a further and stronger reason for not being afraid: they know in fact that God does not abandon us, that his love reaches us wherever we are and just as we are, in our wretchedness and weakness, in order to offer us a new possibility of good.

Dear brothers and sisters, to make my considerations more meaningful, it might be useful to identify several common requirements of an authentic education. It needs first of all that closeness and trust which are born from love: I am thinking of the first and fundamental experience of love which children have, or at least should have, from their parents. Yet every true teacher knows that if he is to educate he must give a part of himself, and that it is only in this way that he can help his pupils overcome selfishness and become in their turn capable of authentic love.

In a small child there is already a strong desire to know and to understand, which is expressed in his stream of questions and constant demands for explanations. Therefore, an education would be most impoverished if it were limited to providing notions and information and neglected the important question about the truth, especially that truth which can be a guide in life.

Suffering is also part of the truth of our life. So, by seeking to shield the youngest from every difficulty and experience of suffering, we risk raising brittle and ungenerous people, despite our good intentions: indeed, the capacity for loving corresponds to the capacity for suffering and for suffering together.

We thus arrive, dear friends of Rome, at what is perhaps the most delicate point in the task of education: finding the right balance between freedom and discipline. If no standard of behaviour and rule of life is applied even in small daily matters, the character is not formed and the person will not be ready to face the trials that will come in the future. The educational relationship, however, is first of all the encounter of two kinds of freedom, and successful education means teaching the correct use of freedom. As the child gradually grows up, he becomes an adolescent and then a young person; we must therefore accept the risk of freedom and be constantly attentive in order to help him to correct wrong ideas and choices. However, what we must never do is to support him when he errs, to pretend we do not see the errors or worse, that we share them as if they were the new boundaries of human progress.

Education cannot, therefore, dispense with that authoritativeness which makes the exercise of authority possible. It is the fruit of experience and competence, but is acquired above all with the coherence of one's own life and personal involvement, an expression of true love. The educator is thus a witness of truth and goodness. He too, of course, is fragile and can be mistaken, but he will constantly endeavour to be in tune with his mission.

Dear faithful of Rome, from these simple observations it becomes clear that in education a sense of responsibility is crucial: the responsibility of the educator, of course, but also, as he grows up, the responsibility of the child, the student, the young person who enters the world of work. Those who can measure up to themselves and to others are responsible. Those who believe seek further; indeed, they seek to respond to God who loved them first.

Responsibility is in the first place personal, but there is also a responsibility which we share as citizens in the same city and of one nation, as members of the human family and, if we are believers, as children of the one God and members of the Church. Indeed, ideas, lifestyles, laws, the orientations in general of the society in which we live and the image it has of itself through the mass media exercise a great influence on the formation of the new generations, for good but often also for evil. However, society is not an abstraction; in the end we are ourselves all together, with the orientations, rules and representatives we give one another, although the roles and responsibilities of each person are different. Thus, the contribution of each one of us, of each person, family or social group, is necessary if society, starting with our City of Rome, is to become a more favourable context for education.

Lastly, I would like to offer you a thought which I developed in my recent Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* on Christian hope: the soul of education, as of the whole of life, can only be a dependable hope. Today, our hope is threatened on many sides and we even risk becoming, like the ancient pagans, people "having no hope and without God in the world", as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Ephesus (Eph 2: 12). What may be the deepest difficulty for a true educational

endeavour consists precisely in this: the fact that at the root of the crisis of education lies a crisis of trust in life.

I cannot finish this Letter, therefore, without a warm invitation to place our hope in God. He alone is the hope that withstands every disappointment; his love alone cannot be destroyed by death; his justice and mercy alone can heal injustices and recompense the suffering experienced. Hope that is addressed to God is never hope for oneself alone, it is always also hope for others; it does not isolate us but renders us supportive in goodness and encourages us to educate one another in truth and in love.

I express my affection for you and assure you of my special remembrance in prayer, as I impart my Blessing to you all.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI served as pope from 2005 to 2013.