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Fit for Mission: Forming the Young in a Homeschooling Community

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The journey from being a carefree child to a self-possessed young person, apt for the service of both God and neighbour, has always been a long and arduous one. Most, if not all, of its sojourners fall many times along the way. In our day this transition seems harder to accomplish than ever before.

Over the last decade my husband and I have welcomed over 60 young people into our home, each one staying anywhere from two weeks to three years. This has given us great insight into the struggles young people are facing today and how quickly things have changed since we were leaving school. The vast majority of these young people are from practising Catholic families and have a very deep love for their faith and for their fellow men, a love which sets them apart from the average young European. In helping them, we ourselves have been helped to become more human. Some of these young people struggle to a greater extent than others. What strikes me is that those whose wounds run deepest, are those whose identity and sense of purpose are weak. Those who know they are part of a family and community seem to be able to weather life's storms with more agility. Divorce and family breakdown play a major part in undermining this sense of identity: but so do other factors such as social media and the pressure to conform.

My working background is in youth ministry, working with teenagers and young adults, particularly within the context of Christian formation. I still occasionally go into schools to speak to the students about the plan God has for them. This work has given me a unique perspective on the lives many young people are living, very different from the sheltered home life I knew, and the one in which my own children now live. The great majority have not been given a moral compass: they find it hard to know right from wrong. By contrast, those young people who do have strong moral convictions are at risk of being considered judgmental or intolerant: more often than not, they keep a low profile.

The pressures young people feel today are far removed from what I experienced as an

emergent young woman. Many young people have told me that they feel pressure to perform academically, to be physically attractive, to be popular, to think in a particular way, to “accept everyone”—code for accepting everything—to speak in a particular way, to be conscientious and successful; yet little care is taken of their spiritual or emotional well-being. The expectation that their private lives, so often in tatters (e.g., nights spent at the homes of separated parents, grandparents, or friends) should be embellished and shared with the world via social media does not in any way help them feel a strong sense of identity.

Despite having witnessed the grim realities which stare many youngsters in the face, I find myself surrounded by young people who are thriving and developing into confident, competent and contented human beings. Our home and immediate environment feels like an oasis teeming with life in a barren wasteland. This is because my husband, five children and I have as our closest neighbours four fabulous Catholic families. Between us all we have 21 children whom we are homeschooling. We have lived here since our eldest was a year and a half old.

We are not an official community, simply a group of families and single people living alongside each other, attempting to carry out God’s work in our lives. As with all families, we are all very different, and whilst there are many things we join forces for, we are still able to maintain our familial autonomy.

Once a month we set aside a day to work together on those projects from which everyone benefits. It might be preparing the barn for a performance or turning it into a seasonal gym or maybe repairing the raised vegetable beds, collecting manure for the garden, laying a new path, oiling the outside of the chapel, reseeding the lawns, weeding or preparing hanging baskets. Everybody gets involved and even the smallest children have overalls and work gloves! We also celebrate Holy Mass together and have times of Eucharistic adoration for anyone who wishes to come.

In many ways it is similar to the rural community in which I grew up in the Scottish Highlands where people were dependent on each other for their mere survival, so remote were we and so long and tedious the winter months. As children we felt welcome in the homes of many of our neighbours, including those without children. We would often go and sit with the elderly in their homes, listening to their tales and hoping for the odd biscuit. Our situation today differs, however, in as much as we are intentional about creating a particular environment for our families and the others who live alongside us. The adults among us have spent many hours discussing the needs of each family, coming up with strategies for meeting these ever-changing needs as well as possible and brainstorming ideas for activities, projects and also boundaries that will enable our children to flourish. Whilst one of the benefits to living alongside other like-minded families is sharing so much, it can also be problematic when our children want spend all their time with these friends, being reluctant to focus on school work if they know their friends are playing outside. We also have to find ways of carving out family time for ourselves.

However, the active concern of our friends and neighbours has also helped in teaching our children lessons we would have had difficulty in imparting by ourselves. There is a great benefit in being surrounded by adults who want to be instrumental in helping our children become the people God made them to be. Whilst most of our children’s education is done within the family home, we do pool our resources and are therefore able to offer our children learning opportunities which would be hard to access otherwise. One of our neighbours is a science teacher by profession and teaches each of the different age groups for an hour each week. Another teaches art, and another is a brilliant builder and often leads big construction

projects. Others take responsibility for teaching the catechetical program, and some are beautifully musical and will lead the singing for different liturgical seasons. As I write, we are in the final throes of preparing for a production of C.S. Lewis's "The Horse and His Boy", with which everyone gets involved.

It is beautiful to watch our young people mature into confident and competent individuals each with their own strengths and interests. Nurtured as they are within an environment where they know they are accepted, loved and valued, they have largely escaped from the pressure to conform to superficial fashions and fads. I am sure it is this freedom to just "be" that has allowed them to flourish. The fact that all of the older children here have a strong faith and a genuine relationship with God reflects the example and care of everyone in our small community.

Marriage is a beautiful sacrament, designed to help a person to grow to holiness through the love, support and dedication of their spouse. It is the source from which a community of love can spring. Friendships mirror this, providing practical help in moments of need, giving a different perspective in more challenging moments, or pointing out accomplishments when all one can see is failure. Being surrounded as we are by friends adds another layer of insulation to the cold realities of life that can cause families to falter. I find it easy, as a busy mother, to feel as though I'm doing a poor job of everything I turn my hand to and that the day is too short to accomplish only the mere essentials; yet when I step outside my own small world these problems seem to shrink. So many times I have shared a struggle with a neighbour and, because they know my situation so well, they have been able to suggest a different way of looking at things, which is exactly what I needed to hear. Sometimes, as occasionally happens, when one altercation follows another they are there offering to look after the children, cook meals, take my bins out, walk the dog, feed the chickens: or even clean my house!

I am often struck by the depth of understanding our young people have in matters of faith and morals. This is due in great part to Sofia Cavalletti's *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, which encourages and teaches children contemplation and enjoyment of God. From the age of three our children have been drawn into a deeper and deeper relationship with their creator and Lord and know him on a personal level. It is also due to the classical approach to education we have adopted. Among other things, we use *The Mother of Divine Grace School Program* for Catholic home educators, which places great importance on the development of the mind.

The ultimate object of all this is of course God himself, and we are fortunate enough to have easy access to weekday Mass. It often makes me laugh when I realise that my children are keen to get there on time because they don't want to be the last in the chapel; or worse, not being present at all for something which all their peers see as normal part of the day. Whilst peer pressure might not be the healthiest reason to attend Mass, I am relieved to know that they are being motivated by their friends to make good choices: with maturity, they will have acquired a habit which will enable them to appreciate the beauty and merit of the divine mystery.

From my kitchen window, I love to watch as hordes of children clamber, with such speed and agility, on the giant climbing frame in our garden. As soon as school is through for the day the children rush for the door and, unless they are playing on the said climbing apparatus, might not be seen again until supper time. The freedom this gives is good for the inquisitive soul. To have the time and space to explore the outdoors without constant supervision from parents is a rare luxury. Apart from our own gardens, we have common areas for prayer, play, gardening or building. The children are encouraged to take on the various tasks which need to be carried out in order to maintain the beauty and safety of the shared gardens. It is great to

see the older teenagers helping the younger children, and a general openness to work for the common good. In this way our young people are becoming competent at many practical tasks which will pay dividends in their adult lives.

I have heard people say that by creating a sheltered Christian environment for our families, we are trying to protect our children from the real world: that they will be lost when we finally let them loose. Rather, I see our community as a seed-bed, where young people can mature into confident human beings. We do our part by focusing our energy on the development of a strong Christian identity, intimacy with God and concern for others. When the time comes for our children to fly the coop, they should be well prepared to carry out the mission entrusted to them. To set the world ablaze with the love of God, just as early evangelisers like St Augustine did, after being formed in the monasteries and seminaries of their time.

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