

“And He set Himself to teach them at some length.”

Mk 6:34

We celibate priests do not understand how new mums manage. The responsibility of looking after infants must, at times, feel overwhelming. ‘This new life has been entrusted to me and is utterly dependent on me for everything!’ The responsibility to keep a new-born child from harm, to feed, clothe, keep warm, clean, and healthy a new baby: and that’s before any emotional need is addressed! But from day one – and, arguably, even from before birth – there is also the need to teach.

Perhaps much of the early teaching is done without mum even thinking that she is teaching. The nurturing and care, the emotional bonding, and the fulfilling of so many of the baby’s needs all serve, in one way or another, as the start of teaching her baby what human love and life is all about.

As the years go by, the role of education becomes ever more significant, as the infant and then the child is taught how to behave, how to treat other people and how not to treat them; what is right and what is wrong; how to use all sorts of household items: how to be careful of things that might harm them, how to use carefully things that are fragile, how to use correctly the ordinary instruments of daily living... knives, forks, plates, and cups, and even how to enjoy playing with toys without breaking them. But from the beginning, mum is teaching her baby about values, about what matters in life, what is important, what should take priority. And all of that starts long before any formal schooling begins: teaching children how to read, write, count, and so forth.

Schools assist parents in this vital task of education but they cannot replace parents. As a former schoolteacher, I can tell you that parents who abdicate all responsibility for their

child's formal education, and leave it wholly up to the school, almost invariably set that child at an educational disadvantage which, in all likelihood, will last a lifetime. Too often, responsibility for educating children has been handed over to official educators, teachers, child psychologists, and even politicians, indeed, all manner of experts. But as our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has said, *'the number of so-called 'experts' has multiplied, and they have assumed the role of parents in even the most intimate aspects of education.... It is time for fathers and mothers to return from their exile – for they have exiled themselves from their children's upbringing – and to resume fully their educational role.'* (Pope Francis, 2015, General Audience, May 20).

But this applies also, and indeed above all, to religious and spiritual education. The primary responsibility for teaching children to love God and the things of God lies not with the priests and nuns, with RE teachers and catechists, but with parents. In Catholic theology, the main reason for having children in the first place is to bring children into the world who can learn to know and love and serve God throughout their lives, and so be happy with Him forever in heaven, sharing in all the goodness that God Himself is and has to offer. In other words, we, as a race, have children so that God can pour His blessings upon them, just as mums and dads choose to have children so that they, in turn, can pour their love into the lives of their children.

Yet all of this involves teaching. No child is brought up in a moral vacuum, no matter how often we may hear modern parents say that they will leave certain matters for their own children to decide upon when they are old enough to decide for themselves. From day one, children are – at least, we hope they are! – taught not to do violence to others or to harm others in any way, not to steal or to be selfish, not to be greedy, but to share what they have with others. But moral teaching can sometimes be more nuanced than this. For example, even the inclusion or not of certain moral and religious values in the education of their

children is, in itself, part of the children's moral and religious education. To choose not to teach one's children certain things is, in itself, to teach them the value of those things, or lack thereof. Not to teach something is to say to the children that these things do not matter.

At the heart of a parent's love for her children, then, is the right teaching of the things that *do* matter. And from the point of view of our Catholic Faith, from the point of view of all that is rich, and multi-layered, and beautiful, and good, and true, what matters most is to nurture in the hearts and minds of your children a love of God and a love of the things of God. Teach them the basic prayers, teach them how to make the Sign of the Cross and how to genuflect, and why. Teach them to honour the Blessed Virgin Mary, the angels, and the saints. Teach them to see heaven as the only good – the only goal – truly worth striving after, and teach them how to get there. Teach them that a life of virtue is not for the faint hearted. Teach them, as the saints tell us, that the only thing to fear in life is sin and the consequences of sin.

Teach them to sit at the feet of the Good Shepherd who stepped ashore from the fishermen's boat, saw a large crowd, and took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and began to teach them at some length.