

INTERMEDIATE

2. Puberty

87. Puberty, which constitutes the initial phase of adolescence, is a time in which parents are called to be particularly attentive to the Christian education of their children. This is a time of self-discovery and of one's own inner world, the time of generous plans, the time when the felling of love awakens, with the biological impulses of sexuality, the time of the desire to be together, the time of particularly intense joy connected with the exhilarating discovery of life. But often it is also the age of deeper questioning, of anguish or even frustrating searching, of a mistrust, of others and dangerous introspection, and the age sometimes of the first experiences of set backs and of disappointments.

88. Parents should pay particular attention to their children's gradual development and to their physical and psychological changes, which are decisive in the maturing of the personality. Without showing anxiety, fear or obsessive concern, parents will not let cowardice or convenience hinder their work. This is naturally an important moment for teaching the value of chastity, which will also be expressed in the way sexual information is given. In this phase, educational needs also concern the genital aspects, hence requiring a presentation both on the level of values and the reality as a whole. Moreover, this implies an understanding of the context of pro creation, marriage and the family, a context which must be kept present in authentic task of sexual education.

89. Beginning with the changes which their sons and daughters experience in their bodies, parents are thus bound to give more detailed explanation about sexuality (in an on-going relationship of trust and friendship) each time girls confide in their mother and boys in their fathers. This relationship of trust and friendship should have already started in the first years of life.

90. Another important task for parents is following the gradual physiological development of their daughters and helping them joyfully to accept the development of their femininity in a bodily, psychological and spiritual sense. Therefore, normally, one should discuss the cycles of fertility and their meaning. But it is still not necessary to give detailed explanations about sexual union, unless this is explicitly requested.

91. It is very important for adolescent boys to be helped to understand the physical and physiological development of the genital organs before they get this information from their companions or from persons who are not well-intentioned. The physiological facts about male puberty should be presented in an atmosphere of serenity, positively and with reserve, in the framework of marriage, family and fatherhood. Instructing both adolescent girls and boys should also include detailed and sufficient information about the bodily and physiological characteristics of the opposite sex, about whom their curiosity is growing.

In this area, the additional supportive information of a conscientious doctor or even a psychologist can help parents, without separating this information from what pertains to the faith and the educational work of the priest.

92. Through a trusting and open dialogue, parents can guide their daughters in facing any emotional perplexity, and support the value of Christian chastity out of consideration for the other sex. Instruction for both girls and boys should aim at pointing out the beauty of motherhood and the wonderful reality of procreation, as well as the deep meaning of virginity. In this way they will be helped to go against the hedonistic mentality which is very widespread today particularly, at such a decisive stage, in preventing the ‘contraceptive mentality’ which unfortunately is very common and which girls will have to face later in marriage.

93. During puberty, the psychological and emotional development of boys can make them vulnerable to erotic fantasies and they may be tempted to try sexual experiences. Parents should be close to their sons and correct the tendency to use sexuality in a hedonistic and materialistic way. Therefore, they should remind boys about the God’s gift, received in order to cooperate with him ‘to actualize in history the original blessing of the creator that of transmitting by procreation the divine image from person to person’; and this will strengthen their awareness that, ‘fecundity is the fruit and the sign of conjugal love, the living testimony of the full reciprocal self-giving of the spouses’. In this way sons will also learn the respect due to women. The parents’ task of informing and instructing is necessary, not because their sons would not know about sexual reality in other ways, but so that they will know about it in the right light.

94. In a positive and prudent way, parents will carry out of what the fathers of the second Vatican council requested: ‘it is important to give suitable and timely instruction to young people, above all in the heart of their own families, about the dignity of married love, its role and its exercise; in this way they will be able to engage in honorable courtship and enter upon marriage of their own’.

Positive information about sexuality should always be part of a formation plan so as to create the Christian context in which all information about life, sexual activity, anatomy and hygiene is given. Therefore, the spiritual and moral dimensions must always be predominant so as to have two special purposes: presenting God’s commandments as a way of life, and the formation of the right conscience.

To the young man who asked him what he had to do to attain eternal life, Jesus replied: ‘if you would enter life, keep the commandments, (Matthew 19:17). After listing the ones that concern love for one’s neighbor, Jesus summed them up in this positive formulation: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matthew 19:19). In order to present the commandments as God’s gift (written by his hand, cf. Exodus 31:18), expressing the covenant with him, confirmed by Jesus’ own example, it is very important for the adolescent not to separate the

commandments from their relationship with a rich interior in life, free from selfishness.

95. As its departure point, the formation of conscience requires being enlightened about: God's project of love for every single person, the positive and liberating value of the moral law, and awareness both of the weakness caused by sins and the means of grace which strengthen us on our paths towards the good and towards salvation.

'Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person' which is 'mans most secret core and sanctuary', as the second Vatican council affirms, enjoins him at the appropriate to do good and to avoid evil. It also judges particular choices, approving those that are good and denouncing that are those evil. It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments.

In fact, 'conscience is a judgement of reason whereby the human person realizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed'. Therefore, the formation of conscience requires being enlightened about the truth and God's plan and must not be confused with a vague subjective feeling or with personal opinion.

96. In answering children's questions parents should offer well-reasoned arguments about the great value of chastity and show the intellectual and human weakness of theories that inspire permissive and hedonistic behavior. They will answer clearly, without giving excessive importance to pathological sexual problems. Nor will they give the false impression that sex is something shameful or dirty, because it is great gift of God who placed the ability to generate life in the human body, thereby sharing his creative power with us. Indeed, both in the scriptures (cf. Song of Songs 1-8; Hosea 2; Jeremiah 3: 1-3; Ezekial 23, etc.) and in the Christian mystical tradition, conjugal love has always been considered a symbol and image of God's love for us.

97. Since boys and girls at puberty are particularly vulnerable to emotional influences, through dialogue and the way they live, parents have the duty to help their children resist negative outside influences that may lead them to have little regard for Christian formation in love and chastity. Especially in societies overwhelmed by consumer pressures, parents should sometimes watch out for their children's relations with young people of the opposite sex – without making it too obvious. Even if they are socially acceptable, some habits of speech and conduct are not morally correct and represent a way of trivializing sexuality, reducing it to a consumer object. Parents should therefore teach their children the value of Christian modesty, moderate dress, and, when it comes to trends, the necessary autonomy characteristic of a man or woman with a mature personality.