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A Response on the NFCPG Position Paper on Sex Education

William G. White, M.D.

Doctor White, a director from the National Federation's Region VI, was appointed to the NFCPG Committee on Sex Education and assisted in drafting the Position Paper.

Because I was involved in drafting the Position Paper on Sex Education of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, I was asked to respond to Dr. Klaus's, Dr. Norris's, and Mr. Horkan's letters. (See Klaus and Horkan letters in *Linacre Quarterly*, August, 1982.) The opinions I express in this response are my own and not necessarily those of the NFCPG.

Dr. Norris's kind words are indeed gratifying. "Education in Wholesome Chastity" is the product of the Committee on Sex Education appointed by Dr. Eugene Diamond during his term as president of the Federation. The committee members include Dr. Herbert Nakata, the late Dr. Sean O'Reilly, Dr. Herbert Ratner, and myself. The committee received the valuable advice of Archbishop Nicholas Elko, episcopal advisor to the NFCPG; Rev. Charles Corcoran, O.P., editorial advisory board member for *Linacre Quarterly*; Miss Caroline Ward, managing editor of *Child and Family*; and Dr. Diamond. Although the paper had many authors, I am its principal "drafter" and I fully accept all responsibility for any ambiguity, lack of clarity, or inadequacy of expression. Credit for the substance of the paper must, however, be given to all those who participated in its production.

I certainly agree with Dr. Klaus that the conclusion of "Education in Wholesome Chastity" does not contain all the nuances and distinctions of the paper as a whole. I am glad that Mr. Horkan is not disappointed with the paper's treatment of the issues it deals with, but "with those it fails to deal with." As a position paper, it is not an exhaustive treatise of the vast subject of human sexual development and education. As Mr. Horkan suggests in his last paragraph, the NFCPG has already recognized that "Education in Wholesome Chastity" is not the last word on the subject and is currently gathering materials for a syllabus or course outline for parents. Any books or articles recommended by readers will be gratefully considered.

Nor is "Education in Wholesome Chastity" a critique of any specific course or document. It is, rather, an outline of basic principles which must be understood if the education of children in matters relating to sex is to be positive and prudent. It is a cautionary statement that some of these essential principles have not been adequately appreciated in some textbooks, courses, and documents. The examples used in the NFPCPG Position Paper were drawn from some of the most popular and most important of these sources, but are used only as examples. Specific critiques of the *Benziger Family Life* series and "Education in Human Sexuality for Christians" are available elsewhere.^{1, 2, 3, 4}

"Education in Wholesome Chastity" is written from the viewpoint of Catholic physicians who are all too familiar with currently widespread forms of sexual psychopathology and their causes and effects. It attempts to relate the issue of classroom sex education to the larger context of contemporary, hedonistic, neo-Puritan culture, in the light of scientific insights into the development of the child and of the perennial teachings of the Church. Although many of its cautions can be fruitfully applied to the education of older adolescents (high school), it is primarily oriented toward the sexual development and education of pre-adolescents and pubescents (grade school and junior high school), on whom many of the most harmful courses have been imposed.

Important Point of Paper

One important point of the paper is that there are many influences on the child's sexual development, including home, school, peers, and the news and entertainment media. Since many of these influences are unwholesome, it behooves the Catholic community, especially parents, to do what it can to make those influences over which it has most control—home and school—as wholesome as possible. Moreover, since the influence of the home is far more important than any other, education in wholesome chastity for parents is the most effective way to assure a wholesome and chaste education for children. More emphasis should be placed on the education of parents than is currently done.

Dr. Klaus's observations about the selective deafness of many adolescents to their parents is an important one. The NFPCPG paper does not propose that parents take a didactic approach to instructing their children, either in adolescence or before. It would be most inappropriate for parents to adopt the tried-and-true methods of classroom sex education. Giving answers for which the child has no questions is not education. Sex education by parents in the home is primarily affective and exemplary, not didactic. Conceptual instruc-

tion is of secondary importance and can be provided by parents in an informal, relaxed, low-key way as a response to the child's questions, not at the initiative of the parent. The parent who answers his child's questions simply and honestly, from the earliest years, and who practices a gentle, loving, liberating discipline, will help establish the kind of comfortable relationship of open and relaxed communication which will help carry the child through the difficult years of adolescence. This relationship, which can grow only in an atmosphere of warm and open affection, cannot be delegated to any other adult. Parents can succeed or fail in this responsibility, but they cannot assign it to someone else. This is not a matter of inadvisability; it is a matter of impossibility. Therefore, it is parents who must be educated: away from their own Puritanism and toward the wholesome chastity (so closely allied with charity) which will allow them to bring up their children well.

If a good foundation has been established and the child has developed a sense of responsibility, respect for the rights of others, self-control, and a capacity for independent decision-making, parents need have little anxiety about the temporary lapses of communication which frequently occur during the adolescent's search for independence. Those families in which parents and children totally fail to communicate about sexual matters throughout their lives together, generally suffer from a deeply rooted breakdown of communication which also extends to religion and other values. These problems are often traceable to a dysfunctional relationship between the parents. In this situation, therapeutic intervention must be directed at the family as a whole, not just at the children.

Nor does "Education in Wholesome Chastity" overlook the role of the school:

Let us merely ask that the schools assume their own share of the burden of "education in matters relating to sex" in a positive and prudent manner, not in the neo-Puritan mode. Let the Catholic schools teach the Ten Commandments, neither excluding or isolating the sixth and ninth. Let them teach biology as biology, with neither a prudish neglect of nor a neo-Puritan preoccupation with the reproductive system. Let them teach children to read and to love reading, so they may enjoy and benefit from the great literature, experiencing vicariously and safely the conflicts of life. . . . Let the schools help children through study habits, sports, fair codes of discipline, and ample opportunities to interact with their peers, to develop strong characters which will insure that the passions which unfold as they get older will not overcome them. Let them counsel troubled students discreetly and with Christian love, without imposing their difficulties on the rest of the class. Let them provide access to and encourage frequent use of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion.

It is difficult to see how this approach is inconsistent with the Holy Father's apostolic exhortation on the family, as cited by Mr. Horkan, or with National Catechetical Directory of the U.S. Bishops, which states:

Catechesis calls particular attention to the role of self-control, self-discipline, prayer, the reception of the sacraments, and devotion to the Blessed Mother, model of chastity, as elements in developing a Christian approach to sexuality. . . .

Education in sexuality should be given in an *integral manner* (emphasis added).

The primacy of the parental right in education obviously extends to the children's formation in relation to sexuality.

It is the failure of formal, distinct courses of sex education to carry out the teachings of the Church which has prompted the NFCPG's statement. Such courses are rooted not in "the moral norms" but in contemporary neo-Puritanism. They were not developed with the broad participation of the body of Catholic parents, but by small groups of professionals (who may coincidentally be parents). They do not enter into "the same spirit that animates the parents," the spirit of, for example, the parents of Florida, who recognize "the need for strong Church teaching on chastity, sexual morality, and the commandments," but instead seek to "clarify" parental values by exposing them to moral relativism and peer group re-direction. They are taught in schools controlled not by parents but by professionals. Such programs fall far short of "education for chastity."

Adolescent's Dilemma

The dilemma of the adolescent who is sexually confused or rebellious is, of course, a difficult one. Concerned teachers will wish to be available for personal counseling of these troubled students. But, just as it would be wrong to ignore the problems of these troubled adolescents, it would be equally wrong to impose their difficulties on their untroubled peers. Not only would such classroom discussion disrupt the tranquility of the academic environment, it would also accentuate sexual preoccupations in those students whose lives were as yet less dominated by them. Because of its emotional power, sex has a tendency to displace all other concerns. It may have been true in the past that the presumption of virginity in all adolescents did a disservice to those who were desperately trying to recover their self-respect after having lost their virginity. But the prevailing presumption of the lack of virginity of adolescents (which Dr. Klaus has rightly deplored)⁵ is clearly unfair to those who wish to preserve theirs. A distinction must be maintained between education, whose end is the perfection of normal students, and clinical-pastoral intervention, whose end is the healing of troubled and broken spirits. The latter does not belong in the standard classroom or curriculum for normal students.

Some forms of group or classroom instruction in chastity and in reproductive biology are appropriate and are not in opposition to the Magisterium nor are they a disservice to it. This instruction should be

carefully planned and carried out in a wholesome and chaste way which does not offend the modesty, the personal privacy, or the individual readiness of the student and which does not impose a puritanical, mechanistic, or humanistic viewpoint. Instruction in awareness of the meaning of the menstrual cycle, for example, should carefully avoid implying that temperature-taking, mucous-observation, and fertility charting are appropriate or necessary for all couples or (even less) for single women. Natural family planning is appropriate only for married couples and only for good reasons. Many normal people will go through their lives never having to use it. Instead, education should be oriented toward an understanding of the meaning of marriage and the value of children. The prevalent preoccupation with erotic feelings should be replaced with an emphasis on the meaning of sexuality for the human person and for society. Every high school religion teacher should master *Humanae Vitae*, especially the paragraphs on "Responsible Parenthood." Education in the advantages of breastfeeding and its natural effects on the spacing of children would not be inappropriate for high school students. The inseparability of the unitive and procreative meanings of sexuality from the point of view of the growth of the human person should be emphasized. Good literature will often convey these truths to young people better than the social or natural sciences.

As in Dr. Klaus's program, parents should be closely involved, and both parents and teachers must understand and embrace the Church's Magisterial teaching on chastity which "frees the Christian, who thereby lives in harmony with his created nature, from the slavery of his fallen nature."

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