

**Catechesis on Marriage and Family**  
**As I Have Loved You**  
**A Programme for Catholic Education in Sexuality**  
**Gerard O'Shea**

Following the series on Catechesis on Sexuality by Sr Jane Dominic Laurel, O.P., *The Sower* will be drawing attention to various initiatives around the world in this area of the handing on of the good news of marriage, family and sexuality. In this issue we have asked Dr Gerard O'Shea to tell us about a programme and resource for parents which he has assisted in developing.

++++

**The need for a practical resource**

*As I Have Loved You* began as a project at the John Paul II Institute of Marriage and Family in Melbourne, Australia. The Archdiocese of Melbourne had produced a set of 'Directives' concerning sexuality education. These directives were based on the document of the Pontifical Council for the Family *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*. Taken together, neither document provided practical assistance for implementing what was wisely proposed. It was clear that the Church genuinely understood what was needed in the area of sexuality. Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* offered a profound understanding of the place sexuality in human life. Nevertheless, this would remain a dead letter if it was not explained to ordinary people and put into practice in their lives. This need for a simple, practical explanation constituted the development brief for the programme.

**The basic principles**

The document *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* had already embraced the essential message of the *Theology of the Body* and had specified four major principles to be followed:

1. Each child is unique and should be formed individually.
2. The moral dimension should always be included in explanations.
3. Formation in chastity and timely information about sexuality must be provided in the broadest possible context of education for love. It cannot be neatly fitted into any single curriculum area.
4. Information should be provided clearly and at a time appropriate to the individual child.

The implementation of these principles presented an enormous challenge. In acknowledging that each child was to be formed individually, the document precluded the use of a classroom approach to education in sexuality. Such education, it taught, ought to be conveyed through a personalised, one-to-one dialogue (*Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* 66). The document also recommended that the right personnel for delivering this formation were the parents, not the teachers. For over a century, Catholic parents have been in the habit of delegating their educative role to the Catholic School, and then largely forgetting about it. Now they would need to be formed as educators of their children in this important area. Was this possible for the twenty-first century?

Could this be done in a climate of pluralism, language and cultural variations? How would the substantial numbers of 'non-practising' parents, many of them estranged from

Catholic teaching, react to the notion that they were responsible for forming their children in Catholic sexual ethics?

### **For my own children**

It was more out of personal duty to my own children rather than conviction about its broad appeal that I proceeded with this task. It would have to be attempted, I thought, even if it did not meet with universal success. Some parents, at least, would want to fulfil their responsibilities, and they should be given the resources to do so.

I began by creating a series of simple pictorial work sheets to depict the essential teachings involved for each of the four principles. They were created to be comprehensible for children from about the age of ten years. I showed these to the teachers on my staff, and they were very positive in their feedback and some very good suggestions. When I showed the work sheets to my wife, who had no teaching background, she kindly told me that they looked lovely, but she was not certain of how she might use them. This encounter led to the first modification. On the back of each work sheet, a full description of how to use it was included.

I then called for volunteers from the school parents to form a focus group who would provide feedback for the draft programme. I did not exclude anyone who asked to join the group; I wanted to hear objections as much as endorsements. I noticed, however, that no men had volunteered, nor had anyone who did not speak English as a first language. I then invited such people to be part of the group and we were ready to begin.

*The parent input was the most inspiring part of the whole process*

### **Parental input**

The parent input on this committee was the most inspiring part of the whole process. Once they were given the freedom to speak, they were able to offer profound insights drawn from their own family life. Not all of the participants were practising Catholics, but every one of them wanted only the best and the finest of Christian teaching included in the programme. Even those who did not agree with Catholic teaching were quite clear about this. If they disagreed with some aspect of the programme, they reserved the right to tell their own children, but they did not want their own version to find their way into the text! All of them wanted ‘good things to be given to their children’ (Luke 11:13).

The refinement of language in this process was quite extraordinary, and some brilliant ideas came forward and were incorporated into the text – particularly regarding the way in which the sixth commandment could be explained. It was further noted that a whole section seemed to be missing from the draft: there was nothing that described the meaning of friendship, and its various levels. A new section on friendship was then prepared and reviewed. It now stands out as one of the greatest strengths of the programme.

### **Teaching Fertility**

Two further processes followed. Firstly, the programme was handed to the educators of the ‘Billings Family Life’ programme in Melbourne. As the home of Drs John and Evelyn Billings – the researchers who identified the ‘Billings Method’ of natural family planning – the Melbourne office of this group remains particularly well informed.

From their input, it was decided to include far more specific details about the reproductive systems and a simple explanation of the nature of fertility. As one Billings teacher noted, children are now entering puberty at a wide range of ages – some as early as eight years, and some as late as fourteen. Girls in particular need to be prepared for the event of their first menstruation. If it happened to them without any explanation beforehand, they can be quite traumatised by it and some may actually think that they are dying. Not everyone in the focus group agreed with this level of detail, but all were comfortable with the fact that they were not obliged to use it, as they would be in control of how much information was conveyed to their own children.

Finally, the programme was presented in detail to the school community. Those who did not respond to the invitation in newsletters, I wrote to personally. Those who did not respond to the personal written invitation, I phoned. Those who did not answer the phone, I went to see. This was an important project, and I wanted everyone to have the opportunity of participating. In the end, ninety-three percent of the parent body participated in the first programme. The remaining seven percent were very confident of their own ability to have this conversation with their children without any further assistance. The feedback from participating parents has continued to be very positive.

### **Appealing to all**

This project represents one school's response to the challenge to provide Christian Education in Sexuality, and this is where all such projects must begin. Subsequently, it has been parent groups and individual parishes who have asked to be trained in our programme, and I have only ever had positive feedback. The programme appeals immediately to committed Catholic parents, but my experience has been that those who are not as committed can also be moved to adopt this process if schools are prepared to put in the effort.

There can be no doubt that this way of running a programme of Christian Education in Human Sexuality is very demanding. Nevertheless, it is worth it. Some responses to the programme follow. The names have been changed, and some of the responses have been summarised - but every one is from a *real* person who has participated in the programme.

+++

### **Some Responses from Participants**

‘About half way through the programme, the penny dropped for me: sex education is not just about the birds and the bees; it's about what it means to be human. Of course parents are the best one to do this. We are the ones who are there all the time; we are the ones who see the big picture for our children. The programme has helped me to know how to recognise what is needed and when. I'm very grateful that the school has helped me to be able to do this myself without taking over.’

**Tracey, Stay at Home Mum**

‘I never thought I'd be able to do this with my sons. I thought that it would be best to leave it to the school because the teachers would be trained in how to go about it. Now I realise how much my sons need me to be there for them. Now I really believe that no

one can replace me. I still feel like it's going to be very hard, but I want to do it, and now I know how to go about it.'

**Marco, Truck Driver**

'What I like about this programme so much is that it's so human. It isn't focussed just on the clinical details as if that's all there is. You can easily get into a mindset that everything to do with sex is biological and you can forget about the spiritual and human dimensions. This programme has been great for showing me how to put the biological dimensions into the whole broad context of being a parent whose job it is to educate my children in my values.'

**Clare, Nurse**

'I knew my daughter wasn't ready for a lot of the details, but I didn't know why. Now I know how to approach the whole subject, and how to recognise the signs of readiness. I feel like I have been given back control over my family. I wanted to be the one who helped my children to understand the meaning of sex, but until now, I didn't know how to do it.'

**Margaret, Solicitor.**

'Time goes so quickly when you're a parent. Things like this creep up on you and you can feel like you're unprepared and then leave the important things to someone else who is supposed to be an expert. I'm very grateful that the school has given me the skills I need to work with my own kids. It means for one thing, that I can be more for them than a taxi driver and the guy who pays for the things they want. Now I feel like I'm their father, and they really need me.'

**Tom, Office Manager**

*Dr Gerard O'Shea is a Catholic School Principal and Part-time Lecturer at the John Paul II Institute in Melbourne. For more information on this initiative, please contact Gerard O'Shea on [goshea2@gmail.com](mailto:goshea2@gmail.com) or The Marriage and Family Office at the Maryvale Institute: [marriageandfamily@maryvale.ac.uk](mailto:marriageandfamily@maryvale.ac.uk).*