

## Reflection of Papal audience on topic of Catholic Education by Bishop Colli

It was an interesting and an exciting moment. I listened attentively, and then at one point to Pope said: "Within the context of the evangelization of culture, I wish to mention the fine network of Catholic schools at the heart of ecclesial life in your province. Catechesis and religious education is a taxing apostolate. I thank and encourage those many lay men and women, together with Religious, who strive to ensure that your young people become daily more appreciative of the gift of faith which they have received. More than ever this demands that witness, nourished by prayer, be the all encompassing milieu of every Catholic school. Teacher as witnesses, account for the hope that nourished their own lives by living the truth they propose to their pupils, always in reference to the one they have encountered and whose dependable goodness they have sampled with joy." Who is the Christ!

Quote from Pope Benedict XVI given to Ontario Bishops on their visit to Rome on September 8, 2006.

## Question regarding sacraments in today's waning mass attendance

Holy Father, I am Paolo Rizzi, a pastor and instructor of theology at the Superior Institute of Religious Sciences. We would enjoy hearing your pastoral opinion regarding the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation. More and more the children and young people who receive these sacraments prepare themselves well during catechetical sessions, but then don't come to Sunday Mass. It's natural to ask what sense this makes. Sometimes there's a desire to say: "Just stay home for all of it!"

Instead, however, we go on like always and accept them, thinking that in any case its better not to snuff out the wick of a weak flame. The tendency is to think that the gift of the Spirit can have results beyond what we see, and that in an epoch of transition such as ours its more prudent not to take drastic steps. What do you think? What pastoral attitudes can you suggest?

Benedict XVI

Well, I can't give an infallible answer right now, I can only try to respond based on what I see. I have to say that I've followed a path similar to yours. When I was young I was rather more severe. I said: the sacraments are the sacraments of the faith, and when the faith isn't there, where there's not practice of the faith, the sacraments can't be conferred. When I was Archbishop of Munich I always discussed this with my pastors, and there too there were too factions, one severe and one more generous. I too in the course of time have realized that we have to follow instead the example of the Lord, who was very open also with the people who were at the margins of Israel at that time. He was a Lord of mercy, too open "according to

many of the official authorities” with sinners, welcoming them or allowing himself to be welcomed by them at their dinners, drawing them to himself in his communion.

Thus I would say in essence that the sacraments are naturally sacraments of the faith. Where there is no element of faith, where First Communion would just be a party with a big lunch, nice clothes and nice gifts, then it can't be a sacrament of the faith. But, on the other hand, if we can see even a tiny flame of desire for communion in the church, a desire also from these children who want to enter into communion with Jesus, it seems right to me to be rather generous. Naturally, for sure, it must be part of our catechesis to make clear that Communion, First Communion, is not automatic, but it demands a continuity of friendship with Jesus, a path with Jesus. I know that children often have the intention and desire to go to Sunday Mass, but their parents don't make it possible. If we see that the children want it, that they have the desire to go, it seems to me almost a sacrament of desire, the “vow” of participation at Sunday Mass. In this sense we naturally should do everything possible in the context of sacramental preparation to also reach the parents and let's say, also awaken in them a sensibility for the path that their children are taking. They should help their children to follow their own desire to enter into friendship with Jesus, which is the form of life, of the future. If the parents have the desire that their children should make the First Communion, this somewhat social desire should be expanded into a religious desire to make possible a journey with Jesus.

I would say, therefore, that in the context of catechism with children, the work with parents is always very important. It's an occasion for meeting the parents, making the life of faith present also to the adults, so that they themselves can learn anew from the children, it seems to me, and to understand that this great solemnity makes sense only, and it's true and authentic only if, it's realized in the context of a journey with Jesus, in the context of a life of faith. The challenge is to convince the parents a bit, through the children, of the necessity of a preparatory path, which reveals itself in participation in the mysteries and begins to foster love for those mysteries.

This is a fairly insufficient response, I would say, but the pedagogy of the faith is always a journey, and we have to accept today's situation, but we also have to open it up little by little, so that it's not directed at the sole aim of some exterior memory of things, but so that the heart is truly touched. In the moment in which we become convinced, the heart is touched, it's felt a bit of the love of Jesus, and it's experienced a bit of desire to move in this direction. In that moment, it seems to me, we can say that we've accomplished a real catechesis. The true sense of catechesis, in fact, should be this: to carry the flame of the love of Jesus, even if it's small, to the hearts of children, and through the children to their parents, thereby opening anew the places of the faith in our time.

Answer given to priests of Brescia, Italy on a Papal visit there in 2008.