

Foundations and Principles: Education for Love

The **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program is based on sound theological, catechetical, and educational principles which are drawn from a combination of sources. The sources include papal encyclicals and other Vatican documents, several publications issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), as well as pedagogical principles based on the work of specialists in the fields of catechesis, character education, and sociology.

A brief overview of the foundational documents is provided below, followed by a more detailed analysis of some of the major documents. Serious students of this program may wish to obtain and study the original documents.

Overview of Ecclesiastical Documents

Fifty years ago the bishops of the Second Vatican Council provided a blueprint outlining the goals of the Church's educational efforts. In *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), the Council Fathers indicated that every child has the right to an education "in which truth and love are developed together." Special mention was given to the need to give children "a positive and prudent sexual education" (GE 1).

The fundamental principles found in this document were developed over the years by subsequent Vatican commissions and episcopal conferences. Chief among these documents is *Familiaris Consortio* (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World), issued by Pope John Paul II after the first Synod on the Family held in 1980. This document could be subtitled a treatise on authentic love; it refers to sex education as "education in love."

Other Vatican documents that flesh out the basic elements of sexuality education include Educational Guidance in Human Love (1983) and The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality (1995). Both refer to sex education as "education for love", and both state the need for parents and teachers to work together in providing this education.

In more recent years the bishops of the United States have issued three documents which have impacted, in varying degrees, how sex education is presented to Catholic children. The first of these is the 2002 document Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth, which mandates that children of all ages are to be given annual "safe environment" training.

The second USCCB document, the 2005 National Directory for Catechesis, lists 21 points that are to be included in sexuality education, all of which are to be provided "in the broadest context of education for love." (NDC p 178)

A third USCCB document, issued in 2008 under the title *Catechetical Formation in Chaste Living*, is intended to guide catechetical leaders, parents, teachers, and publishers in the “crucial and delicate task” of sexuality education. This document pulls together the principle concepts from all of the documents mentioned above, and clearly delineates the complementary tasks of all of those responsible for the sexuality education of children.

The most recent ecclesiastical document to impact the church’s approach to sexuality education is *Amoris Laetitia*, the apostolic exhortation issued by Pope Francis in response to the 2014-2015 Synod on the Family. Pope Francis devotes a full chapter of this brief document to the raising of children, with special emphasis on the need for sexual education, which must be seen, he insists, in the broader context of education for love and for mutual self-giving.

DOCUMENTS FROM THE UNITED STATES BISHOPS: A Closer Look

Safe Environment Charter USCCB 2003

In 2003 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops responded to the sexual abuse crisis by issuing *Promise to Protect, Pledge to Heal: The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. Often called “The Charter” by diocesan and parish catechetical personnel, this document requires, among other things, that all children be given annual lessons designed to help them to be aware of and to protect themselves from sexual abuse. The Charter states: “...Dioceses will establish ‘safe environment’ programs...providing education and training for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, and others about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children.” Article 12

While the sessions used to fulfill this mandate often take the form of lessons on how to avoid sexual abuse, the Charter authors actually envisioned a wholesome development of the young person which would enable them to avoid and/or respond to dangerous situations.

The original Learning about L.I.F.E. program (Ave Maria Press. 2006) was created by Kathie Amidei and Sister Kieran Sawyer as one of the ways the Catholic community could fulfill the Charter’s mandate. The program provided material for trained facilitators to use with parents and children to provide the “education and training for children and youth” that is required by the Charter mandate. The new **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program continues to fulfill the Charter mandate.

To view the full charter, please visit <http://bit.ly/safe-environment-charter>.

National Directory for Catechesis USCCB 2005

In 2005 the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops published the *National Directory for Catechesis*. This document calls for catechesis that “includes instruction on the gift of human sexuality, its inherent goodness, and the proper place of that gift within the context of a faithful, fruitful, and lifelong marriage.” The Directory lists 19 components that are to be incorporated into catechesis

on sexuality. Those to which the **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program specifically responds are listed here.

- Recognizes that the family is the most suitable environment for gradual education in human sexuality
- Recognizes that parents have the basic right, duty, and primary responsibility to provide education in human sexuality for their children
- Recognizes the duties of pastors and parish catechetical leaders to support and encourage parents to carry out their role as educators of their children in human sexuality
- Helps parents to teach their children that the positive values inherent in human sexuality derive from the dignity of each human person created in God's image
- Promotes marital fidelity and teaches that sexual intercourse is a moral and human good reserved for married spouses
- Includes instruction on the immorality of ... all forms of sexual abuse
- Helps parents to ensure that ... information regarding sexuality is provided in the broadest context of education for love. (NCD pp 177-178)

Catechetical Formation for Chaste Living USCCB 2008

In 2008 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published the document *Catechetical Formation for Chaste Living*. The *Chaste Living* document is concerned with forming children in their development toward "authentic love". Its focus is on helping young people to understand and build relationships, and on guiding them in the gradual growth toward generous and self-giving love. The *Chaste Living* document makes a distinction between sexuality education (concrete, specific education in the biology of human sexuality) and catechetical formation (the cultivation of the virtues that enable a person to live a chaste life). While the former is primarily the responsibility of the parents, the document indicates that the latter is a responsibility shared by catechists and teachers.

The **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program has been carefully designed to accord with the following principles and concepts of the *Chaste Living* document:

- Presents Authentic Love as the goal of sexuality education
- Promotes positive loving relationships in family life, friendship, and marriage
- Emphasizes that sexuality is a gift to be shared only in marriage ("self-giving love")
- Defines chastity as the power of authentic love to channel and control sexuality
- Calls for the partnership of parents and catechists in the formation of children for chastity
- Promotes the ongoing cultivation of the virtues (character strengths) needed to support chastity formation
- Spans pre-school through grade twelve; is taught in age-appropriate stages
- Includes teaching on how to recognize and avoid sexual abuse

Visit <http://bit.ly/chaste-living-document> to view the full document.

VATICAN AND PAPAL DOCUMENTS: A Closer Look

Theology of the Body Pope John Paul II, 1978-2005

Over the many years of his priesthood and papacy, Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla) developed an integrated vision of the human person, body and soul. In his many talks and writings, he explained the divine meaning of human sexuality and showed how the body itself provides answers to fundamental human questions. Much of his teaching on this subject can be found in a book which was still in manuscript form when he became Pope John Paul II in 1978, and which he taught chapter by chapter in his weekly audiences over the first five years of his papacy. Both this book, and the compilation of his weekly catecheses, have become known as the “Theology of the Body.”

Most of the current writings on sexuality education draw from the many documents that present the teachings of John Paul II on sexuality, human love, chastity, and marriage. The **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program has been designed to relate these concepts in language and symbolism that can be better understood by the parents and children who participate in the sessions.

Familiaris Consortio, Apostolic Exhortation Pope John Paul II, 1981

The apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World) was based on the work of the first Synod on the Family held in 1980. This document reflects, in very readable language, many of the heavy philosophical and theological concepts found in Theology of the Body. It could be called a treatise on how authentic love is to be lived out in the contemporary family. In a frequently quoted passage the document states: “Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” (FC 11) The document declares that sex education, which it calls “education in love” (FC 37), is primarily the right and duty of parents, who are to collaborate with other educational agents in presenting it to their children.

To view the full exhortation, visit http://bit.ly/familiaris-consortio_full.

Truth and Meaning in Human Sexuality Pontifical Council for the Family, 1995

This document, produced by the Pontifical Council for the Family in 1995, also reflects the teaching of Pope John Paul II. The document says: “Education for authentic love implies education in right relationships. Children, adolescents, and young people should be taught how to enter into healthy relationships with God, with their parents, with their brothers and sisters, with their companions of the same or opposite sex, and with adults.” (TM par 53) This quote states well the goals of the **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program.

To download the Truth and Meaning document, visit <http://bit.ly/truth-and-meaning>.

Deus Caritas Est Encyclical by Pope Benedict XVI

The basic framework of the **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** sessions is a gradual understanding, by the parents and their children, of the difference between the four kinds of human relationships represented

by the acronym L.I.F.E.: Love, Infatuation, Friendship, and Exploitation. *Deus Caritas Est*, an encyclical letter promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, also speaks of human relationships in these four categories. The Holy Father uses the ancient Greek words Agape, Eros, and Philia to name the three different kinds of love relationships, and refers to sex without love as a vice that uses sex as a mere commodity that is exploited for personal gain. (*DCE 3 and 4*)

To view the entire encyclical, visit <http://bit.ly/deuscaritasest>.

Amoris Laetitia, Apostolic Exhortation Pope Francis, 2016

Soon after his election to the papacy, Pope Francis called the bishops of the world together for a Synod on the Family, which was to reflect on the many challenges impacting family life in today's world. The apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) was his response to this Synod. He devotes a full chapter of this brief document to the raising of children, with special emphasis on the need for sexual education. "We need to devote more time to our children", he says, "speaking with them about important things like sexuality with simplicity and concern" (AL 260). Through such ongoing conversations, the Holy Father points out, the developing sexuality of the young people "can be directed through a process of growth in self-knowledge and self-control" that will help to prepare them "for a great and generous love" (AL 280-284).

Conversations about L.I.F.E. helps to create family gatherings in which these essential conversations are likely to happen.

Visit <http://bit.ly/amoris-laetitia-full> to view the full document.

PRINCIPLES OF VIRTUE DEVELOPMENT

Besides the theological and catechetical principles outlined above, the **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program draws on sound principles of character education and virtue development. Character education is defined as the life-long process of teaching children how to be good: how to make good decisions, how to develop personal rules of conduct, how to live morally responsible lives, and how to develop relationships that are characterized by authentic love. Helping children to develop as persons of character is a prime responsibility of parents, who are to be aided in this task by teachers, pastors, catechists, and youth leaders of any kind.

Character education, (or to use the language of the Chaste Living document "the cultivation of virtue") is a primary focus of each level of the **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program.

Gradually, in the year by year discussions with their parents, the children are led to see that developing virtues and making good decisions are their own responsibility. At puberty they are introduced to the virtue of chastity as the personal virtue that will help them to make good decisions about their own sexuality.

The character education components of the **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program are based on the following six principles*:

- Character education is the process of teaching children how to be good human beings – persons who KNOW what is good, WANT to do what is good, and DO what is good.
- Character education happens best in a caring community – family, classroom, school, village, country.
- Character education is a gradual process, and must be based on the cognitive capacity and maturity level of the individual child.
- Character is the result of the daily choices and decisions made by each individual.
- Every individual shares responsibility for the ethical climate of the communities he/she is part of.
- Faith plays an essential role in the development of character.

*Principles developed by Dr. Thomas Lickona and his associates at the Center for the 4th and 5th R's (www.cortland.edu/character) and the Institute for Excellence and Ethics (www.excellenceandethics.com).

PRINCIPLES OF FAMILY FAITH DEVELOPMENT

Along with her ministry as the director of a large family-based catechetical program, Dr. Kathie Amidei is deeply involved in the formal study of evidenced-based research on the effectiveness of various methods of transmitting the faith to children. Her research has shown that ongoing family conversations are the most effective way for parents to influence the faith development of their children.*

The **Conversations about L.I.F.E.** program follows research-tested principles of family faith development:

- Parent-child interaction is the most appropriate setting in which to teach and learn about topics involving faith and love, relationships and sexuality.
- Parents know best how to approach these sensitive topics with their own children.
- Parents want to have meaningful conversations with their own children on the sensitive topics of relationships and sexuality. They don't always know how to do that and appreciate any help we can give them in this area.
- It is easier for families to have these discussions if they are surrounded by other families and are given a set process to follow.
- The facilitated family sessions provide structure for "Intentional Conversations" that should be, but may not be, already happening within each family.
- The facilitated family sessions begin an ongoing conversation that can be integrated into family life by the parents. Once the topic is introduced, it becomes safe and feels comfortable to continue the discussion at home within the family.

*A leading voice in this research is sociologist Christian Smith who has conducted several recent studies on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents. His research continues to show the dominant effect of family interactions on the faith lives of young people and indicates that the greatest influence shaping teens' religious beliefs is their parents.

<https://christiansmith.nd.edu/>