

## **Pope's Letter to Romans on Education**

"Each Person and Generation Must Make Their Own Decisions in Their Own Name"

VATICAN CITY, FEB. 6, 2008 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a Jan. 21 letter on education that Benedict XVI wrote and will present at a Feb. 23 audience with teachers, students and others who directly participate in education.

Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the Pope's vicar for the Diocese of Rome, sent an invitation to citizens and the faithful of Rome for the event where the Pope will symbolically present the letter.

During the Angelus address of Jan. 27, the Holy Father said he wrote the letter because, "I have wanted to offer in this way my own contribution to the formation of new generations, a difficult but crucial commitment for the future."

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Dear faithful of Rome,

I thought that I would address myself to you with this letter to speak to you about a question that you yourselves experience and to which various parts of the Church are dedicating themselves: the question of education.

We all have the good of the persons whom we love at heart, in particular our children, adolescents and young people. We know that the future of this, our city, depends on them. Thus we cannot avoid being solicitous for the formation of the new generations, for their capacity to orient themselves in life and to be able to tell good from evil, not just for their physical health but their moral health.

Educating has never been easy and today it seems to become more and more difficult. Parents, teachers, priests and all those who have a direct responsibility to educate know this well. One speaks, thus, of a great "emergency in education," confirmed by the many failures that too often result from our efforts to form solid persons, capable of working with others and of giving meaning to their life. It is not unusual, then, that the new generations are faulted, as if the children that are born today are different from those that were born in the past. One speaks, moreover, of the "generation gap" that certainly exists and is a burden, but is the effect, rather than the cause, of the lack of transmission of certainties and values.

Should we therefore fault the adults of today, who are apparently no longer able to educate? Among parents and teachers, and among educators in general, the temptation is strong to abdicate -- or yet, before this, there is the risk of not even understanding -- the role, or better, the mission that has been entrusted to them. In reality, what is in question is not only the personal responsibilities of adults or young people -- which nevertheless exist and must not be hidden -- but a growing atmosphere, a mentality and a form of culture that lead to doubting the value of the

human person, the significance itself of truth and of the good, in the final analysis, the goodness of life. It becomes difficult, then, to hand on from one generation to the next, something valid and certain, rules of conduct, credible objectives around which to build one's life.

Dear brothers and sisters of Rome, at this point I want to speak a very simple word to you: Do not be afraid! None of these difficulties, in fact, are insurmountable. They are rather, so to speak, the other side of that great and precious gift that is our freedom, with the responsibility that rightly accompanies it. Unlike what takes place in the field of technology and economics, where the progress of today can build on that of the past, in the ambit of the moral formation and growth of persons such an accumulative possibility does not exist, because human freedom is always new and therefore each person and generation must make their own decisions in their own name. Even the greatest values of the past cannot simply be inherited. We only make them our own and renew them through a personal choice, which often costs suffering.

However, when the foundations are shaken and essential certainties are lacking, the need for those values returns to make itself felt in a compelling way: Thus, concretely, today the demand grows for a true education. Parents, who are concerned and often anxious about their children's future, ask for it; many teachers, who have the sad experience of the deterioration of their schools, ask for it; society as a whole, which sees the basis of its communal life threatened, asks for it; deep in themselves children and young people, who do not want to face life's challenges all alone, ask for it. He who believes in Jesus Christ then has still another, stronger reason for not being afraid: He knows, in fact, that God does not abandon us, that his love comes to us where we are, with our misery and our weakness, to offer us a new possibility of goodness.

Dear brothers and sisters, to make these reflections of mine more concrete, it might be useful to identify some common exigencies of an authentic education. It needs, above all, that nearness and that confidence that are born from love: I think of that first and fundamental experience of love that children have, or at least should have, with their parents. But every true educator knows that to educate he must give something of himself and that only in this way can he help his students to overcome egoism and become capable of authentic love in turn.

Already in a small child there is furthermore a great desire to know and to understand, which is manifested in his continual questions and his requests for explanations. It would therefore be a poor education that limited itself to giving notions and information, but left aside the great question regarding truth, above all that truth that could be a guide in life.

Even suffering is part of the truth of our life. Thus, trying to shield the youngest from every difficulty and experience of suffering, we risk creating, despite our good intentions, fragile persons of little generosity: The capacity to love, in fact, corresponds to the capacity to suffer, and to suffer together.

In this way we arrive, dear friends of Rome, at the point that is perhaps the most delicate in the work of education: finding the right balance between freedom and discipline. Without rules of conduct and of life, validated day in and day out even in the smallest things, character is not

formed and one is not prepared to face the trials that will not be lacking in the future. The educative relationship is, however, above all the meeting of two freedoms and successful education is the formation of the right use of freedom. Little by little the child grows, he becomes an adolescent and then a youth; we must therefore accept the risk of freedom, always remaining attentive to help him correct mistaken ideas and choices. That which we must never do is to go along with him in his errors, pretend not to see them, or worse, to share in them, as if they were the new frontiers of human progress.

Education cannot, therefore, do without that authoritativeness that makes the exercise of authority credible. It is the fruit of experience and competence, but it is acquired above all by consistency in one's own life and by personal involvement, an expression of true love. The educator is thus a witness of truth and of goodness: Certainly, he too is fragile and can make mistakes, but he will always strive to harmonize himself with his mission.

Dear faithful of Rome, from these simple considerations it emerges how important responsibility is in education: the responsibility of the educator, certainly, but also, and in a measure that grows with age, the responsibility of the child, the student, the young person who enters into the world of work. That person is responsible who knows how to answer, that is, respond, to himself and to others. He who believes strives, moreover, and first of all, to respond to God who first loved him.

Responsibility is in the first place personal, but there is also the responsibility that we share together, as citizens of the same city and of the same nation, as members of the human family and, if we are believers, as children of one God and members of the Church. In fact, the ideas, the lifestyles, the laws, the whole orientation of the society in which we live, and the image that it gives of itself through communication, exert a great influence on the new generations, for good but often also for ill. Society, however, is not an abstraction; in the end we are society, all of us together, with the directions, the rules and the representatives that we give ourselves, even though the roles and responsibilities of each of us is different. Thus, the contribution of each of us is necessary, of every person, family or social group, so that society, beginning with this city of ours, Rome, might become a more favorable environment for education.

Finally, I would like to propose a thought to you that I developed in the recent encyclical letter "Spe Salvi" on Christian hope: The soul of education, as also the entirety of life, can only be a trustworthy hope. Today our hope is threatened on many sides and we too run the risk of becoming again, like the ancient pagans, men "without hope and without God in this world," as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Ephesus (Ephesians 2: 12). Precisely here is born the most profound difficulty for a true educational project: At the root of the crisis in education there is, in fact, a crisis of confidence in life.

Thus, I cannot conclude this letter without a warm invitation to put our hope in God. He alone is the hope that resists all delusions; only his love cannot be destroyed by death; only his justice and his mercy can cure the injustices and give recompense for the sufferings that have been undergone. Hope that turns to God is never hope only for me; it is always also a hope for others: It does not

isolate us but makes us solidary in the good, it stimulates us to reciprocally educate each other in truth and in love.

I greet you with affection and I assure you that I will remember you especially in prayer, while I impart to all my benediction.

From the Vatican, Jan. 21, 2008

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

[Translation by Joseph G. Trabbic]