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Parents are key to helping youth understand the beauty of the gift of sexuality

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You might look at this and think, “Now what can a twenty-something year old single girl tell me about raising my children?” You have a valid point. I have no children and cannot speak from a parent’s perspective. But I was a teenager myself not long ago and I remember, and live out today, much of what I learned through the love and direction of my parents.

So, I offer to you this message of hope and thoughts on raising a teen that stem from my reflections on the adolescent experience in today’s culture.

I am one of two chastity education presenters for the Diocese of Fargo, the other being Nathan Hillmer. We travel around the diocese giving presentations on chastity education to junior high and high school students along with parents, priests and catechists. This year’s presentations draw from the themes found in Jason Evert’s new book *Theology of His Body/Theology of Her Body*.

Our presentation is not the typical “don’t have sex” talk that employs various scare tactics to instill fear. “If you have sex before marriage you will get an STD **insert scary music and dark clouds** and you will die!” Statistics have shown that pre-marital sex greatly increases the risk of a plethora of STDs and STIs. I am not making light of that fact. I am merely pointing out that if youth (and adults) are not informed of the truth and beauty *behind* sexuality, they will be more likely to rebel due to a lack of understanding of *why* sex is beautiful and *why* it is properly found in marriage. From my experience in public schools and through further study of Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, I know that sex education from a purely biological standpoint is incomplete.

I once read an analogy of a kite. You go outside on a windy day with your kite in hand. You run, toss the kite in the air and firmly grasp the string as the kite begins to soar in the sky. Once it gains enough height, the string becomes taut and the kite begins to tug at your hand. Wanting to escape your grasp. Wanting freedom. If you let the kite go, what happens? Yes, it might soar gloriously for a few seconds but, because there is no anchor, it plunges to the ground and lands in a broken heap of cloth, wood and string.

We are like the kite. Oftentimes we prefer not to have rules and regulations that seemingly ‘restrict our freedom.’ This is especially the case in the realm of sexuality. Teens often view ‘rules’ regarding sexuality as limiting, unreasonable and as arbitrarily imposed hindrances to happiness.

As a parent, you might sometimes feel your teens act as if your moral guidelines and house rules infringe on their right to become who they want to be. As a former adolescent, I say feel free (and obligated) to attach a string of moral guidance to keep them safely grounded.

John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* not only gives us the foundation of a true and complete understanding of human sexuality, but it also shows us that the ‘rules’ are not arbitrarily imposed. They are handwritten by the Creator with love on each of our hearts.

Our bodies were made to express love in a free, total, faithful and fruitful way. Any use of our sexuality without these attributes is saying a lie with the body.

But how do teens come to the knowledge of the beauty of sexuality? Through the family. Yes, supplemental guidance can come through things like the presentations Nate and I give or the *Theology of the Body for Teens* curriculum that is offered in many of our parishes, but to have the message truly resound in the hearts of the youth, it needs to be nourished through the family.

In John Paul II's work on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (*Familiaris Consortio*) he affirmed numerous times that, "the right and duty of parents to give education is essential." The Pontifical Council for the Family stressed the same point.

Now you might read that and think, "Whoa, I'm not qualified to teach my teenager theology! How am I supposed to do this?"

Hopefully, you will be relieved to hear that both John Paul II and the Pontifical Council (in addition to the Catechism and other works of the Church) also stress that, "God gives [married couples] the grace to carry out their mission adequately." The message from Holy Mother Church is one of *hope*.

You need not be a canon lawyer to educate your teenager in faith and morals. Under all of their attitude and emotional upheaval, deep down they truly do desire your guidance and affirmation even though they "strive for freedom" like the rebellious little kite.

The Catechism stresses the importance of parents teaching through example in a home of charity, tenderness, forgiveness, respect, and fidelity (Cf. CCC 2223). It is in the loving environment of the home that teenagers will be formed into the beautiful sons and daughters of God that they are called to be.

Here's one last tip. A practical application. Tell your children you love them and hug them every day. Sounds simple, I know. They might get a wee bit squirmy when you hug them, but deep down they will appreciate it. Think of how many children and teens there are out there who are unable to receive even that small gesture of love from their parents.

Small yet powerful things like this set the foundation for teaching them about the meaning and beauty of love which will eventually help open up the doorway to teach them about the truth and beauty of human sexuality.

One resource I would recommend for parents is the *Theology of the Body for Teens: Parent's Guide*. It not only gives a clear, concise overview of Theology of the Body but it also includes helpful family applications and "Conversation Starters" which help parents overcome the awkward situation of having "the talk" with a teenager.

For copies of the parents' guide, additional resources or more information, contact Ashley at (701) 356-7900 or Ashley.grunhovd@fargodiocese.org.