

The Holy Father's words of wisdom to my children (and yours) this summer



I want to begin this column by stating unequivocally that there is no bigger supporter of Pope Francis than me. From the priorities of his pontificate – the mercy of God, care for creation, our duty to care for our brothers and sisters (especially the poor and migrants) – to his easygoing style and sense of humor, I love the man. Heck, our young son's middle name is Francis.

With that said, I can also acknowledge that, from time to time, he says things that make me scratch my head (or worse). We don't have to relitigate them all in this space, but judging from reader comments, you're likely aware of what I'm talking about. (As managing editor of *Our Sunday Visitor*, I always brace myself for the off-the-cuff question-and-answer sessions on papal plane trips.)

But of all the controversial things he's said over the past nine-plus years, nothing stunned me quite as much as what he said in a recent video message to teenagers. It began harmlessly enough: "I encourage you to use well and responsibly the time that is available to you: It is in this way that one grows and prepares oneself to take on more demanding tasks," the pope said as he encouraged the teens to make the most of their summer vacations.

Then he lost me.

"Besides recreation and rest, I know that some of you use this time to offer help voluntarily in solidarity initiatives. Others devote themselves to small jobs to lend a hand to their

family or to support their studies; others carve out days of silence and prayer to be with God and to receive light on their path.”

OK. Let’s unpack this a little bit together.

My wife and I have three teenagers – ages 19, 17 and 13 – so perhaps we’re jaded and more than a little biased. But let’s start here: “I encourage you to use well and responsibly the time that is available to you.” My two teenage sons – the 17-year-old and 13-year-old – would argue that playing video games, eating whatever they want whenever they want it and endlessly pestering every other member of the family would qualify as using their time “well and responsibly.” My wife and I disagree – loudly and often – but we applaud the pope for encouraging them to be, at a minimum, productive.

I’m going to surmise something for a second. Having met the pope earlier this year with my colleagues, it’s a nervous moment even for adults who were able to leave their rowdy children at home, 5,000 miles away. So my guess is that the vast majority of the kids Pope Francis meets have really been read the riot act by their parents, and so they compose themselves for their brief meeting with the Holy Father and act like little saints. That’s Pope Francis’ reality, not mine.

But let’s move on to when our beloved pope really ran this train off the rails. I’ll repeat it so you don’t have to look above: “I know that some of you use this time to offer help voluntarily in solidarity initiatives.” [Editor’s note: What!?] “Others devote themselves to small jobs to lend a hand to their family or to support their studies; others carve out days of silence and prayer to be with God and to receive light on their path.”

OK. Wow. I would really love for all of this to be true. And maybe, for some of you, it is. God bless you and your

wonderful, pious, self-giving kids, but we're still aspiring to greatness over here – especially during the summer. “Offer to help voluntarily in solidarity initiatives?” “Carve out days of silence in prayer?” My gosh, that sounds amazing. The only time we have silence is when everyone's phone battery is at full capacity so they aren't fighting over the charging cords.

This is all part of the life of a family, of course. And while I joke about our big, loud family, I wouldn't trade this time with them for anything. That said, if they ever do get quiet, I'll take the opportunity to remind them of the pope's expectations for them this summer.

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