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The Family's Educational Mission (II)

The second part of an article on the parents' role in fostering a love for the true good in their children.

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The human person is marked by the capacity of *self-determination*: each is free to “construct” who one really is through one’s own free decisions. Freedom is not merely the possibility to choose one option over another,

but the capacity of self-dominion in directing one's actions towards the true good. Therefore a central aspect of educating children is forming them to exercise their freedom, so that they truly want to do what is good—not because it is commanded, but because it is good. Children are often taught more effectively by what they see and experience in the home—an atmosphere of freedom, cheerfulness, affection and trust—than by what they are told. Hence, more than in instructing, the parents' educational mission consists in “infecting” children with the love for truth that is the key to freedom.^[1] In this way, with the help of God's grace, the children grow up with the desire to direct their lives towards the fullness of Truth, who alone gives full meaning to human existence and satisfies the deepest yearnings of the human heart.

A demanding love

Educating a person in freedom is an art, and often not an easy one. As Benedict XVI said: “We thus arrive... at what is perhaps the most delicate point in the task of education: finding the right balance between freedom and discipline. If no standard of behavior and rule of life is applied even in small daily matters, the character is not formed and the person will not be ready to face the trials that will come in the future. The educational relationship, however, is first of all the encounter of two forms of freedom, and successful education means teaching the correct use of freedom.”[2]

In striving to reconcile discipline and freedom, it is important to keep in mind that Christian faith and morals are the key to human happiness. Living as a Christian can often be demanding, but far from being oppressive it is enormously liberating. The goal should be to help

children, right from a young age, to experience in the family home the reality that it is only by sincerely giving ourselves to others that we can be truly happy.[3] They should experience that a consistent Christian is not a “boring ‘yes man’; he does not lose his freedom. Only the person who entrusts himself totally to God finds true freedom, the great, creative immensity of the freedom of good.”[4]

The Christian life is the only true path to happiness, since it frees us from the sadness of an existence without God. As Benedict XVI forcefully insisted at the beginning of his pontificate: “If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this

friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return.”[5]

To make this a reality in their children's lives, parents need to give clear witness to the joy of an authentic Christian life. “Parents teach their children mainly through their own conduct. What a son or daughter looks for in a father or mother is not only a certain amount of knowledge or some more or less effective advice, but primarily something more important: a proof of the value and meaning of life, shown through the life of a specific person, and confirmed in the different situations and

circumstances that occur over a period of time.”[6]

Children need to perceive that the behavior they see in their parents' life is not a burden, but rather a font of inner freedom. And parents, without using threats, giving positive reasons, need to form their children interiorly for the exercise of their freedom, helping them understand why what is being asked of them is something good, so that they really make it their own. Thus their personalities are strengthened and they become mature, secure and free persons. They learn to rise above passing fads and to go against the current when necessary. Experience shows that when the children are older, there is nothing they thank their parents for more than this education in freedom and responsibility.

Setting high goals

While leaving children free, it is impossible to be “neutral” regarding the values they receive. If the parents fail to form their children; others will do so. Perhaps today more than ever, the social environment and the media exercise a strong influence on children, one that is far from neutral. Moreover, the tendency exists today to teach values that are acceptable to everyone, perhaps positive in themselves, but generally quite minimal. Therefore parents need to teach fearlessly all the good values they consider essential for their children’s happiness. For example, by insisting on the importance of study, children learn that it is good to apply themselves to their work at school. By insisting with affection on the importance of cleanliness and dress, children learn that hygiene and appearance are not trivial matters. But if the parents fail to insist on these values, always leading by their own example and providing

good reasons (for example, the importance of temperance, always telling the truth, loyalty, prayer, frequenting the sacraments, living holy purity, etc), children will intuitively sense that these values belong to the past, that not even their parents practice them or bother to take them seriously.

One factor of vital importance here is communication. A common temptation is to think: “I don’t understand young people today,” or “the environment is so bad,” or “in the past this would never have been allowed.” Arguments from authority can be useful at times, but they always prove insufficient in the end. In education, rewards and punishments can sometimes be effective, but above all one ought to speak about the goodness or badness of actions and the kind of life these acts build up. This will also make it easier for children to discover the

indissoluble link between freedom and responsibility.

Giving children good reasons for what is asked of them will always be necessary. St. Josemaria said that “the ideal attitude of parents lies more in becoming their children's friends—friends who will be willing to share their anxieties, who will listen to their problems, who will help them in an effective and agreeable way.”[7] To make this a reality, parents need to spend time with their children, speaking with and listening to each one. They need to take the initiative to speak calmly about the facts of life, the crises that come during adolescence, courtship, and certainly (since it is the most important reality in their life), the vocation God destines each person to. As Benedict XVI wrote, “education would be impoverished if it were limited to providing concepts and information, and neglected the key

question about the truth, especially the truth that can guide our life.”[8] Parents should never be afraid to speak with their children about anything, nor to admit that they too made mistakes when they were young. Far from taking away their authority, these confidences will better enable them to carry out their educational mission.

The most important “business”

The educational mission of parents is an exciting task and a great responsibility. Parents “should understand that founding a family, educating their children, and exercising a Christian influence in society are a supernatural task. The effectiveness and the success of their life—their happiness—depends to a great extent on their awareness of their specific mission.”[9] Being parents is their first job. St Josemaria used to say that raising children is

the parents' first and best "business": the business that will bring them happiness, and for which the Church and society hold such great hopes. Moreover, just as good professionals have a noble eagerness to learn and to improve their work, parents should want to learn how to be better spouses and better parents. To foster this desire, St Josemaria encouraged many practical initiatives that continue to assist thousands of couples: family enrichment courses, boys' and girls' clubs, schools in which the parents are the principal protagonists, etc.

Being good parents is a great challenge. The effort required should never be lost sight of, but with the grace given in the sacrament of matrimony and the spouses' joyful and loving dedication, all these sacrifices can be cheerfully borne. The education of one's children is a task of love. With this love, parents

can go trustingly to God, *from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named*,^[10] asking that he protect their family and bestow his blessings on the children. “Pray for them. The prayer of a father or mother, when they pray to God for their children, is extremely powerful. Pray! Pray for them. Put them under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, be a good friend of St Joseph, who was a wonderful father, and have a lot of devotion to the guardian angels of your children.”^[11]

Footnotes:

^[1] Cf. Jn 8:32.

^[2] Benedict XVI, Letter to the Diocese of Rome on the Urgent Task of Education, January 21, 2008.

^[3] Cf. Vatican Council II, Pastoral Const. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 24.

[4] Benedict XVI, Homily, December 8, 2005.

[5] Benedict XVI, Homily at the Inauguration of his Petrine Ministry, April 24, 2005.

[6] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 28.

[7] *Ibid.*, no. 27.

[8] Benedict XVI, Letter to the Diocese of Rome on the Urgent Task of Education, January 21, 2008.

[9] *Conversations*, no. 91.

[10] Eph 3:14.

[11] *Hogares luminosos y alegres*, p. 125.

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