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Educating in Freedom

"The task of raising children comes down to getting them to 'want' to do what is good, providing them with the intellectual and moral resources so that each one be able to do what is good from his or her own conviction."

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God has willed to create free beings, with all that this entails. As any good father would do, he has given us some guidelines—the moral law—so

that we can use our freedom correctly, that is to say, in a way that fosters our own good. In doing so, “he takes a risk with our freedom.”[1]

In some way, we could also say that the Almighty has accepted submitting his own plans to our approval. “God respects and bows down to our freedom, our imperfection and wretchedness,”[2] because he prefers our love freely given to the slavery of puppets; he prefers the “apparent” failure of his plans to putting conditions on our response.

In *The Way*, St. Josemaria quotes a saying attributed to St. Teresa of Avila: “Teresa, I wanted it... But men did not.”[3] Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross is the most eloquent sign of just how far God is prepared to go in respecting human freedom; and if he himself has gone to such lengths, a

Christian parent should think, who am I not to do likewise?

Loving one's children means loving their freedom. But it also means running a risk, "exposing oneself" to the children's freedom. Only in this way is their growth properly *their own*: a process that is assimilated internally and personally, and not an automatic response conditioned by coercion or manipulation.

Just as a plant does not grow because the gardener externally "stretches" it, but because the plant makes its nourishment its own, so a human being grows in humanity in the measure that the model initially received is freely assimilated.

Therefore, "after giving their advice and suggestions, parents who sincerely love and seek the good of their children should step tactfully into the background so that nothing can stand in the way of the great gift

of freedom that makes man capable of loving and serving God. They should remember that God himself has wanted to be loved and served with freedom and he always respects our personal decisions.”[4]

Freedom loved and guided

Certainly, loving the freedom children possess is far removed from being indifferent to how they use it. Paternity brings with it the responsibility of educating one's children, guiding their freedom and placing “requirements” on it. Just as God deals with men and women *suaviter et fortiter*, so too parents should know how to invite their children to use their capacities in such a way that they may grow into persons of worth. A good opportunity for this might be when they ask for permission for plans they have made. It might then be suitable to reply that it is up to them

to decide for themselves, after a due consideration of the circumstances. But they should be encouraged to ask themselves whether the request they are making is really appropriate, helping them to distinguish between a true need and a mere whim, and to understand that it would not be fair to spend money on what many people would not be able to afford.

True respect for freedom requires fostering moral demands that help one to overcome oneself. This is the way all human growth takes place. For example, parents ought to require of their children, according to their ages, a respect for certain limits. At times, punishment may become necessary, applying it with prudence and moderation, giving suitable reasons, and of course not resorting to violence. The best results are obtained by offering support and encouragement, while showing patience. “Even in the extreme case,

when a young person makes a decision that the parents have good reason to consider mistaken, and when they think it may lead to future unhappiness, the answer lies not in force, but in understanding. Very often it consists in knowing how to stand by their child, so as to help him overcome the difficulties and, if necessary, draw all the benefit possible from an unfortunate situation.”[5]

The task of raising children comes down to getting them to “want” to do what is good, providing them with the intellectual and moral resources so that each one be able to do what is good from his or her own conviction.

Knowing how to correct

Respect for persons and their freedom does not mean taking as valid everything they think or do. Parents have to dialogue with their children about what is good and

what is best. And sometimes they will need the strength to correct with the necessary energy. Since they not only respect, but also love their children, they refuse to “tolerate” every way of acting their children may decide upon.

Love is the least tolerant or permissive force found in human relations. For although we can love someone *with* their defects, it isn’t possible to do so *because of* their defects. Love desires what is truly good for every person, that they give the best of themselves, that they reach happiness. Therefore one who truly loves strives to get others to struggle against their deficiencies and longs to help them to correct them.

The positive features each person possesses are always—at least potentially—greater than their defects, and those good qualities are

what make them lovable. However, we don't love the positive qualities but the person who possess them, and who also has other qualities that are perhaps not so positive. "Correct" behavior is usually the result of many "corrections," and these will be more effective if they are done in a positive way, emphasizing above all what one can improve in the future.

It is easy to see why educating children is an appeal to their freedom. This is what distinguishes educating from training or instructing. Thus "educating in freedom" is redundant, and says nothing more than "educating."

Pedagogical value of trust

Nevertheless, the phrase "educating in freedom" underscores the need to form people in a climate of trust. As has already been stressed, the expectations others have regarding our behavior act as moral motives

for our actions. The trust others show us spurs us to act; whereas the feeling that others mistrust us is paralyzing. This is especially clear in the case of young people and adolescents, who are still shaping their own characters and give great weight to the judgment of others.

Trusting means having faith, giving credit to someone, considering that person as “capable of the truth”—of expressing it or protecting it, as the case may be, but also of living up to it. Trust given to someone usually brings about a twofold effect. It fosters gratitude, because one knows one has received a gift, and also a sense of responsibility. When someone asks me for something important, that person shows confidence in my being able to give it, and expresses a high opinion of me. If someone trusts me, I feel moved to meet their expectations, to be responsible for my acts. Trusting

in people is a very effective way of entrusting something to them.

A great deal of what educators can achieve depends on how much they can foster such an attitude. Parents in particular need to win the trust of their children, after having given it to them in the first place. From an early age it is good to foster the use of children's freedom. For example, they ought to ask children for things, and then offer them explanations about what is good and what is bad. But this would lack meaning unless there is trust—the mutual sentiment that helps someone to open up their intimacy, and without which it becomes difficult to set goals and tasks that contribute to personal growth.

Trust is given, is won, is attained; it cannot be imposed or demanded. One becomes worthy of trust by giving an example of integrity,

leading by example, already having given what one is now asking of others. Thereby one acquires the moral authority needed to require something of others; and thus educating *in* freedom makes possible the educating *of* freedom.

Educating children's freedom

Education may very well be understood as an “enabling of freedom” in order to perceive the call of what is truly of value, of what enriches and leads to growth, and to face up to its practical requirements. And this is achieved by proposing ways of using one's freedom, suggesting tasks imbued with meaning.

Each stage of life has its positive aspects. For young people, one of the noblest of these is the facility for trusting and responding positively to loving demands. Within a relatively short period, remarkable changes

may be observed in young people who are entrusted with tasks they are able to take on, and which they see as important: assisting someone in need, helping parents care for younger children, etc.

In contrast, when parents limit themselves to giving in to children's whims, although on the surface more comfortable, in the long run this approach incurs much heavier costs, and above all does not help children to mature, since it fails to prepare them for life. People who, from a very early age, get used to thinking that everything is solved in an automatic way, without any effort or self-denial, will probably never mature. And when life's inevitable blows come, it may be too late to remedy this situation.

To be sure, the atmosphere of hedonism and consumerism in which many families are immersed

(not only in the so-called “first world”, but also in many other environments of less developed countries) is not conducive to an appreciation of the value of virtue, or of the importance of delaying immediate gratification in order to obtain a greater good.

But in the face of such an adverse environment, common sense makes clear the importance of struggling with special effort to counteract it. It is especially important today to show convincingly how someone who possesses the moral energy to fight against the prevailing environment is *more free* than someone who does not.

All of us are called to attain such *moral freedom*, which can only be won by the morally good use of free-will. It is a challenge for all educators, and in particular for parents, to show in a convincing way

that the authentically human use of freedom consists not in doing what we feel like doing, but rather in doing what is truly good “because we feel like it.” And this is “the most supernatural reason,” as St. Josemaria used to say.[6]

There is no worse blindness than that of those who allow free rein to their passions, to their “feelings.” Those who can aspire only to what they find superficially appealing are less free than those who are capable of pursuing an arduous moral good, not only in theory but also in practice.

In the end, freedom finds its true meaning only “when it is put to the service of the truth which redeems, when it is spent in seeking God’s infinite Love which liberates us from all forms of slavery.”[7]

J.M. Barrio

Footnotes:

[1] *Christ is Passing By*, 113.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *The Way*, 761.

[4] *Conversations with Mgr Escrivá de Balaguer*, 104.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Christ is Passing By*, 17.

[7] *Friends of God*, 27.

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