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Chapter 5

Between Parent and Child

By its very nature the institution of marriage and married life is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory. Children are the supreme gift of marriage and contribute greatly to the good of the parents themselves. — *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1652

It is indeed true that the family is the basic unit of society, and its influence on the well-being of the individual, the Church, and the nation is widely recognized. The importance of the family extends into many fields, but when we look at the proper mission of the family as established by God, namely, the procreation and training of children, then we must acknowledge that the relation of the family to youth is of the highest importance. The training and attitudes which are conveyed to young people within the family circle will affect significantly the future of our Church and our country.

Unfortunately, we must concede at the outset that everything is not as it should be with the family today. There are serious problems to face, and Christian parents and children should take the lead in confronting and solving them. Alcoholism, crime, drugs, juvenile criminality, mental illness, pornography, suicide, lack of respect for authority, and the weakened influence of religion are troubles only too familiar to the present generation of children and adults. These problems have always existed, of course, but never have they been so widespread, never have they seemed so overwhelming, never has the response to them seemed so timid and uncertain.

Even good parents do not seem anxious to make the necessary effort to protect their children from these problems or to bring the level of family life up to the Christian ideal. Instead, some parents, perhaps without even realizing it, seem resigned to lowering the level of family life to pagan depths. They have lost their will to fight. They are like the man walking along the street who saw a drunkard lying in the gutter. The man looked at the drunkard for a minute and then said, "I can't lift you up, but I tell you what I'll do. I'll lie down beside you!"

So often, sincere parents look at some youthful activities today—their viewing of degrading and dirty movies, their use of foul language, their reading of immoral books and magazines, their attachment to alcohol and drugs, their involvement in early and prolonged sexual experiences, their contempt for the property and possessions of others—and then, with a shrug of the shoulders, say, "Oh, well, young people are different these days. I guess I can't be too strict with my children."

We are not implying that all young people fall into these categories. There are many boys and girls who are a credit to their families, their Church, and their God. But even these children find it increasingly more difficult to buck the tide of immorality and licentiousness. They are often subjected to ridicule and scorn and even physical abuse for not doing what "everybody else" is doing. These children need the support and encouragement and example of a true Christian family to do the right thing in a society that is intent on doing the wrong thing. With the proper education and training at home, Catholic boys and girls can become witnesses to Christ in the world. They can let the light of his teachings shine before their friends and acquaintances in an increasingly paganized society. This is their mission and the mission of every follower of Christ.

In order to deal with the problems confronted by parents and children, it is necessary to discuss the purpose of the family and the roles and duties entrusted to mothers, fathers, and children by God himself. Only by starting from the foundations and working up can we draw a blueprint for the ideal Christian family.

The Purpose of the Family

It is and always has been the teaching of the Catholic Church that a prime purpose of the institution of marriage is the beget-

ting and upbringing of children. In the words of Vatican II: "The true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior, who through them will enlarge and enrich his own family day by day" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 50).

What an exalted vocation marriage and family life is! God could have decided to bring new lives into the world by direct creation as he did with Adam and Eve. But instead, he chose to have human beings work in partnership with him. A husband and wife have a unique position in God's scheme of things. They cooperate with God in creation. The parents work with God in producing the body; he produces the soul. Marriage cannot accomplish this fundamental purpose without the contribution of Almighty God.

Pope John Paul on many occasions called young people "the hope of the Church." This very simple but significant statement points up another purpose of the family: the upbringing and training of children. Husbands and wives not only share in the creation of children with God, but they must then work with God to educate and prepare their children for their proper role in life.

People make headlines today if they discover a new medicine to cure a deadly disease, if they write a best-selling book, if they pitch a no-hitter in the World Series, or if they win a tennis championship. Prominent people from all walks of life are held in esteem. But their accomplishments pale into insignificance when compared with the task of training a soul for God, of joining with God in bringing new souls into the world and molding them according to the plan of God for their eventual return to him. Children are the truly important people of our day and our hope for the future.

The Christian family should be a team, with each member having certain responsibilities to fulfill. When one or more members of a baseball team neglect their duties and fail to execute their proper role, the team runs into trouble. The same is true of the family. In the game of life, however, the consequences of poor teamwork are far more devastating than those experienced in an athletic event.

Hence the need for spelling out the duties and responsibilities of each member of the family. Only when these roles are fully understood and faithfully lived will the family be strong enough to

bring about the Christianization of our society (cf. Pope John Paul's *Letter to Families*).

The Role of Parents

The goal of Christian parents must be to help their children become Christian men and women in the fullest sense. To have any hope of accomplishing this goal, parents must first of all be completely Christian themselves. They must be models worthy of imitation by their children. The importance of good example, of practicing what you preach, can never be overemphasized. It is not enough for parents to point out the way to their children; they must lead the way.

If they want their children to pray, they must pray; if they want their children to go to church, they must go to church; if they want their boys and girls to be truthful and honest, parents must be truthful and honest; if they want them to respect the name of God and refrain from cursing, they must do likewise; if they want their children to read decent literature and watch wholesome movies and television programs, parents must not violate these conditions themselves.

The most obvious role of parents is that of providing children with the necessities of life—food, shelter, clothing, medical care, education, and so forth. All of these things are important in giving a child a sense of security and well-being. Children must be taught, however, the value and proper use of the material goods of this world.

They must never get the idea that life is just one long pursuit of material wealth. They must be encouraged early and often to thank God for the material blessings that have come their way. They must be told of their obligation as followers of Christ to share their earthly goods with those who are less fortunate. "I assure you," our Lord said, "as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me" (Matthew 25:40).

Parents must give their children love and affection. There is a story of a little girl named Laura who lived in an orphanage. Her playmates often made fun of her because of an unsightly birthmark on her face, and so Laura preferred to play by herself. One day, one of the teachers at the orphanage saw the little girl climb the fence that enclosed the property, reach over the top, and place an envelope on the branch of a tree just beyond the fence. After

Laura had returned to the building where she lived, the teacher retrieved the envelope. In it was a note with these words: "To anybody who reads this, I love you! Laura."

Children crave love and affection. If they do not find these feelings at home, they will seek them outside the home. The love of parents for their offspring can have a great influence on them. This love and affection can be shown in many ways. It may consist of understanding and support for children; it may involve giving them a sense of worth and self-esteem; it may mean openness and sympathy, advice and direction, encouragement in their school work or in their hobbies, and respect for their privacy, their good reputation, their personal religious life, and their choice of vocation.

Whether by word or deed, parents must communicate their love to their children. They must, in fact, just plain communicate. They must be approachable, they must show an interest in what their children are saying, they must answer their questions honestly and fully, they must listen, listen, listen. There should be family conversation times, as well as opportunities for private talks. Parents should never refuse a child's request for private conversation. It is through open and honest dialogue that children will gain confidence in their parents, and parents will gain confidence in their children.

Not every conversation between parents and children will result in complete agreement on both sides. All opinions should be voiced in a spirit of charity, and once a decision is reached, the discussion should be terminated. Children will find some decisions hard to accept, but if they feel that their parents have been open and fair and attentive to their views, they will usually abide by whatever decisions are reached. It is when parents refuse even to discuss the matter in a candid and reasonable way that unhealthy conflicts arise in the family and children feel less and less inclined to seek parental advice about some problem or situation that has arisen.

The Role of Children

Just as parents have certain duties and responsibilities to their children, so children have duties and responsibilities to their parents. There is no one, with the exception of God, to whom children owe more loyalty and devotion than their parents. The

parents who, from the day they were born, have fed, clothed, sheltered, and educated them, have taken care of them when they were sick, and have given them just about everything they could ever reasonably want or need. It is doubtful that most children could ever do as much for their parents as has been done for them.

Children should honor their mother and father, said Pope John Paul in his *Letter to Families*, "because for you they are in a certain sense representatives of the Lord; they are the ones who gave you life, who introduced you to human existence in a particular family line, nation, and culture. After God, they are your first benefactors. While God alone is good, indeed the Good itself, parents participate in this supreme goodness in a unique way. And so, honor your parents!" (n. 15).

The best way that children can repay their parents is by always showing them love, respect, and obedience, especially when they disagree on something, and by taking time now and then to say thank you. They can repay their parents by discussing things with them, asking their advice, keeping them informed of their activities, and generally being open and honest with them. Genuine communication is a two-way street. Children who expect their parents to listen to them must listen to their parents. They must be polite and courteous, understanding and patient. When discussion has ended and a decision has been made, children must accede to their parents' wishes because parents stand in the place of God. In the words of St. Paul: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for that is what is expected of you. 'Honor your father and mother' is the first commandment to carry a promise with it—that it may go well with you, and that you may have long life on the earth" (Ephesians 6:1-3).

Children who keep open the lines of communication with their parents and with their brothers and sisters will avoid many of the problems and heartaches which plague so many young people today.

Children also should help mom and dad with the household chores—making the beds, cleaning the house, doing the dishes, preparing the meals, mowing the lawn, running errands, taking care of the younger children, and so forth. These chores should be done automatically and voluntarily and not only after mom or dad has to yell or threaten to take away some privilege. These tasks are not always pleasant, but neither is getting up for work every morning or washing clothes or putting meals on the table.

Doing the chores willingly and with a smile might not make them any more pleasant, but it will go a long way toward making your house a happy home.

To sum up the roles of the members of a family, we can turn to the advice of the kindly Pope John XXIII:

Let the father of the family take the place of God among his children, and not only by his authority but by the upright example of his life also stand clearly in the first place.

Let the mother, however, rule firmly and agreeably over her offspring by gentleness and virtue in the domestic setting. Let her behave with indulgence and love towards her husband and, along with him, let her carefully instruct and train her family, the most precious gift given by God.

The children are always to obey the parents who bore them, as is fitting, and love them, and be to them not only a comfort but, in time of need, a real support.

Within the walls of the home let there be that warmth of love which existed in the family at Nazareth (*Ad Petri Cathedram*).

The Education and Training of Children

There is no educational institution more important for a child than the family. No school can compensate for what is lacking there. The home is the natural education element and the parent is the teacher appointed by God. In the words of Vatican II: "Parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it" (*Declaration on Christian Education*, n. 3).

The task of training children and transmitting values to them in today's society is an awesome one. It begins at birth and continues until children become of age to make a life for themselves. The task belongs to both parents and is one more reason against divorce. The upbringing of children cannot be safeguarded except through a stable marriage bond.

We do not exaggerate when we say that a child's training must begin at birth. A famous prison warden once observed that "it is in the high chair not the electric chair that crime must be fought." And psychologists assure us that a child is pretty well

formed by the age of six. These pre-school years are vitally important and should be a matter of serious thought and concern for parents.

The family is the first and best school of faith and morals because it is there that children first learn of God, learn to love him and pray to him, learn of the Church, learn the wholesomeness of human companionship, and learn to love their neighbor. Or at least children will learn these things if their parents are oriented toward God in their daily lives. In a truly Catholic family, the word "God" should be as familiar to children as "mom" and "dad."

As soon as children begin to understand, prayers should be taught and stories told of God and Jesus, Mary and the saints. Small children find Bible stories fascinating and religious and moral principles can be taught by reading to them of God the Creator, Adam and Eve, Moses, Daniel, and the events in the life of Jesus.

Children will have many questions about these stories and about God. Parents can use these opportunities to impart a world of valuable knowledge about God and our relationship with him to their youngsters at a time when their minds are like sponges, just waiting to soak up information. Parents who neglect these important years may regret it later when they are confronted by teenagers who have little or no interest in God or his Church.

When the time comes for children to enter school, Catholic parents have the duty "to entrust their children to Catholic schools, when and where this is possible, to support such schools to the extent of their ability, and to work along with them for the welfare of their children" (*Declaration on Christian Education*, n. 8). Where Catholic schools are not available, parents should enroll their children in parish programs of religious education, and should become involved in these programs themselves.

Parents cannot completely delegate the religious education of their children to any school or program. The role of the parent as a religious educator does not cease when a child enters school. The parent must continue the training and moral formation of the child at home and make sure that the child's classroom instruction does not contradict or undermine correct doctrine or sound morality. Parents should also take advantage of good Catholic literature and adult education courses to keep themselves informed and prepared to teach their children.

Among the spiritual duties of parents is the obligation to pray

for and with their children. The power of prayer can be astounding. Many problems could be solved if some of the time spent in undue concern and anger was devoted to prayer. St. Monica had a problem child, the future St. Augustine. She prayed for him for many long years and through those prayers saw him return to the God from whom he had drifted far away.

Family life should be one constant prayer, from the Morning Offering, to grace before and after meals, to the family rosary, to evening prayers and spiritual readings. The family that prays together stays together. Important, too, is frequent recourse to the sacraments—Mass and Communion regularly, Confession frequently. This daily striving for holiness cannot help but make the duties and responsibilities of family life easier to shoulder.

Since we have mentioned the sacraments, parents should be reminded of their important spiritual duty of having a child baptized promptly. Following upon this is the obligation to arrange for a child's First Penance, First Communion, and Confirmation, and to take an active part in the child's preparation for these sacraments. With proper instruction and encouragement from parents, these sacramental encounters with Christ can be joyous and fruitful occasions for children that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Finally, parents and guardians are bound to observe and correct youths entrusted to their care. To put this in a practical light, it means, for instance, to supervise the children's school work, to know who their friends are, to find out where they are going when they leave the house. Any mother or father who takes the attitude that as long as there is peace and quiet in the house, little effort need be made to find out where their boys or girls are, or with whom they are spending their time, or what they are doing, will be answerable to God for neglecting important parental responsibilities.

Parents must check what their children are reading, what they are watching on television and the Internet, what movies they are going to see. Parents who are indifferent to having their children read morally objectionable books and magazines, or view filthy and degrading programs and films, share in the guilt. Massive quantities of morally objectionable materials pour out in a polluted stream each year. Adults are bound before God not only to avoid such materials themselves but to steer their children away from them, too.

This obligation of correcting and training is by no means easy, and that is all the more reason why parents should rely on prayer and the sacraments to seek God's special help in this all-important job. With God's help parents can be just, merciful, patient, and considerate in dealing with their children.

Effective Discipline

Failure to discipline a child and to show that he or she cannot always have their own way is no favor to the child. When an undisciplined child runs into serious difficulties, and finds that these difficulties cannot be resolved immediately, he often becomes angry and even violent. He is so used to having his own way that he cannot tolerate resistance to his demands.

Children need and want limits. It is vital for their security and well-being that they know what is expected of them, what the boundaries are which govern their activities. Limits, boundaries, and expectations must be pointed out very early in a child's life and then the reins can be loosened as the child grows older and more mature.

Discipline to be effective must be fair, firm, consistent, and constructive. *Fair* means that the punishment should fit the crime. *Firm* means that the punishment should be decisively and promptly administered. *Consistent* means that the same infraction should always be treated in the same way, not punished one time and overlooked another; not resulting in an easy punishment for one child and harsh sentence for another. It also means that both parents agree on the disciplinary system, and support each other in its enforcement. *Constructive* means that discipline should not be strictly negative. An explanation of why the conduct was bad should accompany the punishment so that the child can learn from the experience.

Finally, discipline must be balanced with love. Just as a husband and wife should not let disagreements and conflicts carry over until the next day, so parents should not allow children to go to sleep at night without discussing the incident or without expressing their continued love and affection for the offender. Parental firmness does no psychological harm to children. On the contrary, it shows youngsters that parents really care about them.

A word of advice to parents and future parents: Children re-

spond to praise much quicker than they do to criticism. Establish a system of rules and responsibilities for the family, and enforce it. But do not constantly nag the children about little things. And when they are good, reward them with praise, affection, treats, and extra privileges. Children generally aim to please their parents and win their approval, so frequent expressions of that approval will accomplish more than constant criticism and ridicule. Firm leadership coupled with love, understanding, and patience will result in happier and well-behaved offspring and a peaceful family environment.

Sex Education—When, What, and How Much?

There are few matters more controversial today than education in human sexuality. People are generally agreed on the need for sex education for children, but they are far apart when it comes to the best way of meeting this very important need. Some feel that it should be the exclusive prerogative of parents; others that the schools ought to help out. Some feel that the moral dimensions of sexuality must be included; others say that morality should have little or nothing to do with it, that only clinical details and contraceptive techniques should be presented.

What does the Church expect of Catholic parents in this sensitive area? It expects, in the words of Vatican II, that as children advance in years, they will be given "positive and prudent sexual education" (*Declaration on Christian Education*, n. 1). Pope John Paul expanded on this instruction in 1981, calling on parents "to give their children a clear and delicate sex education." He said that "sex education, which is a basic right and duty of parents, must always be carried out under their attentive guidance, whether at home or in educational centers chosen and controlled by them" (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1632).

The Holy Father also said that "the Church is firmly opposed to an often widespread form of imparting sex information dissociated from moral principles. That would merely be an introduction to the experience of pleasure and a stimulus leading to the loss of serenity—while still in the years of innocence—by opening the way to vice" (*The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, n. 37).

It is not within the scope of this book to offer detailed instructions on how to educate children in human sexuality; sound lit-

erature along these lines is readily available. However, we would like to offer a few basic thoughts and suggestions. They are taken from the Pontifical Council for the Family's 1995 document *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*.

"Each child is a unique and unrepeatable person and must receive individualized formation" (n. 65).

"Each child's process of maturation as a person is different. Therefore, the most intimate aspects, whether biological or emotional, should be communicated in a personal dialogue" (n. 66).

"Experience shows that this dialogue works out better when the parent who communicates the biological, emotional, moral, and spiritual formation is of the same sex as the child or young person" (n. 67).

"The moral dimension must always be part of their explanations. Parents should stress that Christians are called to live the gift of sexuality according to the plan of God, who is love, i.e., in the context of marriage or of consecrated virginity and also celibacy. They must insist on the positive value of chastity and its capacity to generate true love for other persons Only a person who knows how to be chaste will know how to love in marriage or in virginity" (n. 68).

"In talks with children suitable advice should always be given regarding how to grow in the love of God and one's neighbor, and to overcome any difficulties: These means are discipline of the senses and the mind, watchfulness and prudence in avoiding occasions of sin, the observance of modesty, moderation in recreation, wholesome pursuits, assiduous prayer, and frequent reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Young people especially should foster devotion to the immaculate Mother of God" (n. 71).

"Parents should provide this information with great delicacy, but clearly and at the appropriate time Giving too many details to children is counterproductive. But delaying the first information for too long is imprudent because every human person has natural curiosity in this regard, and sooner or later everyone begins to ask themselves questions, especially in cultures where too much can be seen, even in public" (n. 75).

The document also discusses the principal stages in the development of children (innocence, puberty, and adolescence), urges

parents not to allow educators or anyone else to interfere with their children's "right to chastity" (n. 118), declares that "no material of an erotic nature should be presented to children or young people of any age, individually or in a group" (n. 126), and warns against methods and ideologies, such as "values clarification" (n. 140), that would threaten the rights of parents and the moral life of their children.

This document is must reading for those who wish to understand the Church's teaching on the truth and meaning of human sexuality.

Parenthood Means Sacrifice

There was a story in the newspapers not long ago of an eight-year-old boy who fought his way three miles through deep snow to a neighbor's house to seek help for his mother, who lay dying at home. Help was obtained, the mother was rushed to a hospital, and her life was saved. "It was one of the most remarkable things I've ever seen a boy do," the neighbor said.

The point of the story is that parents never know how their children will react in certain situations. Mothers and fathers can only give their offspring good example and good training, teach them to love God and their neighbor, to treat others as they would like to be treated—and pray. Having done all of these things, parents can then stand before God and say that they did all they could to return to God this soul entrusted to their care.

The task of parenthood requires all-out service and sacrifice. In a world where men and women are brought up surrounded by an attitude of selfishness and individualism, parents need gallant hearts that dare to be different. But any goal worth obtaining means sacrifice and daring to do what is right instead of what "everyone else" is doing. And the goal of a successful family life surpasses the earthly success of any other human endeavor. A good home, where rights and duties of both parents and children are honored, comes as close to earthly paradise as anything we might hope for in this life.

A false picture, a caricature, of marriage and the family is being presented to us today by the pleasure-seekers in our society. We must be on guard not to be influenced by this phony portrait. The sooner the world gets back to the true Christian ideals of marriage and the family, to the recognition and realization of the

primary purpose of the family — cooperation with God in the procreation and education of youth — the better it will be for the world.

St. Francis de Sales gave this important bit of advice to mothers and fathers:

Parents ought often to speak of God to their children, but yet more often to speak to God of their children.

Family life is important. Christ himself spent thirty out of his thirty-three years on earth in the midst of a family. The ideal of Christian family life was set by Jesus, Mary, and Joseph of Nazareth. But Nazareth is set on a hill, and you have to climb to get there.