

THE VOCATION OF PARENTS

Saint Francis de Sales said, “The purpose of parenthood is to people the earth with adorers of God and to fill heaven with saints.” And there it is.

We can base all our ideas on bringing up children on this motive. It is a consideration for every married couple with children, for all souls who hope some day to be parents. There is the whole purpose of parenthood. It follows then that everything we do in relation to our children should have that end in view.

This is the task to which mothers and fathers should be dedicated. How few parents are working toward that end, however! Why are they neglecting to do so? Not out of sheer perverseness, usually, but mainly because ever so many, even Catholics, do not know the purpose of parenthood. As a matter of fact, many Catholics in spite of memorized catechism lessons are hardly aware of the purpose of their own existence: to know God, to love Him, and to serve Him forever in heaven. And though we may not condone their senseless driftings through life, neither must we hastily condemn them.

Mothers

We know there are mothers today neglecting that goal of parenthood, but not because they are deliberately ignoring it. Rather they are ignorant of it.

But mothers should be told and should be reminded over and over again. And it must be impressed on them that they should give unstintingly all the time and consideration required for the task.

In our day most mothers are not remiss in child care. We cod-liver oil them, feed them, dress them well. We attend to all the rules of hygiene and health. Even the poorest of us give remarkable care to these aspects of child-raising. When I lived in a slum clearance housing project mothers regularly attended classes in “nutrition” and other lectures at the health center. They brought their babies for “shots” for prevention of various diseases; they made use of the variety of medical and dental treatment offered by the council’s free health stations, and its hospitals, clinics and dispensaries. There was a surprising amount of talk among neighbors concerning child care, child education, child psychology.

Yet while we raise strong, sturdy bodies and alert, lively minds, we are apt to leave their souls stunted, warped, left in a foreverness of infancy. Their minds and bodies take up our time and effort. Their souls are tightly closed buds that may never be opened to the light of God and blossom on this earth.

When we once know what parenthood is all about and recognize what is before us, we will learn to love and study our children in a new, bolder, stronger way. We will have willing ears for their childish chatter and we will have more patience and joy with them. Mothers must look on their little ones as souls that belong to God and whom He holds dear. Then we will lift our daily living with the children to a higher level than we might achieve with the most noble of materialistic ideals.

The charge is commonly made that mothers are too “tied down,” their existence is too drab, they are shut away from the world. If only we could be shut away from the world! Actually for most of us the truth is that the world is too much with us. We are being suffocated by it.

With radio on from rising till retiring, gab sessions on the telephone, the “dailies,” the picture-splattered magazines filling in, in panting sentences, the details omitted on the broadcast bulletins and now in more and more homes, television, too—we are taken up in a whirl by the world. How does a mother manage to keep her nerves calmed, her emotions stable when they are so constantly under attack?

And most of us have a particular weak spot. I’ll admit it’s politics, the state of the nation and the world that disturbs me. Then I know a woman who gets worked to near hysteria by the radio soapbox serials. After one particularly trying day at the radio, she was in tears when her husband came home from work, and couldn’t prepare his supper, she was so broken up over the adventures of Ma-Soap-and-So. And she was not a neurotic, middle-aged woman but a young bride. There are others whose minds are always filled up with the gossips and sins (imaginary or otherwise) of their neighbors and the affairs of their own assorted relatives. There are mothers to whom cleanliness is such a fetish that they are always drawn taut and tense with housecleaning, laundering, and face washing (usually

accompanied by slappings and scoldings) their little ones, and are frightfully disturbed over smudges on their scrubbed-down domains.

It does not matter whether we are preoccupied with national affairs, gossip or a shiny floor, the Devil achieves his aim when such things interfere with our home life and our children. It is true that children can “get on your nerves,” cause you to blow up, become sharp and short-tempered. But if we find it happening daily and many times a day we ought to search our hearts to see if it is actually the children who are the cause or if their annoyances are only the fuel that sets off a powder keg of nerves and irritation inside us; a powder keg we ourselves filled up with outside misery that should not have been permitted entrance in the first place.

Perhaps it is good for mothers to be “up-to-the-minute,” smart, socially active, but first of all they should be mothers. If we can’t be everything, then let’s not put motherhood in last place or out of the running. What our children need are their mothers. So we ought to concentrate on that, living strictly according to our vocation, being worthy of it, seeking to perfect ourselves in it.

Yes, to be a mother we have to face living in a mature, grown-up way and let our life be full of purpose, our actions have meaning and our existence be fruitful. That’s why it’s so disheartening to see mothers allow everything else under the sun to fill up their minds, prevent them from thinking. That’s why it’s so wrong for mothers to dissipate themselves on stupid worthless chatter or become addicts of TV, movies, radio and tabloids.

No, we don’t have to enter a convent to combine work and prayer and do all we do for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, especially in our case, the souls in our own household. We just work at being a loving mother.

There is one cue in particular, a danger signal which mothers should watch for. Beware the words, “Go away, don’t bother me!” Of course, children should not be spoiled, pampered, catered to as though mother were a lackey and the child a king, but something is amiss when mothers are always seeking ways to “chase them away” either to the TV, a movie, or a friend’s house, or elsewhere to play. Blessed is the mother who gives in a well-balanced, cheerful and wholesome way her thought and time and life for her children.

Fathers

As to fathers, everything there is to say about fathers can be summed up thus, “The husband should be the head of the house.” Simply because this expression is bandied about and joked over today we no longer have any concept of what it means and what it entails. No ruthless tyranny, no bloated, beastly authority substitutes for fatherhood. The divine plan for fatherhood makes it a sacred thing. If we rightly understood the sense in which the husband is the head of the house and the wife the heart we would know why a certain Trappist priest said, “If I had my way, vigil lights would be burned before married couples.”

One spiritual writer has described the family as a little church with the father as the bishop.

Coming down to plain, everyday existence, let us face the fact of father’s first place. The father rightly should be the provider and mainstay of the family but his vocation consists of far more than that. It is not enough to bring home a pay envelope and consider his obligation fulfilled. He should be more than a provider just as the other should be more than a housekeeper and nursemaid. He must shoulder the responsibilities in managing home and family, should take the initiative in new ventures in the development of the family and its progress and welfare. It is so wrong for a husband to leave all the decisions, all the responsibilities, all the thinking to the wife. If God had not wanted marriage to be a partnership, he could so simply have created one sex.

Yet there are homes where one partner must do the work of two. Usually it is the woman, but she can never really be father and mother both. Many heroic souls carry this burden bravely but usually everyone suffers from it. The children are deprived of well-balanced homes and a real father. The mother weighted down with more than her share often suffers physically and mentally. The man, not fully living his manhood, is debilitated and whatever front he brags remains weak and undeveloped in character.

Some of the blame lies on women themselves, mothers who brought their sons up pampered and spineless, wives who want to run the whole show themselves. Yet there are men who deliberately shirk the duties of the “head of the house.” The nation is full of them settling the affairs of the world and sport over their beers, disdaining as beneath them their kingship at home.

But a home must have its head. Authority is necessary to order and life. The mother having a twenty-four hour day job in her own realm needs a wise head and a good heart beside her. The children need a father to fill the place God made for fatherhood in their lives. And Dad must be more than a good sport, he must be a good soul. Our children's first world is—mother, father, home. If we teach them to say “Our Father Who art in heaven,” they ought to have a decent meaning for the word “father” and where else will they learn it but from their personal experience with their father on earth. If we teach them to call God “Our Father,” then father must be a tremendous living force else the word is a mockery, perhaps a blasphemy.

Once an agnostic acquaintance told me he could never “accept” the fourth commandment. He added bitterly, “If you knew what associations the word has for me, you would never ask me to call God ‘Father.’” Granted all fathers may not cause such a poisonous reaction in their sons. But how many have been such a negative quantity in their children's lives that whole generations have grown up never quite making any sense out of calling God their “Father.”

They do not think of God as the Source of Life when they regard only vaguely and perhaps in a most accidental way their own father's part in bringing them to life. They cannot imagine God providing for them, nurturing them, solicitous for them, protecting them, supremely interested in their affairs, tenderly possessing them, even laying down His life for them, when their earthly father was hardly the type to do these things. Can we expect our children to have faith in a heavenly Father Whom they cannot see when they can't even have faith in the only father they do know?

The head of the house ought to be in his own human way and in his earthly realm the father, as God is the Father in His divine way and supernatural realm. Reams have been written on motherhood but there is still too little said today on the place and importance of fatherhood. Yet just as a mother ought to be the doorway through which a child first sees Mary, mother of us all, so a father should be the portal through which the child first glimpses God, Creator and Father of us all.

Adorers of God

As for “bringing up children” there is only one way to do it: *bring them up to God.*

It often seems the biggest part of raising them is the moral and discipline part—bringing them up to be good or bad, polite or ill-mannered. Now I do not wish to minimize the importance of morality, nor could I. But really morality ought to be an effect of religion and not the sum total of it.

We would not have such a terrific time with “good and evil” if we worked at making our children God-conscious and God-loving.

When I was a child my mother often said of me, “She is always good....She never gives me any trouble.” What my mother didn't know was that she had inspired such a love in me for her that I couldn't bear to do anything to offend her. I considered her feelings first, and far above my own. If she bought me a dress I didn't like, I would exclaim over it and admire it. I might be miserable wearing it but would have been more miserable if I had turned away from her gift and spoiled her pleasure in giving it to me. Interrupt play to run errands? Her wishes and needs and desires were more important to me than all the games and playmates in the world. Mind the younger children, help in the house? Naturally. Disobedience? It never occurred to me. The idea of disobeying would have been repulsive. I loved her and would suffer if she were hurt in any way. Serving her was as natural and as easy as breathing.

Cannot parents inspire in their children such a love of God that they will think only of pleasing Him, of serving Him and all this in a joyful, easy way?

Of course, there will always be the pressure on them (and us too) of the effects of original sin, so they are not going to be perfect or even near it. But God supplies the graces we need to counteract those effects. And once they have received Holy Communion they have a daily source of strength. There will be routines of prayer, even simple prayers, morning and night, grace at mealtimes. Later when they are ready for it they join in the family rosary.

The way to lead them is the way of love. God gave us ten commandments, most of which are “thou shalt not...” Yet He summarized them in just two, and these are “thou shalt love the Lord Thy God and love Thy neighbor as Thyself.” So we should teach them to love God and they will love His law, His Will. They will not be so often beset with temptation to evil when their hearts are intent on doing good.

And all this is only the beginning. We want them to become “adorers” of God. This is the easy part, believe it or

not. We don't wait until they start school and are handed a catechism. It starts with their earliest years. While they are "under our feet" in the kitchen we go about preparing meals, doing the dishes, but talking to them of God, of the purpose of life, of the Redeemer Who opened the gates of Paradise for them. Children in their baptismal innocence have an unsmudged intelligence and can easily grasp the ideas in the Real Presence, the Holy Eucharist, the Incarnation.

When we tell them stories we need not neglect Goldilocks or Winnie-the-Pooh (and Winnie is good for laughs) but we should lean heavily on stories of the lives of the saints (how they love to hear about Francis of Assisi!) and incidents in the life of Christ. The nativity story is one they love (and play) the year round. They should learn hymns too. Most children enjoy singing. Hymns make good lullabies.

And in how many ways we can remind them of the power and majesty and goodness of God: in blue skies and white clouds, in rain, in snow, in the variety and quantity of snow-flakes, blades of grass, trees and leaves of trees, in every living thing about them. "See that great bridge that holds trains and cars and people...see how God has made men that they can build such things." When we point out a boat or a house or other works of man it is always, "Wasn't God good to make men so they can do these things and do do them?"

A soul can spend a lifetime studying, contemplating, learning of God and still never exhaust itself. Our children can learn early to see the design of God in everything about them. They can so effortlessly become constantly recollected in God. How they will adore Him! And knowing Him and serving Him will be a joy not a drudge. Love makes all things possible. As they become true lovers of God they will not falter at adversities that beset them later. Sacrifice, self-denial, mortifications which invariably must be faced in life will not be met with resentment, frustration and neuroses.

Putting God first in their lives will do more toward making them normal, happy human beings than all the psychology books ever written. It will give them a right sense of values for all time and will be the base and foundation on which they stand. In the future too, whatever vocations and careers they pursue their life will have purpose and direction. All this is not intended as a mere piety pep talk. It is too vital to be dismissed as such.

Actually we have an obligation to do this much for our children. A glance at all the messy lives around us ought to quicken us at the task, for if ever a people have been diverted from God, we have been.

We will not consider at this time ourselves, the grown-ups. Let us draw a curtain of shame over that category for now. But what of the youngsters? "Restless, O Lord!"

How can we look upon the tragedy of our future wives and mothers attending theatres and literally screaming in pseudo ecstasy at a singer? What do you think of the tender souls who live in make-believe worlds where Hollywood idols sate their dreams and desires? I recall a nine-year-old who came to our house and amidst sighs and limpid gesturings spoke of the god-like man she worshipped on the screen. These faraway mortals held her enraptured, body and soul. It was enough to sicken your heart and make you weep. As these children grow older they carry on in their imaginary world and confuse it with reality; through such a blur they transfer their affections to nearer mortals and new creatures. Boys and girls engage in adolescent but passionate romancing, have crushes on public characters of dubious repute, are obsessed with sports, amusements, cosmetics, clothes, books. I mean obsessed truly in the sense that these "creatures" are given time and consideration and devotion out of all normal proportions. But, it is said, they'll eventually marry and settle down. Indeed? And join our generation of divorce, re-marriage, broken homes, neurotic children?

Well, what can parents do? Restrict movie attendance? Be stricter in supervising their activities? These are methods of handling a disease. The right way is to prevent the disease from taking hold. Hence the purpose in having them God-conscious and God-loving.

For all these vain obsessions are only wild, weed-like growths on souls which should have been basking in the sun of God's light and bringing forth good fruit. And restless and dissatisfied they will be, wasting their lives, if all their growth is away from God for Whom they were created. And all their energies and talents and gifts will end in barrenness or in evil fruits.

Parents have indeed the obligation of telling their children the truth about life. And the truth about life is that we are made for God and will know no rest or happiness until we are centered in Him, till our love is brought to bear on Him.

And woe to us if our children must go through empty searching years, needlessly suffering turmoil and wasted pain only to discover when youth is gone and life is spent the happiness their hungering hearts had craved. Let it not be said of us that because we neglected to tell them from the start our children will someday discover the Divine Lover and cry out with remorse as did Augustine: “Too late have I loved Thee! Too late have I known thee!”

Now is the time to lead them to the Divine Lover. And as we feed and clothe their bodies let us give the best to their souls. Encourage frequent if not daily Communion that their souls be nourished with the Body of Christ and clothed with the raiment of God.

And if your children have those sensitive hearts that are stirred by the splendors of sunsets and moved by beautiful music to know a loneliness overpowering them and an ache within them, you can tell them the truth, that at such moments they are getting cloudy glimpses of the beauty their souls seek and only when they achieve complete union with their Maker will the loneliness be gone and the pain of longing gone with it.

Fill Heaven with Saints

This can mean only one thing, that our work is not done until death, until they are in heaven. So we may even still be at it in the next world if we arrive there before they do (which is the usual thing).

You see, it is not a tidy matter of dismissing our responsibility when they come of age in the world’s count of years, when they marry, when they go their separate ways. The parish priest does not cross off his list those aged twenty-one and over, for his is a lifetime work with many souls. Ours is a lifetime work with a few specific ones.

Parents are often confronted with sickening failures in their grown-up children. A son turns out a drunkard, a daughter falls away from the Faith, another perhaps will enter into a bad marriage. What are we to do? Feel sorry for ourselves? Nag and scold them? Tell the neighbors and relatives our child (or children) is breaking our hearts?

Well, we should counsel and admonish them if it will do any good. But what we really must do is pray and sacrifice and do penance and make reparation—and in secret, unobtrusive ways. We must suffer for the souls of our children! The price of salvation is suffering. We should pay it, buying their souls with our pain and sorrow and even, when the time comes, our death.

Sounds rough? Hard to take? I’ll admit it’s a far cry from just washing, ironing and cooking for them.

But think of the Trappists and similar Orders, the cloistered nuns, the priests, the religious brothers and sisters all over the world who are living lives of sacrifice, hard work and reparation for souls, for souls they very often do not know and will never meet this side of heaven. Is it too much to ask of us, that we do as much for the souls we brought into existence, our brothers and sisters in Christ whom we refer to as “our own flesh and blood”?

Or will we, mother and father, be Adam and Eve to our children as our first parents were to all of us? Will they lose Paradise because we would not win it for them?

And how to get them to heaven? It will depend even more on what we are than what we do. You have heard it said that we cannot give to others what we haven’t got to give. And every teacher will admit he has always to be a page ahead of his students. So making saints of them means we must become saints ourselves. There’s nothing fantastic in that.

But it does mean in forming their characters we’ll have to straighten out our own. If they require chastisement, let’s not balk at being at least equally severe with ourselves. While we are finding fault with them we can examine our own consciences—and being cheerful with it all! “Joy is the echo of God’s life in us.”

Do you recall the story of the Cure of Ars who spent as much as eighteen hours a day in the confessional and how people flocked from all over France to him? How did he get that great power of healing souls? Just by sitting there hearing confessions all day? No. It was the remaining hours he spent before the Blessed Sacrament, the penances he inflicted on himself, the work he did on his own soul. He became a channel of God’s grace. He emptied himself of self and left room only for God, and so God could work through him.

And so it is with us. Our “eighteen hours daily” are perhaps our actual day’s work and activity but behind that must be the work of God. We too must become channels through which God’s grace can flow to others, particularly our children. It means we must root out petty whims, faults, selfishness, self-centeredness, all our vices and vanities; clean out our hearts; empty ourselves of every despicable, worthless, nasty trait. It won’t be easy. We may in fact be doing it

for the rest of our lives and never quite complete the job. But we have to keep at it. We will be wells holding God's refreshing waters for our children. We must not let those waters be muddied or contaminated.

Have you ever seen a child present an awkward, ill-made product of his own handiwork as a gift to his parents? Poorly finished and smudged with finger marks it is, yet his parents understand the effort and motive behind it and the love it represents. Have you ever seen a child make such a present for his father? And mother first took it and cleaned and beautified it and wrapped it attractively before it was presented to father?

We, too, are but clumsy children with our limited intelligences and skill and we are trying to fashion these souls for God. But when the work is finished Mary will bring it to Him with us—but first she will add her own lovely finishes and we will hardly recognize the magnificent gift it becomes. And our loving Father will at last bring their souls to ultimate perfection. God always rewards good parents.
