

Parents as Educators

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An educator can only be effective when he or she begins from the principle that no one can give what he does not have, an idea that Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer repeated frequently. In other words, one cannot communicate what one has not really made a part of one's own life. In family life this means that if parents want to teach values to their children, they first need to live in accordance with them. "Parents teach their children mainly through their own conduct," said Blessed Josemaría. "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"¹.

We are thus confronted each day with the responsibility that being an educator brings with it. Blessed Josemaría frequently said that there is no such thing as true education without personal responsibility, just as there is no true responsibility without the freedom that comes from having truly assimilated the values that we want to communicate into a coherent life. A child is educated from the day it is born. This is well known by every parent who dares to take the helpless infant into his or her arms as the child cries its first tears. Much is learned by dint of experience, including the fact that if it is possible to spoil children, it is also possible to educate them.

Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer often emphasized that parental responsibility goes far beyond the moment of conception; this responsibility must be ful-

¹ *Christ is passing by*, 28.

filled by properly educating one's children. Thanks to the love which the Founder of Opus Dei had for ordinary life and his genuine appreciation of the distinctiveness of each human person, I have learned to educate within my family by setting personal goals for each of my children, which can be sought and attained in daily life. My wife and I would decide on the proper course to take with each child, using the time we had every day in the car, or after dinner, with the aim of helping each one, from a very young age, to become more stable in virtue, to overcome defects, and to begin to develop a real sense of responsibility. Discovering the most appropriate ways to shape the personality of the children in the simplicity of ordinary circumstances has helped us to construct an authentic school within our family. "Don't come to me with theories. Each day our lives have to convert those high ideals into ordinary, heroic, fruitful reality"².

Drawing this idea to its logical consequences, it can be said that a parent who does not educate cannot truly call himself or herself a parent. Flowing from the rights and duties inherent in parenthood, it is the mission of parents to develop and follow the appropriate educational pathway for their children, with justice and charity. The entire family community learns together: the children from the parents, the parents from the children, and the spouses from each other. In this context in which love is found continually considered and strengthened, each member both gives and receives to all the others.

All other people who cooperate in education do so by delegation, or by a 'binding obligation' that involves the moral duty to abide, insofar as it is possible, with the directions indicated by the parents. To use the words of John Paul II, "All other participants in the process of education are only able to carry out their responsibilities *in the name of the parents, with their consent*, and, to a certain degree, *with their authorisation*"³. In consequence, choice in schooling is one important aspect of this radical educational responsibility.

1. PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

The stability of Christian marriage, the fidelity of conjugal love, as an expression of mutual and reciprocal self-giving, exercises a decisive influence in the development and formation of a child's personality. Considered from an educational perspective, this is how children learn how love is really a virtue, one which is consistent, faithful, sincere and upright. It is also where children learn,

² Furrow, 949.

³ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families*, 16.

another truth which Josemaría Escrivá taught, that love in the family has no limits.

Blessed Josemaría had the following comments to make regarding educating children in a Christian way: “If I were to give advice to parents, I would tell them, above all, let your children see that you are trying to live in accordance with your faith. Don’t let yourselves be deceived: they see everything, from their earliest years, and they judge everything. Let them see that God is not only on your lips, but also in your deeds; that you are trying to be loyal and sincere, and that you love each other and you really love them too”⁴.

The Founder of Opus Dei also underscored the importance of human virtues as the foundation for supernatural virtues. Amongst the human virtues he particularly loved were those which play a principal role in the formation and development of the children’s personality: sincerity, fidelity and loyalty. The reciprocal gift of the spouses and the development of any interpersonal relationship is founded on these virtues. John Paul II has taught that the family is a school of life where each person is accepted for who he or she is. In this communion and community of persons, a member of a family not only learns how to relate to others but also begins to grow in human virtue: “In the raising of children conjugal love is expressed as authentic parental love. The ‘communion of persons’, expressed as conjugal love at the beginning of the family, is thus completed and brought to fulfilment in the raising of children”⁵.

2. AN IRREPLACEABLE FUNCTION

There are some aspects in which parents have a very particular role to play in the education of their children: the value of their example in the face of suffering, contradictions, difficulties and of success; the importance of establishing and maintaining solid family ties that help to create a sense of belonging and participation; the use of freedom and the accompanying responsibility in all the circumstances of family life; a cheerful and harmonious home environment that comes from the parents’ affection; and, education in the faith and piety, as the Founder of Opus Dei reminded us: “Experience shows in all Christian environments what good effects come from this natural and supernatural introduction to the life of piety given in the warmth of the home. Children learn to place God first and foremost in their affections. They learn to see God as their Father and

⁴ *Christ is passing by*, 28.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families*, 16.

Mary as their Mother and they learn to pray following their parents' example. In this way one can easily see what a wonderful apostolate parents have and how it is their duty to live a fully Christian life of prayer, so they can communicate their love of God to their children, which is something more than just teaching them"⁶.

It is the parents who really know their children well, because they make the necessary time to do so. Only parents can observe their children in the intimacy of the home in an environment which, making them feel loved and accepted as they are, permits them to grow and develop serenely, being faithful to their true selves. "In their conversations, parents should make an effort to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to recognize the fact that their children are sometimes partly right — or even completely right — in some of their rebellious attitudes"⁷.

Only parents can teach by their daily example what it means to assume responsibility for all of one's free acts, gradually teaching the children to make choices and decisions: from what clothes to wear when they are three years old to their holidays companions when they are 18. This is because only the parents can "help their children to direct their efforts and to carry out their projects properly, teaching them to consider things and to reason them out. It is not a matter of imposing a line of conduct, but rather of showing the human and supernatural motives for it"⁸.

Finally, it is also the parents who assume the joyful obligation to build authentic Christian communities and to pass on family traditions, the local dialect and customs of speech, the love for the colours of a particular football team, the sense of one's own roots and of the family origins.

As parents, neither my wife nor I have learned 'techniques' or 'educational methods' from the Founder of Opus Dei. But we have seen his teachings incarnated in the life of so many married couples who are better than ourselves. And we have also received from him because we have heard or read, so many times in such fresh and vigorous ways, about the true meaning of freedom, personal responsibility, love, the family as the school of virtues, and the importance of freedom in education.

⁶ *Conversations*, 103.

⁷ *Christ is passing by*, 27.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 27.