

The Adventure of Becoming a Family

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Åsa is from Finland and speaks Swedish. She has a degree in Accounting, is married, and is the mother of three — soon to be four — children. In her presentation, she describes the joy that comes from discovering the beauty of living fully the vocation to be a spouse and mother of a family, and the usefulness of the advice of Blessed Josemaria in putting into practice the great challenge of making family life a path that leads to God.

It is with great joy that I share with you my experience of how I came to realise the importance of the key role of the family in society. The family is something that has become very “dear” to me and something I really want to fight for. “Fight” might seem like a strong word, but it is something that has become necessary. The family is being attacked from both within and without, and the family is no longer something we can take for granted.

I grew up in Finland in a “normal” family: Mom, Dad, my brother and me. My mother worked as a social worker, and from an early age I understood that not everybody had it as good as I did. It bothered me a lot and I wanted to help as much as I could. My mother was quite absorbed in her work and it took a lot out of her. She is a very generous woman and she put her whole soul into her work. As a child I remember I admired her. She was so strong and capable and she did so much for other people. She studied a lot, as she still does today, and soon she was involved in politics, teaching and so on. She was not what we would call a “typical housewife”. It was at a quite young age that I decided to follow in her footsteps, maybe not exactly in the same field, but more or less. I had my whole life planned out, what I was going to study, when and where.

I never thought much about having a family, and for a while I thought I would not even get married. I figured I would be better off being independent. That was until life ‘turned out’ the way it was supposed to turn out, and suddenly I found myself married with 3 children and a degree in accounting at the age of 26. What happened? Good question; I ask myself that one too. At the moment I am a ‘home mom’ and my life is very different from what I ever expected at this

stage in my life. And what is even more surprising is that I did it by choice, and I like it. It is not a ‘bed of roses’, not at all; but it is an adventure, a real adventure. So what brought about this radical change in me?

The first thing that happened was that I met my husband. I was 19 years old and we were working with a touring theatre company. This was the first encounter that I had with the Catholic Church and a Catholic person. I know it might sound strange to all of you but in Finland there are only 7,000 Catholics, so it can be hard to run in to one. We got married, and by the time I was 20, I was the mother of a beautiful little girl named Emilia. The thought of having children so soon was very foreign to me. I had not yet finished my studies, etc. As a Protestant raised in Finland, one normally does not even consider the possibility of *not* using contraceptives, so this was definitely something totally new to me. I was raised in a Christian home and I have always wanted to do God’s will, but this sounded insane to me. I mean, I could end up with 20 kids!

The good thing about being raised in the Nordic countries is that one is taught to question everything and not to accept anything just because somebody tells you to. To be “fair” or “just”, I thought I would at least give this idea a chance, and study it to see the reasons behind the teachings of the Catholic Church on contraceptives, or rather, on openness to life. It was more or less during the same time that I came across Blessed Josemaría’s teachings on the matter; which of course are the same as those of the Catholic Church.

A whole new world opened up to me. It was not easy to grasp it all at once but I was amazed by the beautiful and attractive way Blessed Josemaría talked about family and family life and about the love between husband and wife. It was not romanticised but very realistic. The idea was that the family is something very holy and at the same time very human. He spoke of love and marriage as something very noble. He spoke of human sexuality as something very good, something one should not be ashamed of, but rather as something that one should respect and treat as a gift. I looked around at families, and I realised very quickly that the state of the family was not the best. The divorce rate is up by 50% and children are suffering greatly. New statistics that have just come out state that every third child in Finland is not doing well. Parents are very busy in today’s world and the individualistic approach to life is tearing the family apart. This is very alarming. The more I studied Blessed Josemaría’s teachings, the clearer the importance of the family for the benefit of the whole of society became to me. If the family falls apart, the whole society falls apart and all of us will suffer greatly.

Why is the family so important? Why is it so important to grow up in a home with a mother and a father and siblings? We all need love. Each of us needs to know and feel we are loved because of who we are; not because of what we do or how we perform, but precisely because of who we are. This is a very basic

human need. This is what happens in a family that is open to love. To quote Blessed Josemaría: “True mutual love transcends the union of husband and wife and extends to its natural fruits — the children. Selfishness, on the contrary, sooner or later reduces love to a mere satisfaction of instinct and destroys the bond which unites parents and children. A child who suspects that he has come into the world against his parents’ ‘will’, who feels he was born not of pure love, but because of miscalculation or oversight, can hardly consider himself a good son — a true son — of his parents”¹.

These are very strong words, but so true. In a family we do not love each other because of our university degrees, or because of how we perform; we simply love each other because of the mother-daughter, sister-brother and father-son relationship/bond. This is the only place in society where we are truly loved for who we are. This is something so natural and very human. The family is unique because here we are allowed to ‘be’ ourselves. Here we learn to share, love, test boundaries, ‘fight’ with our siblings in a natural way, in a way one maybe would not do with the “neighbours’ boy”. One’s whole character is built and formed in the family, and it is here that one learns all the essential things one needs in life when one is facing the “world”. If these “skills”, virtues — how to relate, how to love — are not learned in the family, they might never be learned. This makes a great difference to the whole of society.

What also made a great impression on me was the joy with which Blessed Josemaría spoke, and the joy of the people who were living according to his teachings. He never said that family life was easy, but he spoke of it as full of joy and love even in the midst of difficulties and hardships. This was something! He spoke of marriage as something holy, of being a call. “It is very important that the idea of marriage as a real call from God never be absent, either from the pulpit and the religion class or from the conscience of those whom God wishes to follow this way. Couples should be convinced that they are really and truly called to take part in the fulfilment of God’s plan for the salvation of all men”².

A ‘call’, to me, was connected with doing something great and incredible for God, like going to Africa as a missionary. That marriage and family life could be a calling was very new to me; that having a family and raising children could be a very noble task and a real mission, something very, very important. The message of Blessed Josemaría, that even the most ordinary task could be an encounter with God and a way to reach sanctity, made family life seem very exotic to me. Everything we do can be an act of love and in this way we can grow in love. He

¹ *Conversations*, 94.

² *Christ is Passing By*, 30.

spoke of family life being filled with cheerfulness and a spirit of service. I agreed with what he said and I wanted very much to live a family life like that, but how? I mean, even if I wanted to, I was not sure if I could.

What I appreciated most about Blessed Josemaría's writings is that he also taught *how* to live like a Christian and how to raise a family in a Christian way. He taught that only by being close to God can we really love other people, and that we are close to God through the sacraments and through having a life of prayer. I always prayed more or less my whole life, but Blessed Josemaría spoke of a basic structure, an order in our prayer life. Having a set time for mental prayer, the Rosary, etc. helps us not to pray only when we feel like it, but keeps our dialogue with God continuous throughout the day. This dialogue helps us keep our love alive in dealing with the ordinary tasks of the day, as in a family where there are thousands of tasks to take care of.

I also found Blessed Josemaría's teachings very merciful. Even if he demands a lot, he knows, as does the Church, that we are sinners, that we fall; he speaks warmly about the sacrament of Penance, which he also called the sacrament of joy, where we are forgiven, cleansed and able to start over again. This is a great tool and gift we Catholics should be so grateful for. Having been a Protestant, I know what it is not to have the possibility of going to confession.

Blessed Escrivá de Balaguer also spoke of very human things: about how to relate to the children and to become their friends. He spoke to husbands about how to treat their wives and to keep their love young. He spoke to wives about how to take care of themselves, even their external appearance, for love of their husbands. He touched upon all aspects of life: the spiritual, the psychological and the physical.

These are some of the things that made me change my mind so radically. To sum up in a word, I can say that it was all about love. Human love — pure, sincere and joyful — is what Blessed Josemaría taught me, and it is something that all families need. It is what our society needs and it will be transmitted to society through families.