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Growth: A Family Project (2)

"In a bright and cheerful home, people treat one another in a simple and trusting way." A new article in the series on forming a strong Christian personality.

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The fire crackles in the fireplace during a heated conversation about a battle dating from ancient times. One of Dickens' characters, in his Christmas story "The Battle of Life," then makes a surprising declaration:

“I believe there are quiet victories and struggles, great sacrifices of self, and noble acts of heroism in it (even in many of its apparently lighter moments and contradictions) not the less difficult to achieve, because they have no earthly chronicle or audience, done every day in nooks and crannies, in little households, and in men’s and women’s hearts. Any one of these might reconcile the sternest man with the world, and fill him with belief and hope in it.”[1]

The world’s future is forged not only in major international decisions, however crucial they might seem. It is decided especially in small daily struggles, the “patient love”[2] that is the discreet work of grandparents, parents and children. The project of growth, a growth that is above all “on the inside,”[3] lasts a whole lifetime for each person, and is necessarily a matter of teamwork, all moving “at God’s pace,” spurred

forward by his breath in the sails of our soul.

Breathing the same air

In a family with a Christian atmosphere, jobs, concerns, successes and failures are all shared. Everything belongs to everybody, while each one's personal interests are also respected. Children are taught to be themselves, but to avoid isolating themselves in their own tastes and preferences. Importance is given at home to whatever can unite, like fresh air allowing each one to breathe freely, to fill their lungs and develop.

In this effort to strengthen the family atmosphere, everyone is important, even the youngest. So it is good to give children little responsibilities, in keeping with their age. Thus they are helped to get out of themselves and discover that the smooth functioning of the home requires everyone

working together: for instance, watering a plant, setting the table, making one's bed and tidying one's room, taking care of a younger sibling, or going shopping.... Little by little, they are allowed to share in making decisions; family plans are not simply imposed, but presented in an attractive way. Thus no one is left out, and children are helped to be open, generous, and concerned about the world and other people.

Affection leads to living united, to sharing with others the new episodes of each one's own life story. It can be helpful to share times of rest and recreation in common, with activities that unite and allow the enjoyment of so many good things. Then when sorrow or misfortune arise, charity—supernatural affection—leads us to want to share the weight: *Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ.*^[4] No one can live as a stranger in one's own house. Each

one needs to have initiative, and open their eyes and pay attention to the others, to their hobbies, plans, friendship, work, concerns....

Certainly this requires time, which is truly the best thing that parents can give their children, and that children can give their parents.

A Christian family also needs discipline, but present in a pleasant way. Then children find learning enjoyable, and grow step by step with the example of older siblings. Correction is accompanied by good manners and affection. The “whys and wherefores” are explained, while trying “to keep our bad humor or temper to ourselves.”[5]

Sometimes one needs to be particularly clear, but good parents never forget that virtues and values take root effectively when children see them embodied in the lives of their own parents. Fortitude, temperance, decorum and modesty,

shown in daily life, are then seen by them as genuine goods that become a natural part of their life, like the air they breathe. This applies particularly to the guidance of their emotions and feelings. Parents who outwardly express their mutual affection in the small points of daily life, although without displays of affection that should be kept within the intimacy of the spouses, introduce their children into the mystery of true love between a man and a woman.

“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 yourself be deceived: they see everything. Let them see that God is not only on your lips, but also in your deeds. Let them see that you are trying to be loyal and sincere, and that you love each other and you really love them too.”[6]

Thank you, please, I'm sorry

In a “bright and cheerful home,”[7] people treat one another in a simple and trusting way. And they strive to ensure that their closeness does not give way to insensitivity or insolence. We all have defects. We can make a mistake and wound others, but we have the capacity to overlook misunderstandings, and not harbor resentment. At every level, from parents to children, from children to parents, or among siblings, we have to focus on the positive, on what unites. Wherever people live with one another, at times arguments or quarrels arise. But it's worthwhile making the effort to end each day reconciled with the others. It's the moment to put into practice Christ's teaching on not putting limits to forgiveness.[8] Besides, asking for forgiveness matures one's own soul and the soul of the one who receives or witnesses a sincere expression of

regret. “Listen to me carefully: did you fight with your wife or husband? Children, did you fight with your parents? Did you have a serious argument? That’s not a good thing, but it’s not the real problem. The problem is when this feeling lasts the next day. So, if you have fought, don’t let the day end without making peace with your family.”[9]

Whoever really wants to, is able and even needs to understand and excuse others. And this good atmosphere is exported from the family to the world. To transform the jungle, we need to start with our own garden, with an “ecology of daily life,” given expression “in our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and our neighbourhood.”[10] The family is “the place of an integral education, which enables us to grow harmoniously in personal maturity. In the family, we learn to ask without demanding, to say ‘thank you’ as an

expression of genuine gratitude for what we have been given, to control our aggressiveness and greed, and to ask forgiveness when we have caused harm.”[11]

This attitude helps us to place in perspective problems that can arise in our life alongside others, and to reject the thought that in other circumstances everything would be simpler. It is usually easier to judge more positively those who do not actually live with us. Even psychologically well-balanced people tend to idealize what is good in their friends and acquaintances, while highlighting the defects and errors of their closer family members. But we need to confront and overcome these prejudices! The smiling and friendly demeanor of those we seldom see doesn't always reflect the way things really are. Nor does the brusque

remark of a brother or sister, after a bad day or night, reflect their whole personality, or the real view they have of us. Moreover, it is good to realize that, when we have greater confidence with someone, it is only natural that they lower their guard a bit and give vent to what is weighing on them, in one way or another. Part of real affection then means trying to be understanding,^[12] and providing a shoulder to cry on, if needed.

The stages of development, with their respective crises, are challenges that require patience, because maturity is rarely achieved in one go. The atmosphere in a home is especially affected by adolescence, more or less prolonged, which can sometimes result in disagreements and nervousness in both adults and children. But as time goes by, if the crisis has been well addressed, the family comes out strengthened. Not only do the waters return to their

proper channels, but they become stronger and healthier.

It is normal that children, when they reach adolescence, need more scope for their freedom, to form their own circle of friends and learn to fend for themselves. Parents will continue being their frame of reference, but their youthful vitality will make it hard for them to accept it. Therefore parents need to be more than simply the “authority” at home; they also need to foster a friendly and trust-filled relationship with their children. Parents should encourage their children to make their own decisions, while also pointing out possible pitfalls. They should show them both the “reefs” they may encounter in making their way in life as well as the “beacon” that can guide them safely. And this wisdom is passed on more by example than by many words or rules, although naturally some may be necessary.

In any case, children should be trusted, because freedom flourishes only in a climate of trust. As Saint Josemaría used to say, it is even better that parents “let themselves be fooled once in a while, because the trust that they have shown will make children themselves feel ashamed for having abused it. They will then correct themselves. On the other hand, if they see that no one trusts them, they will always be inclined to deceive their parents.”[13]

A family that prays together stays together

In the family, children also learn how to turn to God, to pray. How much Saint Josemaría appreciated the prayers his mother taught him! “Without mothers, not only would there be no new faithful, but the faith would lose a good deal of its simple and profound warmth.”[14] Normally it is the parents who teach

their children how to draw close to God; but not infrequently their roles are reversed, and Providence makes use of the children to teach a father or mother the marvelous “melody” of the faith.

Often ways will be found to pray together, mindful of the adage, “the family that prays together, stays together.”^[15] A piety that is transparent and sincere sheds light within and outside the home, in serene harmony with other daily occupations. It doesn’t matter if sometimes distractions arise, with the children coming and going and the many tasks at home that need to be covered. When we do what we can, these distractions are not discordant notes but rather harmonious music in heaven.

Faithful parents beget new faithful parents, and also many young people who, accepting God’s invitation,

follow a vocational path in celibacy. Neither love for another human being nor love for God are in competition with affection for our own family, but rather increase it. At every moment of life, the same blood always runs through our veins. We are united, even when separated by great distances and new commitments and obligations. One sign of maturity is precisely the ability, learned over time, to combine the duties arising from the new home we form with an ever stronger filial and fraternal affection for the family we were born in. We count on their prayers for our mission in life and we support them with our own. *For a brother helped by his brother is like a strong city.*[16]

From the home to the periphery

The great potential of a family is not meant to be closed up within itself. Just as it would be impossible to

mature if one were centered on oneself, so family life grows by opening itself to the world outside. A Christian home certainly needs doors to protect its intimacy, to provide the right environment for growth, but these can't be closed so tightly that they suffocate or block the vision of those inside.

Solidarity, therefore, is an important part of the mission of Christian families. This requires going out creatively to help the neediest, trying to help all men and women attain the culture and education they need, caring for the earth as our common home... The needs of those around us are quite varied and often do not align with the priorities that some ideologies and small groups strive to impose upon the world. What great examples we have in families that seek to assist homeless immigrants; large families that welcome a new child; parents who sacrifice

themselves for their own children and for those of others, overcoming financial problems heroically; childless couples who devote their lives to helping other families.

And the best thing about all this effort is that “everything stays within the home.” The first who stand to gain from these initiatives are one’s own family members. And from the home one reaches the whole world. The family, a school of gratuitous and sincere love, is “the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centered individualism.”[17] Those who have grown up with “the ‘healthy psychological prejudice’ of usually thinking about others,”[18] enjoy listening to, learning to understand, getting along with and solving the specific needs of their fellow men and women.

Families not alone

The big picture for families, their role in the Church and the world, is an exciting one. At the same time, the difficulties they face are evident to all. But families are not alone. Many good people spend time and energy helping parents in their educative task. Schools, youth clubs and many other initiatives can be a decisive support in the effort to care for young people, and also for the elderly. Striving to assist and facilitate domestic work, a task that is not exclusive to mothers, is another pillar of Christian homes. Therefore Saint Josemaría once told those who dedicate their lives to passing on to others their knowledge and experience in this field that they are “more effective educators than many University professors.”[19]

Finally, what can we tell those who, despite all their diligent efforts, think they should have done more? Many

parents who have done all they could to raise their children well, have then seen them undergo material and spiritual problems, not practicing their faith or living disordered lives. Besides deepening their own formation in order to foresee and prevent problems, if such a situation crops up, the time will have come for them to imitate the father in the parable who, without forcing his son's freedom, goes out to meet him, ready to help him at the smallest sign of the desire to correct his ways.[20] Then is the time to have greater recourse to heaven, perhaps saying: *My God, now it's your turn to act.* "Parents must be patient. Often there is nothing else to do but wait; pray and wait with patience, gentleness, magnanimity and mercy."[21]

[1] Dickens, Charles, “The Battle of Life,” in *The Christmas Books*, vol. 1, Penguin, London 1972, p. 245.

[2] Pope Francis, *Homily*, 27 October 2013.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 294.

[4] *Gal* 6:2

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 174.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no.28.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 78.

[8] Cf. *Mt* 18:21-22.

[9] Pope Francis, *Audience*, 13 May 2015.

[10] Pope Francis, Encyclical, *Laudato si'*, no. 147; cf. *General audience*, 13 May 2015.

[11] Pope Francis, Encyclical, *Laudato si'*, no. 213.

[12] Cf. *The Way*, no. 463.

[13] *Conversations with Monignor Escriva de Balaguer*, no. 100.

[14] Pope Francis, *Audience*, 7 January 2015.

[15] Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, no. 41.

[16] *Prov* 18:19.

[17] Pope Francis, *Audience*, 7 January 2015.

[18] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 861.

[19] *Conversations with Monsignor Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer*, no. 88.

[20] Cf. *Lk* 15:20

[21] Pope Francis, Audience, 4
February 2015.

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