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Growth: A Family Project (1)

A new article in the series on forging a strong Christian personality. "The family is the place where we discover the beauty of authentic human values."

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How she resembles her mother! The same smile, the same hand gestures when talking, even the same way of walking... Often we hear or make comments like these. For it's true that we acquire many characteristics of

the personality of our parents and siblings, without even realizing it. Some characteristics are inherited, like the color of our eyes, our temperament, or our way of being. But many others have been forged by our daily dealings and encounters with others, by our formation: in a word, by life itself.

The characteristics of personal maturity that we have dealt with in the preceding articles of this series are sown and grow in the context of the family. Therefore, how important it is to take good care of the family! It is and should be the fertile soil in which our path begins, develops and finishes. “At each stage of life, in each situation, and in each social condition we are and remain sons and daughters.”[1]

The responsibility for the family, as willed by God, binds us all, be it as parents or brothers and sisters—and

at the same time always as sons and daughters. We will consider our role in the home in two stages. First, we will reflect in this article on what makes the family unique, and on the “job” of parents and children. In the second article we will delve more deeply into family life and the aspects that fill it with light and joy.

Giving our best in the home means giving everything

Each person has his or her own history, the imprint left on our life by so many different situations, whether joyful or painful. Our past is also framed within God’s plans, which are sometimes mysterious for us. There are homes in which Christian example has been lacking, although sooner or later the figure of Christ has ended up being glimpsed in a friend, a relative or a teacher. In many other families we see the affectionate effort to raise the

children in the faith, along with the defects and limitations of parents and siblings.

We have not chosen our family members, but God has. He counted not only on their virtues, but also on their defects in order to make us Christians: “In the family—of this we are all witnesses—miracles are worked with what there is, with what we are, with what one has at hand. Often times it is not the ideal, it is not what we dreamed of, nor what ‘should be.’”[2]

All of us—grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren—are called to give the best of ourselves at every moment, with God’s help, in order to impart a Christian tone to our family. Parents also grow with their children, and with the passage of the years family roles can interchange. The one who guided others before is now guided; the one who

led cedes this responsibility to those coming after. The home formed by everyone is much more than the primary resource for the basic necessities of nutrition, warmth and clothing. Along with all that, it is the place where we discover the beauty of authentic human values; of self-control and respect, so necessary for inter-personal relationships;^[3] of responsibility, loyalty and a spirit of service. All these values are forged in a slow fire that requires a simple but strong sense of belonging: the awareness of not having been simply “thrown” into the world, but “welcomed” from the start into a small portion of the world, not made of soil but of affection, a family.

God himself “chose to be born in a human family, which he himself formed. He formed it in a remote village on the periphery of the Roman Empire ... And someone might say: ‘But did this God, who

comes to save us, waste thirty years there, in that insignificant periphery?’ He wasted thirty years! He willed this. Jesus’ path was in that family.”[4]

Knowing they love us

A hundred times a minute there takes place in the world what happened when we were born: *joy that a child is born into the world.*[5] True, we are one among many born on the same day. Nonetheless we are unique and irreplaceable, and willed from all eternity: “Each of us is the fruit of God’s thought. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”[6]

No person enters the world by accident; each is of great value, is worth everything. Even someone who perhaps has not known his or her parents, or was adopted by a family. “Each soul is a wonderful treasure; every human being is

unique and irreplaceable. Every single person is worth all the blood of Christ.”[7] We owe so much to our parents, whoever they may be, despite their weaknesses and difficulties. They know all that God expects of them and strive to respond to his gentle but demanding call: “I was an unborn child, and you welcomed me by letting me be born; I was an abandoned child, and you became my family; I was an orphan, and you adopted me and raised me as one of your own children.”[8]

A few weeks after their child’s birth, mothers already can distinguish the features of their child’s temperament: the tone of their cry, of their sleep, of their hunger... Then comes the first smile: the birth, as it were, of their personality, and at the same time one of the first perceptible signs of the imitation so pronounced in children, who are struck by all that they see. Parents are for a child

a source of security, as we often see in the eloquent gesture of a child embracing its mother's or father's legs at the approach of a stranger. From this safe haven, a child learns to move about, to explore the world, and to open up to others.

Although we are not completely determined by the circumstances of our birth and upbringing, the harmonious development of a child's personality requires that from the first moment children know they are loved in the family, so they in turn may love others. Affection and attentive care, which includes fostering the fortitude needed to restrain the selfishness to which we are all prone, help children to perceive their own value and that of other people. This strong and tender love of their parents gives children the self-esteem that will enable them to love, to get out of themselves.

The bonds of love that arise in a Christian family are not broken even by the end of our life here on earth. If someone loses their parents in the first years of life, with faith they can see Jesus himself, our Lady or Saint Joseph taking their place, often through other people with a big heart. Following the example of the Holy Family, we strive to be both very human and very supernatural, [9] and keep alive the hope that one day there will happen what Saint Teresa related: “I seemed to be in heaven, and the first people I saw there were my father and mother.”[10]

Authentic self-realization

“Mom did you like cooking? Washing clothes? Cleaning the house? Taking us to school?” These questions by a daughter to her elderly mother reminds the good woman of the times when things didn’t turn out

well, of the tiredness involved in looking after the home, of financial worries and concern for her young children with a high fever in winter time... and even that plate thrown against the wall in a moment of impatience. “Did I like it? Not really, but I loved you and enjoyed so much seeing you grow up.” How many mothers and fathers behave like this! Many of them should be given a prize, the Pope suggested, because they have learned “to solve an equation that not even great mathematicians know how to solve: to make twenty four hours yield twice as much ... Out of 24 hours they make 48. I don’t know how they do it, but they make an effort and manage to do it!”[11]

A family—never perfect, but harmonious—distinguishes clearly the identity of each of its members. The parents have authority, but they don’t impose it on their children.

Their goal is not to “train” their children, but to guide them to develop their full potential with their affectionate example. Both father and mother are responsible for the family environment, and for each of them their dedication to the other spouse and to the children becomes a path for personal growth.

Family life also helps uncover talents that otherwise might have gone unnoticed, but that the others value highly, such as the capacity for affection, fortitude, good humor...Love for one’s family ensures that, even when difficulties arise, each brings out the best in oneself, the positive side of one’s temperament. And when, owing to tiredness or tension, the less pleasant side appears, it is the moment to ask for pardon and to begin again. “To acknowledge we have erred, to show the desire to restore what has been taken away—respect, sincerity, love

—make us worthy of forgiveness. This is how the infection is stemmed ... So many wounds, so many scrapes and bruises in the family come from a lack of these precious words: ‘I’m sorry. Forgive me.’”[12]

In the family, a woman discovers that her qualities as a mother are irreplaceable. The effort to be faithful to God in her mission will prompt her to create a welcoming environment that is apt for personal growth, for affection and respect, for sacrifice and self-giving. “Women are called to bring to the family, to society and to the Church, characteristics which are their own and which they alone can give: their gentle warmth and untiring generosity, their love for detail, their quick-wittedness and intuition, their simple and deep piety, their constancy...”[13]

The father also discovers his role as the guide for his children; he helps them grow, plays with them, and lets each one develop their way of being. A Christian father knows that his family will always be his “main business,” in which he achieves his true self-fulfilment. Therefore he needs to be on guard against an overly intense and stressful lifestyle that clouds over more valuable goals, and that can even lead to psychological problems and resentment for his family responsibilities.

How important it is, then, that parents be close to their children. Their absence causes so many problems. They need to always foster the pride of passing on to their children their heart’s wisdom.[14] In a “bright and cheerful” home,[15] the father experiences and gives his paternity, and the mother her maternity, complementary and

irreplaceable qualities capable of filling the heart. And if God doesn't send them children, they can exercise a spiritual paternity and maternity with other members of their family and with friends.

Waiting and commitment

“Perhaps we are not always aware of it, but it is the family that introduces fraternity into the world.”^[16] The underlying situation of peoples, peace among nations, is grounded on the free self-offering of a man and a woman for love, on their fidelity to a Yes that marks their lives forever.

Today the hunger for adventure abounds. The offering comes in many forms, with a great variety of possibilities that are intense, brief, passionate. A definitive commitment is less dramatic, but always awakens admiration, since we are made to love forever and, when all is said and done, everything else seems little to

us. A love that was not forever, a “yes” in small letters, would not be love.

Family life requires weathering storms and crises, but fidelity to the Yes that founded the home can always be stronger than all of these: *love is stronger than death.*^[17] Great commitments enable us to bear great difficulties. Here the commitment is not only to an idea or an institution, but above all to persons. The Yes of love enters so deeply into our being that we cannot deny it without doing great damage to ourselves.

Certainly every great project involves a great risk, and many young people today are afraid of a Yes that is forever, because they are afraid of making a mistake. But it is an even greater mistake to remain at the threshold of the love to which our heart is called. Therefore a person’s heart needs to mature, to grow, so as

to love steadily and strongly. This is the Christian meaning of courtship, “a path of life that has to ripen like fruit ... a path of maturing in love, until the moment it becomes marriage.”[18] The best training for this Yes, the best test of its firmness, is being able to wait. The Church never tires of asking the engaged couple to wait, although at times they may not fully understand the reasons. “Those who claim to want everything right away, then back out of everything—right away—at the first difficulty... Engagement strengthens the will to care for something together that must never be bought or sold, betrayed or abandoned, however tempting the offer may be.”[19]

Children learn a lot from parents who are able to care together for this love. These are the homes that produce the best citizens, prepared to sacrifice themselves for the

common good, workers who are honest in what belongs to themselves and to others, enthusiastic teachers, noble politicians, just lawyers, self-sacrificing doctors...In the warmth of these homes new mothers and fathers grow up who will be faithful, and many young people who will dedicate themselves completely to God, in order to serve the human family in a vocation where maternity or paternity also shines forth.

With the passage of time the adventure continues. The walls become too small, new homes and new loves spring up. Enthusiasm and the joy of living are reborn.

Therefore “there is a close link between the hope of a people and the harmony between generations. The joy of children causes the hearts of the parents to rejoice and once again opens up the future.”[20]

[1] Pope Francis, General audience, March 18, 2015.

[2] Pope Francis, Homily, July 6, 2015.

[3] See Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 66.

[4] Pope Francis, General audience, December 17, 2014.

[5] *Jn* 16:21

[6] Benedict XVI, Homily on the occasion of the solemn beginning of the Petrine ministry, April 24, 2005.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 80.

[8] John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, February 2, 1994, no. 22.

[9] See Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 290.

[10] Saint Teresa, *Life*, chapter 38.

[11] Pope Francis, Audience, August 26, 2015

[12] Pope Francis, Audience May 13, 2015.

[13] *Conversations*, no. 87

[14] See Pope Francis, Audiences, January 28, 2015 and November 4, 2015.

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

[16] Pope Francis, Audience, February 18, 2015.

[17] *Cant* 9:6.

[18] Pope Francis, Audience, May 27, 2015.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Pope Francis, Audience, February 11, 2015.

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