

Good Manners

Polite manners provide something essential for living in society, teaching us to be human and civil with others. Courtesy and politeness are "little sisters" of other and greater virtues

12/09/2014

If we consider how manners have developed over time, or how they vary from one country to another, we might conclude that they are purely conventional and can therefore be changed or even

transgressed at will. However, certain basic aspects of courtesy seem to have endured unchanged. We have all heard such expressions as: "By his bearing, you can see he is from a good family," or "What a well brought up child!"

The human virtues underpin the supernatural virtues, and also lie at the foundation of the human usages and customs that are normally referred to as politeness or good manners. Perhaps the affability that fosters pleasant social interaction can't be said to be the most important virtue. But it gives rise to cordiality, empathy and understanding, so important in our dealings with others.

Polite manners provide something essential for living in society, teaching us to be human and civil with others. Courtesy, affability, politeness are "little sisters" of other

and greater virtues. But their particular feature resides in the fact that without them our interactions with others would become unpleasant. Moreover, a coarse and discourteous person could hardly live up to the requirements of charity.

Looking at Jesus

At some point we may well have asked ourselves, when we have acted incorrectly: "What will people have thought of me?" or "Why did I do that?" or "How bad I must have looked!"

The Gospel has handed down to us a passage that describes two opposing attitudes, that of a "respectable" person of those times, and that of a sinful woman.[1] Simon the Pharisee organized a meal befitting the standing of the one invited, a person regarded as a prophet. He certainly would have given some thought to

the distribution of the dinner guests, the serving of the meal, the menu items and the topics of conversation he would like to bring up with the Master. He wanted to look good in front of the people who mattered and his main guest. But he overlooked some small points of refinement that our Lord noticed.

Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.[2]

At first sight, these might seem to be insignificant details. Nevertheless, Jesus, perfect God and perfect man, notices their absence. St Josemaria, who deeply contemplated the reality of the Incarnation of the Son of God,

comments on this passage: Jesus "comes to save, not to destroy nature. It is from him that we learn that it is unchristian to treat our fellow men badly, for they are creatures of God, made to his image and likeness (*Gen 1:26*)."[3]

Here we find practical teachings for those who wish to sanctify, and to strive for sanctity in, all the varied pathways of the world. All the more so now that human nature, with its tendencies and faculties, has been elevated by our Lord. There is absolutely nothing, no matter how seemingly small or trivial, that cannot be offered to God: *So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*[4] All upright activities have now been redeemed, and when they are carried out in union with Him, they can be co-redemptive.

The virtues are personal, they pertain to the person; but it is easy to see that no person is entirely autonomous or an isolated piece. We live in relation to our world, and co-exist with other persons. We are independent but at the same time dependent on one another: "we are always either helping or hindering each other. We are all links in the same chain."[5]

The virtues therefore also possess a social dimension. Virtues are not for showing off or for promoting one's ego, but in the end they are for others. Why is it that we feel at ease with some people, and perhaps less so with others? In all likelihood it is because that person listens to us, and seems to understand us; he or she is not in a hurry, but gives serenity, is not overbearing, but suggests and shows respect for us, is discreet and does not ask just out of curiosity..

Anyone who knows how to get along with others, to share, to offer, to welcome, to spread peace, is on the way to becoming truly virtuous. Jesus teaches us that when certain conditions are lacking, courteous social interaction deteriorates. Being courteous with others is perhaps the best form of introduction. And what we might call the "virtues of social interaction" are the prerequisite and setting for the jewel of charity.

Table manners

It is becoming more and more frequent today, in every sector of society, for both the father and mother to work outside the home. Often both incomes are needed to make ends meet. The difficulties posed by timetables and travel for spending time together as a family are often quite daunting.

This is not to say that in former times, when it was easier to eat as a

family, those gatherings always went smoothly, what with the wrangling among the children or their complaining about the food, and their parents' scolding them.... Much like what happens nowadays, since things have basically changed very little. But now, as back then, it is a matter of taking advantage of the opportunities that life offers, and striving to turn the obstacles into formative occasions.

How often have we really tried, for example, to turn the evening meal during the week or meals on weekends into family gatherings? Social researchers have produced studies showing boys and girls ticking the box *eating as a family* as the most important item for them. To be with those who love us, to share, to be understood, are ways of learning social interaction, learning to give oneself to others. Thus relationships between the members

of the family are strengthened, and parents are provided with informal opportunities to get to know their children better and to anticipate possible difficulties.

How many opportunities are offered by family meals to stress small point of politeness: "I'd be grateful if you could go get the salt." "Have you washed your hands before sitting down?" "Sit up straight and don't cross your legs when you eat." "Can you help your brother to set the table (or put things away)?" "Bread is not thrown away." "Hold your fork properly." "Cut the meat into small pieces and don't talk with your mouth full." "You need to eat not only with your stomach, but also with your head, and to eat everything you have taken, whether you like it or not." "The soup should be raised to the mouth, not the mouth lowered to the bowl." "Don't make noise when

you drink." "Don't drink with your elbow on the table."

Some of these indications can change according to place, but most are universal. They might seem a bit negative, although there is no need to harp on all of them, and all the time. But when seen as affirmations they reflect the consideration we should show others. They are little things that show politeness, courtesy, and hygiene, trying to make the meal pleasant for the others.

At meals one can learn basic points of good education such as how much should I serve myself, since the others are also waiting for food; and also not to eat outside meal times, and thus to appreciate more the food I am given. Moreover, eating together is not just a social reality. It is also culture in the most noble and rigorous meaning of the term.

Culture, as many authors have stressed, is related to cult, or worship. Giving due worship to God belongs to human nature, and also becomes culture when expressed in rituals and institutions. What a wonderful way to give all the glory to God, when the "ritual" of the meal is preceded by a prayer; when we invoke God's blessing on the family and the gifts that we are about to receive; when we thank Him for our daily bread, and we pray for those who have prepared it and for those who live in want.

To say grace is a custom that helps bring home the reality that God is continually by our side, teaching us to give thanks for what we receive, and to respect others in our daily interaction.

Maintaining a good tone

Around the table and in family gatherings children are prepared to

undertake life in society. Knowing when to intervene in a conversation or to await one's turn, learning how to dress with decorum, are aspects of living alongside others.

It is important to learn how to dress in keeping with the occasion.

Looking nice is not so much a matter of wearing expensive clothes or brands, as wearing clothes that are clean and well pressed. And children learn this at home, seeing how their parents act at all times with elegance and discretion. It is not the same thing to attend a formal dinner and to be with friends or in the intimacy of the family. It is not the same thing to saunter in any way along the corridors of the house, and to put on a bathrobe as soon as getting out of bed.

Family gatherings, meals among them, also allow children to tell their little adventures at school, and

parents to make an opportune comment or to give criteria on a specific way of acting. These are opportunities to share interests, to get enthused about an upcoming mountain hike or about history, to introduce children to the fascinating art of telling stories. Excursions or visits to places of art can be planned, and aspects of family, religious, patriotic or cultural traditions can be passed on little by little. Children learn to speak without raising their voice or shouting and, more importantly, they learn to listen and to not interrupt the thread of a conversation, to not impose their point of view or their demands.

In the family we learn to look after the others with small points of refinement. No one turns up badly dressed or eats by gulping down their food. Everyone passes the platter and is attentive to what others need. Bread or water is

offered to another family member before serving oneself, and a "thank you" is received in turn, since gratitude fosters concord, and concord fosters cheerfulness and a smile.

After a warm family meal we are happier, not only with the physiological happiness of a healthy animal,[6] but because we have shared our intimacy with those we love most. We have been enriched personally and morally.

These ways of behaving help to form us interiorly, to orient us before God and before others. The mature man or woman is anchored in reality. They have learned to respect themselves, to be masters of their soul and their body. They conduct themselves with naturalness, prudence and measure in every situation. They persevere confidently in friendship, in their work, in the

goals they have set for themselves, because more than receiving they are capable of giving. In the end, they have learned to be generous.

J.M. Martin

[1] Cf. *Lk* 7:36ff.

[2] *Lk* 7:44-46.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 73.

[4] *1 Cor* 10:31.

[5] *Friends of God*, 76.

[6] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 659.

en-in/article/good-manners/
(08/09/2025)