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Parental Authority

A new article in the series on family education offers some ideas on how to help children manage their freedom.

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God is the author of life, and his goodness is shown also in his authority. All created authority participates in it, and specifically the loving authority of parents.

We know that the exercise of parental authority isn't always easy, and needs to "get down" to very

specific aspects of daily life. We've all had the experience in educating children that "if no standard of behavior and rule of life is applied even in small daily matters, the character is not formed and the person will not be ready to face the trials that will come in the future." [1] Nevertheless, we also know that it is not always easy to find a balance between freedom and discipline.

In fact, many parents have a fear of disciplining, perhaps because they themselves have suffered the negative consequences that can come from imposing things on children. They are afraid, for example, that peace at home will be lost, or that their children will reject something that is good in itself.

Benedict XVI points out how to solve the apparent dilemma between setting rules and getting children to take them on freely. The secret lies in

this: "Education cannot ... dispense with the personal prestige that makes the exercise of authority possible. This is the fruit of experience and competence, but is acquired above all with the coherence of one's own life and personal involvement, an expression of true love."[2]

The light of authority

The exercise of authority should never be confused with simply imposing our will on another person, or making sure we are obeyed at any cost. Whoever obeys a particular authority shouldn't do so because of the fear of punishment, but rather because they see in that authority a reference point for knowing what is true and good, even though they may not understand this clearly yet.

Authority is closely allied to truth, since it has to represent what is true.

From this perspective, we see that authority has an eminently positive meaning and should be viewed as a service; it is a light that guides whoever follows it towards the goal he or she is seeking. In fact, etymologically, the word “authority” comes from the Latin verb *augere*, which means “to make grow,” “to develop.”

Whoever acknowledges an authority adheres, above all, to the values or truths it represents. “The educator is thus a witness to truth and goodness,”[3] someone who has already discovered the truth and made that truth their own. Those being educated, in turn, need to trust their educators: not only because of their knowledge, but also because they are ready to help lead them to the truth.

Parents' role

Clearly, children expect their parents to practice in their own lives the values they seek to transmit, and to show them their love. How can parents attain the authority and prestige that their role requires? Authority has a natural foundation and arises spontaneously in the relationship between parents and children. So rather than worrying about how to acquire authority, parents should simply try to maintain it and exercise it well.

This is obvious when children are small; if a family is united, the children will trust their parents more than themselves. Obedience may be hard at times, but it makes sense to them within a context of love and family unity. "My parents want what is good for me; they want me to be happy, and tell me what will help me to truly be so." Disobedience is seen then as a mistake, a lack of trust and love.

Therefore, to establish their authority, parents don't need to do anything more than to be truly parents: to show forth the joy and beauty of their own lives, and to make clear, with deeds, that they love their children the way they are. Naturally, this requires spending time at home. Although today's pace of life can make this difficult, it is important for them to spend time with their children and "to create a family atmosphere that is imbued with love, with piety towards God and concern for others." [4]

For example, it's worth the effort to try to eat dinner together as a family, even though this might take some planning. It is a wonderful way to get to know each other while sharing stories about the day. Children learn, also by listening to what their parents share about their own day, to put their own problems into

perspective, with a dose of good humor.

Then it will be easier to speak clearly to children when necessary, pointing out to them what they do well and what they do badly; what they can do and what they can't, explaining to them, in way appropriate to each one's age, the reasons for acting in one way or another. And among those reasons, parents ought to include the reality of being a child of God. "Try to help children learn to evaluate their actions before God. Give them supernatural reasons to reflect on, so that they feel responsible." [5] They need to show them the example of Christ, who embraced the wood of the Cross out of love for us, to win for us our freedom.

Exercising authority comes down to offering children, right from when they are very young, the tools they

will need to grow as persons. The most important thing is to show them good example in one's own life. Children notice everything their parents do, and tend to imitate them.

Parental authority involves giving the indications necessary to maintain a warm family atmosphere and to help children discover that there is more joy in giving than in receiving.

Within this context, it is good to ask children, even when quite young, to be responsible for services that help create an atmosphere of healthy mutual concern. This can involve helping to set the table, spending some time each week putting order in their room and possessions, answering the door, etc. These are all contributions to family well-being, and children understand these tasks in that way.

It's not a question of "giving them things to do," but rather helping

them see that their contribution to the well-being of the home is important, since they relieve their parents' workload, assist their siblings, take care of their possessions.... They should come to realize that their contribution is in some sense irreplaceable, and thus they will learn to obey.

It is not enough for parents just to talk to their children and make them understand their mistakes. Sooner or later, it will also be necessary to correct them, to show them that what they do has consequences, both for them and for others. Often an affectionate but very clear conversation will suffice; however, in other instances, it will be important to take certain steps, because some harm needs to be repaired, and repentance alone is not enough.

Punishments should be used to make up for a bad action: for example, to

do a small job in order to pay for a broken object. Sometimes a punishment should last for some time. In response to poor school grades it could make sense to limit a child's ability to go out for a certain period of time. In these cases, however, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that the goal here is to provide the child with the time and means needed to do what he or she is supposed to do.

Continuing with the example of poor grades, it would make little sense to prohibit children from going out with friends, while letting them waste time at home. Nor would it be prudent to prohibit them, without a real need to do so, from doing activities which are good in themselves, such as playing a sport or going to a youth club, simply because "these are the things that they really like to do."

Authority and trust

Part of the parents' authority entails helping their children understand the values they want to transmit to them, while always respecting their independence and their particular way of being. This requires, above all, that children feel unconditionally loved by their parents and are in tune with them: that they know them and trust them.

Indicating clearly what children can and cannot do would be useless, and probably lead to permanent conflicts, if not accompanied by affection and trust. “The parental authority which the rearing of children requires can be perfectly harmonized with friendship, which means putting themselves, in some way, on the same level as their children. Children—even those who seem intractable and unresponsive—always want this

closeness, this fraternity, with their parents."[6]

As children grow up, the parents' authority begins to be more dependent on this relationship of confidence and trust. All children want to be taken seriously, but adolescents even more so. They have to deal with physical and psychological changes that unsettle them and that can become paramount in their life for a time.

Although they may not recognize it, they are looking for adults who can serve as a reference point for their life: people who have clear standards, who live in accord with principles that give them stability. This is exactly what adolescents are seeking in their own life. At the same time, they realize that no one can take their place in this effort, which is why they refuse to accept automatically what their parents tell

them. More than doubting their parents' authority, they are seeking to understand better the truth on which it is based.

Therefore, it's important for parents to give them all the time they need, and to be inventive in finding opportunities to spend time together. This could be on a trip in the car alone with a son or daughter, or at home watching a television program or talking about some school event. These are times when parents can talk to them about topics that affect them more deeply and about which it is important for them to have clear ideas.

There is no need to worry if sometimes children seem to ignore this conversation. If a parent says what is necessary, without being sententious or trying to "force" the child to open up, what is said will stick. The important thing is not so

much ensuring that children accept the advice, as that they find out what their father or mother thinks about a certain topic, and thus acquire a reference point for deciding how to behave in their own life.

Parents thus show that they want to be close and available to speak about each child's concerns. And they put into practice Benedict XVI's teaching: "to give each other something of ourselves. To give each other our time." [7]

Some things that parents perhaps don't approve of are, at times, secondary, and aren't worth fighting over, when a simple comment will do. Children will then learn to differentiate between what is really important from what is not. They will discover that their parents don't want them to be "carbon copies" of their own way of being, but rather that they be happy in their life, men

and women who are authentic. Parents therefore shouldn't interfere, while of course still being interested, in things that don't impair their children's dignity or that of the family.

In the end, it comes down to trusting each child, ready to “accept the risk of their freedom and be constantly attentive in order to help them correct wrong ideas and choices. However, what we must never do is to support them when they err, to pretend we do not see the errors, or worse, that we share them.”[8]

Experiencing this trust is an invitation to deserve it. The key is this: “Parents should bring up their children in an atmosphere of friendship, never giving the impression that they do not trust them. They should give them freedom and teach them how to use it with personal responsibility. It is

better for parents to let themselves 'be fooled' once in a while, because the trust that they have shown will make the children themselves feel ashamed of having abused it—they will correct themselves." [9]

Naturally, sometimes small conflicts and tensions will arise. But these can be overcome with joy and serenity, showing children that a "no" in a specific matter is compatible with loving them and understanding their situation.

St. Josemaría insisted that the upbringing of children depends on both the father and the mother. Of course, they are not alone in this important task. God, who has given them the mission of guiding their children to Heaven, also gives them the help they need to fulfill it.

Therefore, the vocation of being a parent brings with it the need to pray for their children. They need to talk to God about them, about their

virtues and their defects, asking how they can help them, and asking for God's grace for their children and patience for themselves. Abandoning in God's hands the results of their efforts gives parents a peace that is spread to others.

In the task of raising children, St. Josemaría said, spouses “receive a special grace in the sacrament of marriage which Jesus Christ instituted . . . They should understand that founding a family, educating their children, and exercising a Christian influence in society, are supernatural tasks.”[10] By acting with human grace and gentleness and with a certain shrewdness, and entrusting their efforts to God, their children will mature. For in the end, each child belongs to God.

J.M. Barrio

[1] Benedict XVI, *Letter to the faithful of the diocese and city of Rome on the urgent task of educating young people*, January 28, 2008.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Vatican Council II, Decl. *Gravissimum Educationis*, no. 3.

[5] St. Josemaría, Notes from his oral preaching in Guadalaviar (Valencia) November 17, 1972.

[6] St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 100.

[7] Benedict XVI, Homily, December 24, 2012.

[8] Benedict XVI, *Letter to the faithful of the diocese and city of Rome on the urgent task of educating young people*, January 28, 2008.

[9] St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 100.

[10] *Ibid.* no. 91.

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