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## **The Son I Never Dreamed Of**

Patricia Schroeder, who lives in Uruguay, is a journalist and mother of seven children, one of whom has Down syndrome. When he turned ten, Patricia asked her other children: “What have you learned from Fran?”

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Francis is the son I never dreamed of, and I say this with a bit of shame. I have seven children. Fran arrived with his twin brother. It never crossed my mind that I could have a

child with Down syndrome. I dreamed of the birth of two sons, strong, athletic, good students.... I dreamed about their future professions, their becoming mature and responsible adults.

A few days after the twins were born, I began to be worried about Fran; his almond-shaped eyes hid a secret we needed to decipher. That very day we asked for a genetic test. After a short time we had the diagnosis confirmed. At first we felt a great uncertainty, a lot of anguish and fear. What could we do? How could we educate him? How could we help him become part of this world of ours that seems so unaccepting for someone different?

The confirmation of the diagnosis transformed our negative feelings into a great certainty. Fran will need the help of each of us: Dad, Mom, brothers and sisters.... Almost

without realizing it, we began drawing up a family action plan that, without exaggerating things, revolved around his special needs.

He taught us that a family, this small community, should organize itself and prioritize in accord with the one who is most in need. For a while it was the twins: Nico and Fran. The two were always together at first, when eating, bathing, and sleeping. If at times Fran needed me more, the rest of the family would be diligent in looking after Nico.

Now Fran and Nico are ten years old. And after so many shared efforts, we look with pride at what has been achieved in our family. We have no doubt that God will never stop holding us in his hands, and that the family is always protected by our Lady's embrace. As Saint Josemaria said, each day God is close to us "like a loving Father. He loves each one of

us more than all the mothers in the world can love their children—helping us, inspiring us, blessing... and forgiving.”

With almost ten years of work as a family team, I thought it was also a good time to pause and reflect on what Fran has brought us. So I asked his brothers and sisters: “What’s the best thing about Fran?” Their responses are very positive:

- If you feel down, he always tries to cheer you up.

- His daily joy, his kindness, his transparency and sincerity (he never hides anything), his warmth, always being concerned about everyone, always being in a good mood and sharing it with the rest, his huge heart. He spreads love around him.

- Fran is always attentive to how you feel; if you are down, he encourages you with a hug without your asking.

- In Fran I see his good humor (most of the time), his way of entertaining others and his big heart.

- He's so transparent, direct and authentic.

- The best of my brother: he is always willing to do whatever you need. He is the first to greet you when you arrive home with a hug and a kiss. When you're sad he asks what's the matter and gives you a hug; he's our "teddy bear" we can hug when we need it.

- (From Nico, the twin): He is the sun and I am the moon, that's how twins are.

So it's easy to see that all our effort with Fran has brought our family a great reward. And the answer to a second question: "what's the worst about Fran" was also quite revealing. He is very insistent, and doesn't stop until he gets what he wants; it is

difficult to “negotiate” with him; he always wants something right away and needs to be the center of attention.

Whenever we notice that Fran has made an advance in some point there are so many of us who take pride. First, the five older brothers and sisters who have rolled up their sleeves countless times to provide extra help at home. And also the grandparents, uncles, cousins, friends and godparents who always want the best for Fran. And the many educational and sports institutions that have opened their doors to us.

I hope this message reaches parents who may now be feeling the same fear we felt in those first days of uncertainty. I also hope it will help bring about greater inclusion in sports, at school, in games and at work. This is not easily achieved, and there has to be some give and take,

just as happened in our home. But the reward is enormous, much more than we could ever have dreamed of.

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