

Temperance and Self-mastery (II)

"Those who are masters of themselves have marvelous possibilities to dedicate themselves to the service of God and neighbor, and thus attain the greatest happiness and peace possible here on earth."

09/01/2014

The years of adolescence offer new opportunities to instill the virtue of temperance. Adolescents have greater maturity, which facilitates the acquisition of virtue. Virtues

require interiorizing habits of behavior and motives, freely deciding to do something good and carrying it out. Although young children can get used to doing good things, it is only when they reach a certain intellectual and emotional maturity that they can go deeper into the meaning of their own actions and evaluate their consequences.

It is important to explain to adolescents the reason for certain ways of acting that young people perhaps perceive as only matters of form, or for certain limits to their conduct that they might see as mere prohibitions. In the final analysis, we need to give them good reasons why it is worthwhile to be temperate. For example, in most cases it would not be convincing to speak about the need to be temperate (above all in the area of entertainment that gets in the way of study) in order to ensure success in one's future career.

Although this is a legitimate reason, it focuses on a distant reality that isn't of immediate interest for many young people.

It is more effective to show how the virtue of temperance is attractive here and now, drawing on the magnanimous ideals that fill their hearts, their great loves: generosity towards the needy, loyalty to their friends, and so on. We should never fail to point out that the temperate and self-controlled person is the one best able to help others. Those who are masters of themselves have marvelous possibilities to dedicate themselves to the service of God and neighbor, and thus attain the greatest happiness and peace possible here on earth.

Furthermore, adolescence offers new opportunities to be self-controlled and temperate. The natural curiosity of someone who is awakening to all

the possibilities in life is enhanced by a new sense of dominion over the future. An eagerness to experience and try out everything arises, which easily becomes identified with freedom. Young people at this age want to feel somehow free from constraint, and could even view any reference to a timetable, order, study, limited expenses, etc. as “unfair impositions.”

Moreover this way of viewing things, so widespread today, is often promoted and heightened by commercial interests that seek to draw from it a lucrative trade.

Faced with this situation, parents can't allow themselves to be overwhelmed by the adverse circumstances; rather they need to think positively, to look for creative solutions, to reason things out together with their children, to accompany them in the search for

true interior freedom, to exercise patience and pray for them.

A key to happiness

Much of the advertising in Western societies is aimed at young people, whose purchasing power has increased considerably in recent years. Various brands come into fashion and quickly fall out of fashion. “Having” objects of a particular brand somehow fosters social inclusion. One is accepted into the group and feels included, not so much for what one *is* as for what one *has* and how one appears in the eyes of others. Consumer behavior in adolescents is often not driven so much by the desire to possess more objects (as happens with young children) as by the eagerness to express one’s personality and to show better one’s standing in the world, through one’s friends.

Together with these motives, the consumer society spurs people not to be satisfied with what they already have, but to try out the latest items on offer. The need is fostered to change the computer or car every year, to get the latest mobile phone or a particular item of clothing that might never be worn, or to accumulate CDs, movies, or all kinds of computer programs for the mere satisfaction of having them. Those who fall sway to this pressure are driven by the satisfaction produced by buying or consuming, and have lost control over their own passions.

Obviously, not all the blame lies with advertising or pressure from the environment. It may also be the fault of those who should have provided a more diligent upbringing. Therefore it's good that parents, and in general anyone dedicated in some way to formation, ask themselves frequently how to carry out better this key task

of educating children—the most important one of all, since on it depends the happiness of future generations and justice and peace in society.

Parents should be aware of the importance of the family atmosphere in instilling sound values in this area. As in everything, good example is needed for children to grasp, from an early age, that to live in keeping with one's social position does not mean falling into consumerism or superfluous expenses. For example, there is a saying in some countries: “bread is from God, and therefore shouldn't be wasted.” This is a specific way of helping children understand that they should eat with their stomach and not with their eyes; that they should finish everything on their plate and give thanks for what they have, since many people in the world go hungry. Children will then come to

understand that everything we receive and have, our daily bread, is a *gift* we have to make good use of.

It's understandable that parents don't want their children to lack what others have, or what they themselves lacked when they were growing up. But this doesn't mean they should give them everything they want. They should teach their children not to make comparisons with others or to try to imitate them in everything, which could lead to a materialistic mentality.

The society we live in abounds in rankings, classifications and statistics that could spur us to want to compete with those around us, to make comparisons. But our Lord does not make comparisons. He says to us: *son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*[1] For him we are all specially loved children, equally appreciated, loved

and valued. Here we have one of the keys to educating for happiness: fostering in ourselves and in our children the realization that there is always a place for us in the father's house, that each of us is loved simply because we *are*, because we are a son or daughter, different but equal. And doing so with a mother's pedagogy and justice, which means treating unequal children unequally.[2]

Furthermore, teaching temperance should never be reduced to mere negation. It should be taught positively, helping children understand how to keep and use properly what they have, their clothes and toys and other objects. It means giving them responsibility in keeping with each one's age: order in their room, caring for younger brothers and sisters, material jobs in the home (preparing breakfast, buying bread, putting out the rubbish, setting the table...). It means

helping them see by our example how to accept joyfully and without complaining the occasional lack of something, and fostering generosity towards the needy.

St. Josemaria happily recalled how his father was always, even after the financial setback he suffered, a generous alms-giver. All these daily aspects lived in the family help foster an atmosphere in which priority is given to people over things.

Possessing the world

Be self-controlled in all things.[3] St Paul's brief instruction to Timothy is valid for all times and places. This is not a principle exclusively for some who are called to a particular dedication, nor something only for parents to practice and which cannot be "imposed" on children. Rather it is up to parents and educators to discover and apply its meaning to each age, each person, and each

circumstance. It requires acting prudently and thoughtfully, and asking for advice, in order to know how to make the right decisions.

And if, in spite of everything, the girls or boys don't understand at the outset the suitability of some measure, and they protest, afterwards they will come to appreciate it and be grateful. And so it is necessary to arm oneself with patience and fortitude, because in few areas is it as important to go against the current as in this one.

And we all need to keep in mind that the fact that a practice is widespread is not a valid reason for doing it. *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*[4]

In this regard, it is good not to be overly generous in giving things to

children, since one learns to be temperate by knowing how to administer what one has. Referring specifically to money, St Josemaría advised parents: “Through your excessive ‘affection’ you end up making them soft. When it isn’t Dad it’s Mom. And if not, it’s Grandma. At times, it’s all three of you, each one doing it secretly. And the child, with these three secrets, can lose his soul. So, come to some agreement. Don’t be miserly with the children. But decide what each one can manage, what they can cope with, their ability for self-control. Don’t let them have too much money until they earn it for themselves.”[5] We have to teach them to manage money well, to buy wisely, to use temperately means like the telephone, with a bill that is paid each month, to recognize when one is spending for the mere “pleasure of spending”....

In any case money is only one aspect here. Something similar happens in the use of time. Being moderate in the time given to entertainment or hobbies or sports forms part of a temperate life. Temperance frees our heart so we can dedicate ourselves to things that might be more arduous but are more important, such as study. It helps us to get out of ourselves and enrich our life by giving ourselves in family life and friendships, or to dedicate time and money to the needy, a practice that it is good to foster in children already when they are quite young.

Tempering curiosity, fostering modesty

“Temperance makes the soul sober, modest, understanding. It fosters a natural sense of reserve which everyone finds attractive because it denotes intelligent self-control.”[6] St. Josemaria summarizes here the

fruits of temperance and relates them to a special virtue, reserve, which is an aspect of decency and modesty. “Modesty” and “decency” are integral parts of the virtue of temperance,[7] since another area of this virtue is precisely the moderation of the sexual drive.

“Modesty protects the mystery of persons and their love. It encourages patience and moderation in loving relationships; it requires that the conditions for the definitive giving and commitment of man and woman to one another be fulfilled. Modesty is decency. It inspires one’s choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve when there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity. It is discreet.”[8]

If adolescents have been strengthening their will right from childhood, when the moment arrives they will have the natural reserve that facilitates understanding sexuality in a truly human way. But it

is important that the father, in the case of sons, and the mother, in the case of daughters, have been able to win over their trust, in order to explain to them the beauty of human love when they can understand it. As St. Josemaria advised: “Dad has to become a friend of his sons. He has no choice but to make an effort here. If Dad hasn’t spoken with him, the time will come when the boy begins to ask about the origin of life with a curiosity which is partly reasonable and partly unhealthy. He’ll ask a shameless friend, and then he’ll look at his parents with disgust.

“But if you watch over him from early childhood, you’ll know when the time has come to tell him nobly, after invoking God, about the facts of life. If you do, the boy will run over to hug his mother because she’s been so good. He will kiss you and say, ‘How good God is to let my parents share in his creative power.’ He

won't say it that way, because he doesn't know enough, but he will feel it. And he'll think that your love isn't something dirty but something holy.”[9] This will turn out to be easier if we don't evade the questions that children naturally raise, and we reply to them in keeping with their capacity.

Here as well, just as in the area of being temperate at meals, example turns out to be fundamental. Words alone are not enough; we have to show with our deeds that “it is not fitting to look at what it is not fitting to desire,”[10] and to be watchful so that everything in the home has the tone that existed in the home at Nazareth.

The widespread trivialization today of human sexuality makes it important to pay special attention to television, internet, books and video games. It's not a matter of fostering a

“suspicious fear” toward these media, but of taking advantage of them as educational opportunities, teaching children how to use them positively and critically. We can never be afraid to reject what harms the soul or transmits a deformed view of the human person. “From the very start, children are relentless witnesses of their parents’ lives. You don’t realize it, but they judge everything, and at times they judge you in a bad light. So what happens at home influences your children for good or for bad.”[11]

If children see their parents changing the television channel when something off-colour appears on the news, or an ad with a low tone, or an inappropriate scene in a movie; if they realize that their parents duly inform themselves on the moral content of a movie or a book before seeing it or reading it, then one is transmitting the value of

purity to them. If they see that their parents, or teachers, refuse to look at offensive ads on the street, and teach them to make an act of reparation in such cases, then the children take to heart the great value of purity of heart and the need to protect this virtue that is reflected in the family atmosphere. “Teaching modesty to children and adolescents means awakening in them respect for the human person.”[12]

Nevertheless, being careful about the moral environment one is exposed to is not, properly speaking, educating in temperance. It is an indispensable condition for Christian life, but the virtue of temperance is not formed only by “avoiding evil,” which is certainly essential for the life of grace. Rather it is a matter of moderating pleasures that in principle are good in themselves. Therefore it is even more important to teach children how to use

temperately all the instruments and means available to them.

Indiscriminate television viewing, even as a family, can end up dissolving the home environment. Even worse would be for each room to have its own television, and each person to “shut themselves in” to watch their favorite programs. Something similar could be said of the indiscriminate, and at times compulsive, use of mobile phones or computers.

As in everything, a sober use of these means on the part of parents and educators teaches children to do the same. If parents spend hours in front of the television watching “whatever’s on,” not only do they give their children bad example, but they can end up neglecting their children, who see their parents being more attentive to strangers than to themselves. It is worth recalling that,

since temperance is self-mastery,
“there is no greater self-mastery than
to make oneself a servant of all souls!
This is how to gain the greatest
honors, both on earth and in
heaven.”[13]

Temperance enables us to employ
our heart and energies in serving our
neighbor, in loving, the key to true
happiness. St. Augustine, who had to
struggle so resolutely in his own life
against the attractions of
intemperance, wrote: “let us consider
temperance, which promises us
purity and integrity in the love that
unites us to God. Its role is to restrain
and quiet the passions that seek to
turn us away from the laws of God
and his goodness, that is, from
happiness. For here is the abode of
Truth, and in contemplating and
cleaving closely to it we are
assuredly happy; but departing from
it we become entangled in great
errors and sorrows.”[14]

[1] *Lk* 15:31.

[2] Cf. St. Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 601.

[3] 2 *Tim* 4:5

[4] *Rom* 12:2.

[5] St. Josemaria, Get-together in IESE (Barcelona), 27 November 1972.

[6] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 84.

[7] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2521.

[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2522.

[9] St. Josemaria, Get-together in Enxomil High School (Oporto), 31 October 1972.

[10] St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia*, 21.

[11] St. Josemaria, Get-together in Pozoalbero (Jerez de la Frontera), 12 November 1972.

[12] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2524.

[13] St. Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 1045.

[14] St. Augustine, *The Morals of the Catholic Church*, ch. 19.