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14 Questions about the Family

Answers offered by Saint Josemaria to questions about love in the family, family conflicts, parent-child relationships, raising children, and faith in the family.

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What is a family? How can one become a good father or a good mother? What role does the family have in the children's education and development? How can parents combine authority and

freedom? How should families exercise trust and confidence in daily life?

“What is the family?” asked Pope Francis, and then answered, “Over and above its most pressing problems and its peremptory necessities, the family is a ‘centre of love’, where the law of respect and communion reigns and is able to resist the pressure of manipulation and domination from the world’s ‘power centres’. In the heart of the family, the person naturally and harmoniously blends into a human group, overcoming the false opposition between the individual and society.

In the bosom of the family, no one is set apart: both the elderly and the child will be welcome here. The culture of encounter and of dialogue, openness to solidarity and

transcendence, originates in the family.

For this reason, the family constitutes a great and ‘rich social resource’. In this sense I would like to highlight two primary factors: stability and fruitfulness.”

Pope Francis, Message to the First Latin American Congress on the Pastoral Care of the Family, Panama City, August 4–9, 2014

The following are 14 answers offered by St Josemaria to questions about love in the family, family conflicts, parent-child relationships, raising children, and faith in the family.

1- How can we fill our family life with love?

2- How can one become a good father or a good mother?

3- Their surroundings influence children's behaviour and attitudes.
What role does the family play in the children's education and development?

4- Many parents feel they don't have time to spend with their children, or on family life. Women who work outside have all the care of the home as well; full-time homemakers can feel their horizons are too narrow.
Where is the work-homelife balance to be found?

5- It's not easy to raise children well.
What is the key to it?

6- How can parents combine authority with giving children freedom?

7- What do trust and understanding between parents and children imply for daily life together?

8- Sometimes parents want to decide on their children's career, who they marry, and even want to stop them from following God's call to a life of dedication to the service of souls.
Would it not be better to give children their freedom and let them grow up?

9- Everyone basically wants to have a stable family, peaceful family life.
But in marriage and families there are inevitably daily frictions and sometimes major conflicts, differences of opinion and opposing ideas. How can these be overcome?

10- What should parents do when their children tell them they wish to dedicate their lives completely to God?

11- We have talked about parents so far. What about the children's role in a family?

12- How is faith shown in the family?

13- How important is prayer for families?

14- Should families pray together?

1. How can we fill our family life with love?

When I think of Christian homes, I like to imagine them as being full of the light and joy that were in the home of the Holy Family. (...) Every Christian home should be a place of peace and serenity. In spite of the small frustrations of daily life, an atmosphere of profound and sincere affection should reign there together with a deep-rooted calm, which is the result of authentic faith that is put into practice.

Husband and wife are called to sanctify their married life and to sanctify themselves in it. It would be a serious mistake if they were to exclude family life from their spiritual development. The marriage

union, the care and education of children, the effort to provide for the needs of the family as well as for its security and development, the relationships with other persons who make up the community, all these are among the ordinary human situations that Christian couples are called upon to sanctify. (...)

The aim is this: to sanctify family life, while creating at the same time a true family atmosphere. Many Christian virtues are necessary in order to sanctify each day of one's life. First, the theological virtues, and then all the others: prudence, loyalty, sincerity, humility, industriousness, cheerfulness....

Would you like to know a secret to happiness? Give yourself to others and serve them, without expecting to be thanked.

2. How can one become a good father or a good mother?

Parents teach their children mainly through their own conduct. What a son or daughter looks for in a father or mother is not only a certain amount of knowledge or some more or less effective advice, but primarily something more important: a proof of the value and meaning of life, shown through the life of a specific person, and confirmed in the different situations and circumstances that occur over a period of time.

If I were to give advice to parents, I would tell them, above all, let your children see that you are trying to live in accordance with your faith. Don't let yourselves be deceived: they see everything, from their earliest years, and they judge everything. Let them see that God is not only on your lips, but also in your deeds; that you are trying to be loyal and sincere, and that you love each other and you really love them too.

For me there is no clearer example of this practical union of justice and charity than the behaviour of mothers. They love all their children with the same degree of affection, and it is precisely this same love that impels them to treat each one differently, with an unequal justice, since each child is different from the others.

This is how you will best contribute to making your children become true Christians, men and women of integrity, capable of facing all life's situations with an open spirit, of serving their fellow men and helping to solve the problems of mankind, of carrying the testimony of Christ to the society of which they will be a part.

3. Their surroundings influence children's behaviour and attitudes. What role does the family play in

the children's education and development?

The parents are the first people responsible for the education of their children, in human as well as in spiritual matters. They should be conscious of the extent of their responsibility. To fulfil it, they need prudence, understanding, a capacity to love and a concern for giving good example.

Imposing things by force, in an authoritarian manner, is not the right way to teach. The ideal attitude of parents lies more in becoming their children's friends – friends who will be willing to share their anxieties, who will listen to their problems, who will help them in an effective and agreeable way.

Being a father or a mother is not simply a matter of bringing children into the world. The capacity for generation, which is a share in the

creative power of God, is meant to have a continuation. Parents are called to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the development of their children into men and women who will be authentic Christians.

4. Many parents feel they don't have time to spend with their children, or on family life. Women who work outside have all the care of the home as well; full-time homemakers can feel their horizons are too narrow. Where is the work-homelife balance to be found?

The problem you pose is not confined to women. At some time or other, many men experience the same sort of thing with slightly different characteristics. (...)

Smaller remedies, which seem trivial, must also be used. When there are lots of things to do you

have to establish priorities, to get organised.

Parents should find time to spend with their children, to talk with them. They are the most important thing – more important than business or work or rest.

In their conversations, parents should make an effort to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to recognize the fact that their children are sometimes partly right – or even completely right – in some of their rebellious attitudes. At the same time, they should help their children to direct their efforts and to carry out their projects properly, teaching them to consider things and to reason them out. It is not a matter of imposing a line of conduct, but rather of showing the human and supernatural motives for it. In a word, parents have to respect their children's freedom, because there is

no real education without personal responsibility, and there is no responsibility without freedom.

5. It's not easy to raise children well. What is the key to it?

It is a question of trust. Parents should bring up their children in an atmosphere of friendship.

Listen to your children. Give them your time, even the time that you have reserved for yourselves. Show them your confidence; believe whatever they tell you, even if sometimes they try to deceive you. Don't be afraid when they rebel, because, at their age, you yourselves were more or less rebellious. Go to meet them half-way and pray for them. If you act in this Christian manner, they will come to you with simplicity, instead of trying to satisfy their legitimate curiosity by taking it to some rough or vulgar friend.

Your confidence, your friendly dealings with your children, will receive an answer in their sincerity in dealing with you. Then, even if there are quarrels and lack of understanding, they will never amount to much; and this is what peace in the family and a truly Christian life mean.

6. How can parents combine authority with giving children freedom?

I always advise parents to try to be friends with their children. The parental authority which the rearing of children requires can be perfectly harmonised 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. It is a

question of trust. 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. On the other hand, if they have no freedom, if they see that no one trusts them, they will always be inclined to deceive their parents.

Since in matters which are open to opinion no one can claim to be in possession of absolute truth, friendly and loving relations offer a real opportunity for learning from others what they can teach us. All the

members of the family can learn something from the others if they want to.

It is not Christian, nor even human, for a family to be divided over such matters. When the value of freedom is fully understood and the divine gift of freedom is passionately loved, the pluralism that freedom brings with it is also loved.

7. What do trust and understanding between parents and children imply for daily life together?

This friendship, this knowing how to put oneself on the children's level, makes it easier for them to talk about their small problems; it also makes it possible for the parents to be the ones who teach them gradually about the origin of life, in accordance with their mentality and capacity to understand, gently anticipating their natural curiosity.

I consider this very important. There is no reason why children should associate sex with something sinful, or find out about something that is in itself noble and holy in a vulgar conversation with a friend. It can also be an important step in strengthening the friendship between parents and children, preventing a separation in the early moments of their moral life.

Parents should also endeavour to stay young at heart so as to find it easier to react sympathetically towards the noble aspirations and even towards the extravagant fantasies of their youngsters. Life changes, and there are many new things which we may not like.

Perhaps, objectively speaking, they are no better than others that have gone before, but they are not bad. They are simply other ways of living and nothing more.

On more than one occasion conflicts may arise because importance is attached to petty differences which could be overcome with a little common sense and good humour.

8. Sometimes parents want to decide on their children's career, who they marry, and even want to stop them from following God's call to a life of dedication to the service of souls. Would it not be better to give children their freedom and let them grow up?

In the final analysis, it is clear that the decisions that determine the course of an entire life have to be taken by each individual personally, with freedom, without coercion or pressure of any kind.

This is not to say that the intervention of others is not usually necessary. Precisely because they are decisive steps that affect an entire life and because a person's happiness

depends to a great extent on the decisions made, it is clear that they should be taken calmly, without precipitation. They should be particularly responsible and prudent decisions. And part of prudence consists precisely in seeking advice. It would be presumption – for which we usually pay dearly – to think that we can decide alone, without the grace of God and without the love and guidance of other people, and especially of our parents.

Parents can, and should, be a great help to their children. They can open new horizons for them, share their experiences and make them reflect, so they do not allow themselves to be carried away by passing emotional experiences. They can offer them a realistic scale of value. Sometimes they can help with personal advice; on other occasions they should encourage their children to seek other suitable people such as a loyal

and sincere friend, a learned and holy priest or an expert in career guidance.

Advice does not take away freedom. It gives elements on which to judge and thus enlarges the possibilities of choice and ensures that decisions are not taken on the basis of irrational factors. After hearing the opinions of others and taking everything into consideration, there comes a moment in which a choice has to be made and then no one has the right to force a young person's freedom.

Parents have to be on guard against the temptation of wanting to project themselves unduly on their children or of moulding them according to their own preferences. They should respect their individual God-given inclinations and aptitudes. If their love is true, this is easy enough. Even in the extreme case, when a young person makes a decision that the

parents have good reason to consider mistaken and when they think it will lead to future unhappiness, the answer lies not in force, but in understanding. Very often it consists in knowing how to stand by their child so as to help him overcome the difficulties and, if necessary, draw all the benefit possible from an unfortunate situation.

9. Everyone basically wants to have a stable family, peaceful family life. But in marriage and families there are inevitably daily frictions and sometimes major conflicts, differences of opinion and opposing ideas. How can these be overcome?

I have only one prescription: strive to live together in harmony and to understand and pardon each other.

Let's be frank – the normal thing is for the family to be united. There may be friction and differences, but

that's quite normal In a certain sense it even adds flavour to our daily life. These problems are insignificant, time always takes care of them. What remains firm is love, a true and sincere love which comes from being generous and which brings with it a concern for one another, and which enables the members of the family to sense each other's difficulties and offer tactful solutions. Because this is the normal thing, the vast majority of people understand me perfectly when they hear me say (I have been repeating it since the 1920s) that the fourth commandment of the Decalogue is a 'most sweet precept'.

The problem is an old one although perhaps it arises now more frequently or more acutely because of the rapid evolution that characterises modern society. It is perfectly understandable and natural that young and older people should see things differently. This

has always been the case. The surprising thing would be if a teenager were to think just as an adult does. We all felt a tendency to rebel against our elders when we began to form our own judgement autonomously. But we have come to understand, with the passing of the years, that our parents were right in many things in which they were guided by their experience and their love. That is why it is up to the parents to make the first move. They have already passed through this stage. It is up to them to be very understanding, to have flexibility and good humour, avoiding any possible conflicts simply by being affectionate and farsighted.

10. What should parents do when their children tell them they wish to dedicate their lives completely to God?

After giving their advice and suggestions, parents who sincerely love and seek the good of their children should step tactfully into the background so that nothing can stand in the way of the great gift of freedom that makes man capable of loving and serving God. They should remember that God himself has wanted to be loved and served with freedom and He always respects our personal decisions. Scripture tells us: 'When God created man, He made him subject to his own free choice' (Sir 15:14).

I think Catholic parents who do not understand this type of vocation have failed in their mission of forming a Christian family. They probably are not aware of the dignity that Christianity gives to their vocation to marriage. But my experience in Opus Dei is very positive. I often tell the members of the Work that they owe ninety per

cent of their vocation to their parents because they have known how to educate their children and have taught them to be generous. I can assure you that in the vast majority of cases, practically in all, the parents respect and love their children's decision. They immediately see the Work as an extension of their own family. It is one of my greatest joys and yet another proof that in order to be very divine you have to be very human as well.

11. We have talked about parents so far. What about the children's role in a family?

The children also have to play their part. Young people are always capable of getting enthusiastic about great undertakings, high ideals, and anything that is genuine. They must be helped to understand the simple, natural and often unappreciated beauty of their parents' lives.

Children should come to realise, little by little, the sacrifice their parents have made for them, the often heroic self-denial that has gone into raising the family. They should also learn not to over-dramatise, not to think themselves misunderstood nor to forget that they will always be in debt to their parents. And as they will never be able to repay what they owe, their response should be to treat their parents with veneration and grateful filial love.

12. How is faith shown in the family?

The virtues of faith and hope [are exercised by] facing serenely all the great and small problems which confront any family, and persevering in the love and enthusiasm with which they fulfil their duties.

In this way they practice the virtue of charity in all things. They learn to smile and forget about themselves in

order to pay attention to others. Husband and wife will listen to each other and to their children, showing them that they are really loved and understood. They will forget about the unimportant little frictions that selfishness could magnify out of proportion. They will do lovingly all the small acts of service that make up their daily life together.

13. How important is prayer for families?

I think it is precisely the best way to give children a truly Christian upbringing. Scripture tells us about those early Christian families which drew new strength and new life from the light of the Gospel. St Paul calls them 'the Church in the household' (1 Cor 16:19).

Experience shows in all Christian environments what good effects come from this natural and supernatural introduction to the life

of piety given in the warmth of the home. Children learn to place God first and foremost in their affections. They learn to see God as their Father and Mary as their Mother and they learn to pray following their parents' example. In this way one can easily see what a wonderful apostolate parents have and how it is their duty to live a fully Christian life of prayer, so they can communicate their love of God to their children, which is something more than just teaching them.

14. Should families pray together?

Customs vary from place to place, but I think that one should always encourage some acts of piety which the family can do together in a simple and natural fashion.

How can they go about this? They have excellent means in the few, short, daily religious practices that have always been lived in Christian

families and which I think are marvellous: grace at meals, morning and night prayers, the Holy Rosary (...).

This is the way to ensure that God is not regarded as a stranger whom we go to see in the church once a week on Sunday. He will be seen and treated as He really is, not only in church but also at home, because our Lord has told us, 'Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them' (Matt 18:20).

I still pray aloud the bedside prayers I learnt as a child from my mother's lips, and I say so with the pride and gratitude of a son. They bring me closer to God and make me feel the love with which I learned to take my first steps as a Christian. And as I offer to God the day that is beginning, or thank Him for the day that is drawing to a close, I ask him

to increase, in heaven, the happiness of those whom I especially love and to unite us there forever.

The above quotations were selected mainly from the book *Conversations with Msgr. Escriva de Balaguer*, a collection of interviews with St Josemaria published between 1966 and 1968 in *Le Figaro*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *L'Osservatore della Domenica*, *Telva*, *Gaceta Universitaria* and *Palabra*; and from “Marriage, a Christian Vocation” from the book *Christ is Passing By*.

For further reading on the subject, see:

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos 2232-2233.

- 10 questions about marriage.

- Letter to families from Pope John Paul II.

- Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*

- eBook: Pope Francis' Catechesis on the Family (Vol. I)

- eBook: Pope Francis' Catechesis on the Family (Vol. III)

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