

# Educating the Emotions

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From ancient times, some human feelings have been viewed as bad, especially those that could diminish or even annul human freedom. Mastery of one's emotions was a

principal concern of the Roman and Greek stoics and of many ancient religions and eastern schools of thought. These schools taught that to reach the truth about man (to be truly oneself, "to be who you are"), the best path was to control or repress one's feelings. Certainly many great wisdom traditions stress the importance of taking precautions against immoderate desires and feelings that could override our freedom. It seems as if people already in remote times knew from experience that the human heart harbors deep inside opposing forces that often clash violently among themselves.

All these traditions make reference to the agitation of the passions. They long for the peace of prudent conduct guided by reason imposed on one's desires. And they hold out the hope of attaining inner freedom, a freedom that is not a point of

departure but a conquest that each person has to achieve. Each needs to acquire self-mastery, taking reason as one's rule. This is the path that began to be called virtue, with joy and happiness promised as the reward for a life lived in conformity with it.

### *Conversion of the heart*

In Christian moral teaching, the disorder in the world of our feelings is seen as stemming from original sin. The human heart is certainly capable of nobility, of the highest degrees of heroism and sanctity. But it can also fall prey to great baseness and dehumanized instincts.

The New Testament shows our Lord asking forcefully for interior conversion of our heart and desires. *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already*

*committed adultery with her in his heart.*[1]

Jesus insists that it is not enough to refrain from doing evil, or simply adhere to external rules of conduct; a radical change of heart is needed.

*For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.*[2]

Christ's teaching is a constant call to interior conversion. *The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*[3] He insists upon the radical need for inner cleanliness of heart: *You are those who justify yourselves before men; but God knows your hearts.*[4] Immoral acts arise

from disordered desires nurtured in the heart. Hence the great importance of educating the emotions correctly.

Christian morality does not regard human feelings with distrust. On the contrary, it gives importance to fostering and guiding them, since they have a great bearing on living a happy life. Orienting and guiding the emotions requires a work of purification, because sin has introduced disorder into the human heart, which needs to be set right. Saint Josemaria wrote: "I don't ask you to take away my feelings, Lord, because I can use them to serve you: but I ask you to put them through the crucible."[5]

Educating the emotions requires building on the foundation of human dignity, respecting everything our human nature demands. This is the path for integrating our feelings in

the best way possible, for attaining the best emotional make-up. In the measure that we achieve it, happiness and sanctity will be more accessible to us.

### *Feelings and virtue*

Each emotion fosters certain actions and hinders others. Therefore our emotions foster or hinder a psychologically and spiritually healthy life, and they also foster or hinder the practice of the virtues or values we are striving to attain. We shouldn't forget that envy, selfishness, pride and laziness are certainly lacks of virtue; but they are also a lack of the correct education of the emotions that favor or hinder virtue. Thus we could say that the practice of the virtues fosters the education of the heart, and vice-versa.

People can often forget that feelings are a powerful human reality which,

for good or for evil, foster or hinder our actions. This can lead to neglect in educating them, perhaps due to a confused impression that feelings are dark and mysterious, closer to the body than to reason, almost outside our control. Sometimes the problem is confusing feelings with sentimentality, or being put off by the fact that educating the feelings is an arduous task that requires good judgment and constancy, which perhaps is why it is easy to overlook it almost without realizing it.

Feelings contribute greatly to the rich texture of our lives, and thus play a decisive role in achieving a happy and fully human life. "You need a heart in love, not an easy life, to achieve happiness."[6] And this requires guiding the heart, not always an easy task. All of us have the possibility of channeling our feelings to a large extent. We should not fall into the fatalistic attitude of

thinking that it is almost impossible to improve or to be formed. Nor should we think that people are necessarily formed in one way or another: generous or envious, sad or cheerful, affectionate or cold, optimistic or pessimistic, as if this were a pre-determined fate, impossible to change.

It is true that our emotional make-up has a temperamental component that is almost innate, with an influence it is difficult to determine precisely. But there is also the powerful influence of the family, of the school, of the culture in which we live, and of faith. And above all, there is our personal effort to improve our character, to strengthen it, with God's grace.

*Good example, making demands, good communication*

In guiding the emotions, example plays an important role. Parents can pass on to their children a capacity to

sympathize with other people's suffering, to understand others, to provide help to those in need. These are emotional responses that we all learn spontaneously and that register in our vital memory, with our barely realizing it, by observing those around us.

However, it is not only a matter of good example. Some selfish and insensitive children have parents who are big-hearted. Giving example is important, but parents also need to teach children to recognize the needs of others, and to realize the attractiveness of a generous life. They also need to foster a readiness to make demands on oneself, because if children fail to be self-demanding, laziness and selfishness will quickly drown out any process of emotional maturation. Authority and discipline are decisive in good formation.

Along with all this, an open atmosphere of good communication is essential. The family environment should foster the intimacy needed for each person to confidently express their emotions, which can then be shared and guided. Children should not feel ashamed to express their own feelings, but rather should be encouraged to express loyally and affectionately what has disturbed or pleased them.

### *The strength of formation*

Between feeling and acting there is an important step. For example, one can feel fear, and yet act courageously. One can experience hatred and yet forgive. In the "space" between feelings and action lies our freedom. Between a feeling and its acceptance, and between acceptance and acting, lies each person's decision. The maturity of a decision is found, on the one hand, in the

moment it is made, insofar as it is informed by the virtue of prudence, and on the other, in the previous process of formation and self-determination, where the virtue of fortitude plays a prominent role. Hence in the course of each one's life, a personal "way of feeling" is formed, and consequently of acting. If a fearful person has become used to giving in to the fear produced by specific stimuli, the habit will be formed of responding to those situations by fleeing in fright, which will become part of that person's emotional make-up. In contrast, if that person manages to overcome the fear, even if it continues to be felt, he or she will behave valiantly, that is, virtuously.

In the end, we cannot change our genetic inheritance, nor the formation we have received, but we can have a great trust in each person's possibility to change and

improve through formation, personal effort and the grace of God.

### *Feelings and moral education*

Education should pay particular attention to moral growth, and shouldn't focus only on intellectual development, strength of will or emotional stability. A sound education of the emotions needs to foster, among other thing, enjoying doing what is good and feeling bad when doing evil. We need to help young people want what is truly worth wanting.

Inside we harbor feelings that incline us to act well, along with others that menace our moral life: *I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want.*<sup>[7]</sup> We have to channel our feelings so that they lead us to feel good about what contributes to a happy and harmonious life, and to feel bad about the opposite.

The first Christians viewed human feelings quite positively. St Paul advised the Philippians: *Have the same sentiments that Christ had.*[8] The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks about the importance of involving our emotions in the struggle for holiness: "Moral perfection consists in man's being moved to the good not by his will alone, but also by his sensitive appetite, as in the words of the psalm: 'My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God'."[9]

Certainly, doing what is good might not at times seem all that attractive. Precisely for that reason our feelings are not always an infallible or sure moral guide. But we should not disdain their strength and influence. Rather we need to guide them in such a way that they facilitate doing what is good and attaining happiness. For example, if someone feels displeasure on lying and

satisfaction on being sincere, this in itself is very beneficial. If one is bothered or saddened at being disloyal, or selfish, or lazy, or unjust, these feelings will help prevent missteps better than any other argument.

With a sound guidance of the emotions, it will be easier to live a virtuous life and achieve holiness. In any case, no matter how good a person's upbringing may be, doing good will often require overcoming oneself, at times with great effort. But acting in accord with the good always leads to personal enrichment. In contrast, choosing evil means deceiving oneself and, in the end, leads to a complicated and unhappy life. We are called to be happy both here on earth and afterwards in Heaven. "I am every day more convinced that happiness in Heaven is for those who know how to be happy on earth."[10]

## *Interior freedom*

Sometimes we may tend to identify obligation with coercion, and perceive the idea of duty as a loss of freedom, which would restrict our emotional development. Acting in accord with duty perfects us. If we accept our duty as a friendly voice, we will end up embracing it joyfully and cordially. And we will discover little by little that the great achievement in educating the emotions is to help people's desires accord, as far as possible, with their duty, striving to carry out the good and attain a happy and fulfilled life. And we thereby attain a much greater degree of freedom as well, since happiness does not lie in doing what we want, in the sense of letting ourselves be led by our desires and setting aside our commitments, but in wanting what we ought to do.

Educating the emotions ties them to upright moral action. We need to fulfill our duty, not because we are obliged to, or forced, or coerced, but because we perceive it as leading us to a full and happy life, to the conquest of true freedom.

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[1] *Mt 5:27-28*

[2] *Mk 7:21-23*

[3] *Lk 6:45.*

[4] *Lk 16:15.*

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Forge*, 750.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, 795.

[7] *Rom 7:19,*

[8] *Phil 2:5.*

[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,  
1770.

[10] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 1005.

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