

Guiding the Heart

"Guiding children's emotions means helping bring it about that what they like coincides with their true good." A new article in the series on the family.

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Parents have the right and duty to guide their children's upbringing, as the natural consequence of having brought them into the world. One can even say that the child, as a person, is the primary purpose of the love between the spouses in God.

Bringing children up well can thus be seen as an extension of the love that gave life to them. The parents seek to give their children the resources needed to be happy, and help them find their right place in life both humanly and supernaturally.

Christian parents see in each child a proof of God's confidence in them. Bringing their children up well is for parents "the best business in the world," as St. Josemaria often said. This effort begins at conception and takes its first steps in guiding the child's emotions and feelings. If the parents truly love each another and see the child as the fruit of their self-giving, they will bring that person up in love and for love. In other words, it falls primarily to parents to guide their children's emotional life, so that their emotions develop normally, as calm and serene children.

Emotional life develops primarily in childhood. Afterwards, during adolescence, emotional crises can occur, and parents have to help their children to deal with them effectively. If they have been brought up as calm and stable persons from childhood, their children will more readily overcome any difficult moments. Moreover, emotional stability favors the growth of good habits in the intellect and will. Without emotional harmony, it is harder to grow spiritually.

Naturally, an indispensable condition for building a good emotional foundation in each child is that the parents themselves seek to improve their own emotional stability. How can they do this? By improving family harmony, by looking after their union with one another, by prudently showing their affection for each other in their children's presence. However, at times we

might be inclined to think that emotions and feelings lie outside the scope of the family's educational task, since these can often seem to be responses that "just happen," that escape our control and cannot be changed. The emotions can even come to be seen in a negative light, since sin has disordered our passions, and these disordered feelings can make it more difficult to act in accord with right reason.

At the root of personality

This passive or even negative view of the emotions, present in many religions and moral traditions, contrasts strongly with God's words addressed to the prophet Ezekiel: *I will give them a heart of flesh, that they may keep my ordinances and obey them* . [1] Having a heart of flesh, one capable of loving, is viewed as something we need in order to follow God's will. Unruly

passions are not the result of having “too much” heart, but rather of a “bad” heart that needs healing. Christ himself told us: *The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of the evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks* . [2] From the heart come the things that defile a man, [3] but likewise the things that make him good.

We need strong emotions, since they are a powerful spur for our actions. We all tend towards what we truly like. Guiding children’s emotions means helping bring it about that what they like coincides with their true good. Acting passionately in a noble way is a human good. What is more natural than the love of a mother for her child? How often this deep affection leads her to make sacrifices cheerfully! And faced with something that a person finds

unpleasant or repugnant, how easy it is to avoid it! In a given moment, perceiving the “ugliness” of an evil deed can be a stronger motive not to do it than a multitude of reasonable arguments.

Obviously this is not meant to confuse morality with our sentiments. It is not a matter of reducing the moral life and our relationship with God to feelings. As always, our model is Christ. In Him, perfect Man, we see how emotions and passions can be a help to acting uprightly. Jesus is deeply moved in the face of death, and he works miracles. In Gethsemane we see the intensity of his feelings when praying. We even see in him the passion of anger, a good anger, when he restores the Temple to its dignity. [4] When we truly love something, it's only natural that our feelings are enkindled. Doing something only to get it done, without putting our heart

into it, is quite unpleasant. Feelings give ardor to reason, and make what is good pleasant; while reason provides light, harmony and unity to feelings.

Facilitating purification of the heart

In our human make-up, the emotions are meant to facilitate a voluntary action rather than blur it or make it difficult. “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’ (*Ps 84:2*).”

[5] Hence it is not a matter of trying to stifle or “control” the emotions, as though they were something bad and needed to be rejected. Even though original sin has introduced disorder into them, they haven’t been ruined, or become totally corrupt and irredeemable. The feelings in the

human heart can be guided in a positive direction to seek what is truly good: love for God and others. Hence all those involved in educating children, and first of all the parents, should aim at helping them, as far as possible, to enjoy doing what is good.

Guiding affectivity first and foremost requires helping children to come to know themselves, so their feelings are proportionate to the reality that has given rise to them. This can involve helping them to overcome, to “transcend” a specific feeling until the cause that has provoked it is seen in its true light. The result of this reflection will sometimes be an attempt to modify the cause in a positive way. On other occasions, for instance the death of a loved one or a serious illness, the reality cannot be altered. That will be the moment to teach children to accept events as coming from God’s hand, who loves us as a Father. Other times, for

instance, after a reaction of anger, a moment of fear, or dislike for a person or event, the father or mother can speak with the children, helping them to understand, to the extent possible, the reason behind that reaction in such a way that they manage to overcome it. Then children come to know themselves better and are better prepared to place order in the world of their feelings.

Those educating children can also help young people to recognize, both in themselves and in others, a specific feeling or emotion. Stories in literature or movies can be used to teach children to make more measured emotional responses. A story draws in the person who sees, reads or listens to it, stirring their feelings in a specific direction and accustoming them to look at reality in a certain way. Depending on age (the influence can be greater the

younger the child is), an adventure story, or one of suspense, or a romantic tale, can help reinforce appropriate reactions in the face of situations that objectively deserve them, such as indignation in the face of injustice, compassion for the disabled, admiration for sacrifice, love for what is beautiful. This will also foster the desire for these sentiments, since they are seen as the source of perfection and nobility.

Well channeled, the appreciation of good stories progressively educates the aesthetic faculty and the capacity to select stories of good quality. This reinforces a proper critical sense and is an effective aid to prevent a lowering of human tone, which can descend into vulgarity and a neglect of modesty. Especially in the so-called “first world” countries, an attitude of “spontaneity” and “naturalness” has become widespread, which frequently leads

to a lack of decorum. Whoever becomes accustomed to this kind of atmosphere, whatever their age, ends up lowering their own sensitivity and animalizing (or trivializing) their emotional reactions. Parents need to instill in their children a rejection of vulgarity, even when it is not a matter of directly sensual topics.

On the other hand, it is helpful to point out that the proper guiding of human affectivity is not identical with the guiding of sexuality. The latter is only a part of the emotional realm. When an atmosphere of trust has been achieved in the family, it will certainly be easier for the parents to speak with the children about the greatness and meaning of human love, giving them, little by little, from an early age, the resources to orient themselves adequately in this aspect of life,

above all by guiding their emotions and fostering virtues.

A heart to the measure of Christ's

Ultimately, guiding the emotions tries to foster in children a big heart, capable of truly loving God and people. The young need a heart capable of “sharing the concerns of those around them, able to forgive and understand, ready to sacrifice themselves, with Jesus Christ, for all souls.” [6] A family atmosphere that is calm but also demanding will help give, almost by osmosis, confidence and stability to the complex world of human feelings. If children see that they are loved unconditionally, if they come to realize that their good behavior makes their parents happy and that their mistakes don’t lead to a loss of trust in them, if they are helped to be sincere and to show their feelings, they will grow up with an habitual interior atmosphere of

order and calm. Positive feelings such as understanding, cheerfulness and trust will hold sway, while whatever robs them of peace, whether anger, temper tantrums or jealousies, will be seen as invitations to ask others for forgiveness, or to forgive them and show signs of affection.

Young people need hearts in love with what is truly of value, in love above all with God. [7] Nothing helps the emotions to mature better than to center one's heart in our Lord and in doing his will. To achieve this, as St. Josemaría taught, we need to “keep it locked with seven bolts, one for each capital sin.” [8] Every human heart has affections that should be given exclusively to God, and we suffer pangs of conscience if we direct them to anything else.

True purity of soul comes through shutting the door to all that implies

giving to creatures or to one's own ego what belongs to Christ alone. It comes through assuring that a person's capacity to love and to desire is well adjusted and integrated. Hence the image of the seven bolts implies more than the moderation of concupiscence or of the obsessive concern for material well-being. It reminds us that we have to fight against vanity, to control our imagination, to purify our memory, to moderate our appetite at mealtimes, to foster friendly dealings with those we find annoying. Although it might seem a paradox, when we put "shackles" on our heart, we increase our freedom to love with undiminished strength.

The Sacred Humanity of our Lord is the crucible in which we can best refine our heart and its affections. Children need to be taught from an early age to draw close to Jesus Christ and his Mother in the same heartfelt

way they show affection for their parents. This will help children, in keeping with their age, to discover the true greatness of their affections and allow our Lord to enter their souls. A heart that keeps itself entirely for God keeps itself whole and is able to give itself completely.

In this perspective the heart becomes a symbol with deep anthropological richness. It is the center of the person, the place where the most intimate and elevated human powers converge, and where each person draws the energy needed to act. It is a motor that has to be educated, cared for, moderated, refined, so that all its strength is aimed in the right direction. In order to educate it in this way, in order to love and to teach others how to love with that strength, “we need to root out of our individual lives everything which is an obstacle to Christ’s life in us: attachment to our own comfort, the

temptation to selfishness, the tendency to be the center of everything. Only by reproducing in ourselves Christ's life can we transmit it to others.” [9] When there is correspondence to grace and personal struggle, the soul becomes divinized and, little by little, the heart becomes magnanimous, capable of dedicating its best efforts to noble and great ideals, to carrying out God's will.

At times fallen human nature will try to reclaim its lost rights, but emotional maturity, a maturity that in part is independent of age, leads a person to look beyond emotions to discover what has unleashed them and how to react to that reality. We can always count on the shelter offered by our Lord and his Blessed Mother. “Get accustomed to entrusting your poor heart to the Sweet and Immaculate Heart of Mary, so that she may purify it from

so much dross, and lead it to the Most Merciful Heart of Jesus.” [10]

J.M. Martin, J. Verdia

Footnotes:

[1] *Ez* 11:19-20

[2] *Lk* 6:45.

[3] Cf. *Mk* 7:20-23.

[4] Cf. *Mk* 5:40-43; 14:32 ff; 11:15-17.

[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* , no. 1770.

[6] *Christ is Passing By* , no 158.

[7] Cf. *Furrow* , no. 795.

[8] St. Josemaria, get-together in Valencia, 7 January 1975; in Pedro Rodriguez, *Critical-Historical Edition of the Way* , Scepter London, p. 372; cf. *The Way* , no. 188.

[9] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 158.

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