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Something Great That Is Love (IV): More mothers and fathers than ever

"The mission of parents is not limited to welcoming the children God gives them. It lasts their whole life, and has as its goal heaven." A new article in the series of vocation.

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The mother of James and John is eager to speak with Jesus. She kneels before Him trustingly and says she

wants to ask Him for something. Jesus replies: “What do you want?” She goes right to the point: *Command that these two sons of mine may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom (Mt 20:21)*. Jesus may have smiled at the boldness of this mother’s request. But soon He will grant her sons much more than she could ever have dreamt of. He will give them an abode in his heart and a universal and eternal mission.

The Church, which then was just beginning, is today experiencing a new apostolic impulse. Through the recent Roman Pontiffs, our Lord is calling her to an “ever renewed evangelization”[1]—one of the dominant notes in the passage from the second to the third millennium. And the family plays a key role in this adventure. Mothers, fathers, grandparents are the protagonists: they are on the front line of

evangelization. For the family “is the first place where the Love of God is made present in our lives, beyond anything we can do or fail to do.”[2] In the family we learn how to pray, with words we will continue to use our entire life; in the family the way we look at the world and other people takes shape.[3] The home is called to be the right environment, the good soil where God can plant his seed, so that it may bear fruit and yield *in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty* (Mt 13:23).

Parents of saints

Saint Josemaria was still a young priest when our Lord showed him the immense panorama of holiness that Opus Dei was called to sow in the world. He realized he could not put off this mission and asked his spiritual director to let him undertake more prayer and penance.

To justify these requests, he wrote to him saying: “Look, God is asking me for this, and besides I need to be a saint and father, a teacher and guide of saints.”[4] We could apply these words, in some way, to any mother or father of a family, since sanctity is authentic only if it is shared and gives light to those nearby. Therefore, if we aspire to true sanctity, each of us is called to become be “a saint and father, a teacher and guide of saints.”

From very early on, Saint Josemaria spoke about a “vocation for marriage.”[5] He knew this expression would surprise many people, but he was convinced that marriage is a true path to sanctity, and that conjugal love is very close to God’s heart. Using a striking phrase he said: “I bless this love with my two hands, and if anyone asks me why I say *with my two hands*, I reply at once: Because I don’t have four!”[6]

The mission of parents is not limited to welcoming the children God gives them. It lasts their whole life, and has as its goal heaven. Although at times the affection of parents for their children can seem fragile and imperfect, the bond of fatherhood and motherhood is in fact so deeply rooted that it makes possible a self-giving without limits: any mother would gladly take the place of a suffering child of hers in a hospital bed.

Sacred Scripture is replete with mothers and fathers who feel privileged and proud of the children God has given them. Abraham and Sarah; the mother of Moses; Hannah, the mother of Samuel; the mother of the seven Maccabean brothers; the Canaanite woman who beseeches Jesus for her daughter; the widow at Nain; Elizabeth and Zachary; and, very especially, our Lady and Saint Joseph. These are intercessors we

can entrust our families to, so that they may be protagonists in a new generation of holy men and women.

We are well aware that motherhood and fatherhood are intimately tied to the Cross and suffering. Along with great joys and satisfactions, the process of the children growing up and maturing entails many difficulties, some smaller and others not so small: nights without sleep, the rebellions of adolescence, difficulties in finding work, finding the right person to share their life with, etc.

Especially painful is seeing how at times children make bad decisions or distant themselves from the Church. The parents have truly tried to raise them in the faith; they have endeavored to show them how attractive the Christian life is. And so they may ask themselves: what have we done wrong? It's not surprising

that this question may arise, although they shouldn't let themselves be tormented by it. It's true that parents bear the main responsibility for educating their children, but they aren't the only ones who influence them. The surrounding environment often presents children with other outlooks on life that seem more attractive and convincing, or that make the world of faith seem distant and unreal. And above all, children have their own freedom to decide which path they want to follow.

Sometimes it's simply the case that children need to distance themselves for a while, so as to rediscover with new appreciation what they have received from their parents. When this happens, parents need to be patient. Although their children have taken a mistaken path, they still need to truly accept them and make their love known to them, and avoid any

undue pressure, which could end up driving them even further way.

“Often there is nothing else to do but wait; pray and wait with patience, gentleness, magnanimity and mercy.”^[7] The example of the father in the parable of the prodigal son is very instructive in this regard (cf. *Lk* 15:11-32). Although he was well aware of the mistakes his son had made, he also realized he had to wait.

In any case, it isn't always easy for a mother or father to accept the freedom of their children when they start growing up, also because some decisions, although good in themselves, are different than what the parents would like. Parents can even begin to see themselves as simply spectators of the lives of their children, who up to now have needed them for almost everything. Nevertheless, even though it might seem paradoxical, this is when

children need their parents more than ever. The same people who taught them how to eat and walk can continue accompanying the growth of their freedom as they open up their own path in life. The parents are now called to be teachers and guides.

Teachers of saints

Parents are truly teachers, often without realizing it. Almost by osmosis, they pass on to their children so many things that will stay with them their whole lives. And they have to educate them especially in the most important art: learning how to love and be loved. Here one of the most difficult lessons is the true meaning of freedom.

To begin with, parents need to help them overcome some prejudices that today might seem beyond dispute, such as the view that freedom means “acting in accord with one’s caprices

and without restraint by any law.”[8] Nevertheless, the true challenge they have before them is to awaken in their children, with patience and perseverance, a liking for doing the good that strengthens bit by bit. Then children won’t see only the difficulties involved in doing what their parents tell them, but they will develop the capacity to “rejoice in the good.”[9] Along this path of growth, children will sometimes fail to appreciate all that their parents teach them. And it’s true that often the parents also need to learn how to educate their children better: a person isn’t born knowing how to be a father or mother. Nevertheless, despite possible mistakes in how they are raised, children over time will come to have a deeper appreciation for what they have been taught at home. As Saint Josemaria said with regard to some advice his mother once gave him:

“Many years later I came to see how wise those words were.”[10]

Children end up discovering, sooner or later, how much their parents have loved them, and how well they have taught them the keys to life. The epilogue to Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* expresses this eloquently: “There is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may sometime be the means of saving us.” Parents know that their mission is to sow and wait patiently for their

diligent efforts to bear fruit, although they may never see all of the good results.

Guides of saints

A guide is someone who leads and teaches others to follow or open up a path. To do so one needs to know the terrain very well and accompany those who travel it for the first time. Good guides and teachers shape both the head and the heart. Salome, the wife of Zebedee, accompanied her sons along Christ's path, and was present at the foot of the Cross. Only John joined her there, but James would end up being the first apostle to give his life for Jesus. She was also present at the tomb on Sunday morning, along with Mary Magdalene. And John followed her there soon afterwards.

Every guide sometimes needs to confront a complicated and challenging journey. In the journey

of life, one of these is the path of replying to God's call. Accompanying their children in discerning their vocation is an important part of the parents' own mission. It's easy to understand why they may confront this challenging step with fear. Saint Josemaria told a group of young people: "Fear? Some words of Saint John, from his first letter, in chapter 4, are engraved on my heart: *Qui autem timet, non est perfectus in caritate* (1 Jn 4:18). A person who is afraid doesn't know how to love. And all of you know how to love, so you have no fear. Fear of what? You know how to love; therefore you have no fear. Forward!"[11]

Certainly, the biggest concern of a mother or father is the happiness of their children. But often they may have formed an idea of what path that happiness should take.

Sometimes parents dream of a professional future that fails to

match their children's real talents. Or they may hope that their children will be good, but "without overdoing things." Perhaps they have forgotten the radical, and at times disconcerting, parts of the Gospel message. Therefore, and with even more reason if they have received a deeply Christian upbringing, it is inevitable that "each child will surprise us with ideas and projects born of that freedom, which challenge us to rethink our own ideas. This is a good thing. Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom."[12]

Parents know their children very well—usually, better than anyone. And since they want the best for them, it's only natural and right that they are concerned that their choices in life will make them happy, and that they consider their children's future with a view to their human prosperity, and seek to protect and

help them.[13] Therefore when their children begin to discern a possible call from God, parents are faced with the beautiful role of being a prudent guide. When Saint Josemaria spoke about his vocation to his father, the latter told his son: “Think it over a bit more.” But right away he added “I won’t place obstacles.”[14] Therefore, while trying to give realistic and sensible advice regarding their children’s spiritual decisions, parents need to learn to respect their freedom and detect the action of God’s grace in their hearts, so as not to become—whether wanting to do so or not—an obstacle to God’s plans.

Moreover, children often fail to realize what a strong “shock” their vocation can be for their parents. Saint Josemaria said that the only time he saw his father cry was when he told him he wanted to be a priest. [15] A lot of generosity is required from parents to accompany their

children on a path in life that is different from what they were hoping for. So it's not surprising that it is hard for them to renounce these plans. But God is not asking less of the parents than he is of their children: this suffering, which is very human, can also be, with God's grace, very divine.

These “shocks” can also be the moment to consider, as Saint Josemaria used to say, that children owe to their parents ninety percent of their call to love God with an undivided heart.^[16] God is well aware of the sacrifice it can require of parents to accept this decision with affection and freedom. He who gave his own Son to save us understands this better than anyone.

When parents generously accept the call of their children by God, without holding on to them for themselves, they draw down abundant blessings

from heaven for many people. Down through the centuries this has often taken place. When Jesus called John and James to follow Him and leave everything, they were helping their father to mend the nets. Zebedee continued working on the nets, perhaps a bit upset, but he let them leave. It probably took him some time to realize that it was God himself who was entering his family. But in the end, how great would be his joy to see his sons happy in this new “fishing” enterprise, in the “sea without shores” of the apostolate.

More needed than ever

When a daughter or son makes an important decision for their life, the parents are more needed than ever. A mother or father can often discern, even from afar, traces of sadness in their children, as they can also sense authentic joy. Therefore they can

have an irreplaceable role in helping them to be happy and faithful.

To carry out this new role, perhaps the first thing they need to do is to recognize the gift they have received. By considering this in God's presence, they will come to realize that "it is no 'sacrifice' for parents when God asks them for their children. Neither, for those He calls, is it a sacrifice to follow Him. It is, on the contrary, an immense honour, a motive for a great and holy pride, a mark of predilection, a very special affection that God has shown."[17] They are the ones who have made possible this vocation, which is a continuation of the gift of life. Therefore Saint Josemaria used to tell parents: "I congratulate you, because Jesus has taken these pieces of your heart—totally—for Himself alone... for Himself alone!"[18]

The parents' prayer then takes on great importance in our Lord's eyes. How many examples of this marvelous intercession we can find in the Bible and in history. Saint Monica's trusting and insistent prayer for the conversion of her son Augustine is perhaps the best known; but in reality there are countless examples. Behind every vocation "there is always the strong and intense prayer of someone: a grandmother, a grandfather, a mother, a father, a community ... Vocations are born in prayer and from prayer; and only through prayer can they persevere and bear fruit."[19] Once the path of a vocation has been undertaken, following it to the end depends in good measure on the prayer of those who love that person most.

And along with prayer, parents need to stay close to their child. Seeing their parents take an interest in their

new mission in life helps greatly to strengthen the children's fidelity.

Often parents have a great desire, without saying so expressly, to help out and share in the happiness of their daughter or son on this path of self-giving. They need to experience the fruitfulness of their lives.

Sometimes it will be the children who ask them in a winning way for advice, help, or prayer. How many stories of fathers and mothers who discover their calling to sanctity through the vocation of their children!

The fruit of James' and John's self-giving is immeasurable. But we can be sure that these two columns of the Church owe to their mother and father the biggest part of their vocation. James brought the Love of God to the very ends of the known world, and John proclaimed it with words that are among the most beautiful pages ever written about

this Love. All of us who have received the faith thanks to their self-giving should feel a deep gratitude towards this married couple from the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The names of Zebedee and Salome will be repeated, with those of the apostles, until the end of time.

“Take this, all of you, and eat of it, for this is my Body, which will be given up for you.”[20] Mothers and father who truly love God, and who have seen how a child of theirs has given himself or herself to Him completely, enjoy a very special understanding of our Lord’s words in the consecration at Mass. In some way they experience them in their own lives. They have given their child so that others may have nourishment and life. Thus their children somehow “multiply” their own motherhood and fatherhood. By giving this new “yes,” they unite themselves to the work of the Redemption, which

culminates in Christ's "yes" in the Passion, and which began, in a humble home, in the "yes" of Mary.

Diego Zalbidea

[1] Saint Paul VI, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii nunitandi* (8 December 1975), no. 82. Cf. also Saint John Paul II, Apost. Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 January 2001), no. 40; Benedict XVI, Homily at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, 7 October 2012; Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 27.

[2] Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, June 4, 2017.

[3] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1655-1666.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Personal notes*, no. 1752.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 27.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 184.

[7] Francis, General Audience, 4 February 2015.

[8] Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 5.

[9] *Reaching the Entire Person, Role of the Emotions (I)*. Available at opusdei.org.

[10] Saint Josemaria, notes from a family gathering, 17 February 1958.

[11] Saint Josemaria, notes from a get-together with young people, November 1972.

[12] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Amoris Laetitia*, 19 March 2016, no. 262. Saint Josemaria spoke about this

concern in a humorous way: “No sooner is the child born but Mom is already planning to have him married to a particular girl, and they’ll do this or that. Dad thinks about the boy’s career or about getting him involved in the business. Each one composes a novel, a wonderful romantic novel. Afterwards, the boy grows up bright, turns out well, because his parents are good, and then says to them: That novel of yours is not to my liking. And we have a fine pair of tantrums” (Notes from a get-together with families, 4 November 1972).

[13] The idiomatic expression used by Saint Josemaria here is “de tejas abajo”—“in light of this world’s concerns.” Cf. Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Rialp, Madrid 2000, p. 99.

[14] Ana Sastre, *Tiempo de caminar*, Rialp, Madrid, 1989, p. 52.

[15] Cf. Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 73.

[16] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 104.

[17] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 18.

[18] Words of Saint Josemaria when meeting with some families, 22 October 1960.

[19] Francis, *Regina Caeli*, 21 April 2013.

[20] *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer.

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