

A Third Letter to Parents

BY ROBERT NASH, S.J.

Dear Fathers and Mothers,

Not so long ago an old man said to a friend of mine: "I'm more than fifty years married, and my wife and I love each other as much today as we did the first day we commenced life together." He was proud of that and with good reason, and we want every married couple, as far as possible, to be placed in the same happy position. So, in this third Letter we propose to begin by setting forth a few hints about the bond of union which should link you, dear parents, with each other and with your children. And, as it is permitted, I think, to be somewhat more informal in a Letter than in an essay or a study, we may perhaps be pardoned if occasionally we branch off at a tangent. We promise that the tangent will be nothing more than a few words here and there to your own children, or to others closely related to your home and family. But by far the greater portion of the Letter will be directed to yourselves..

Husband and wife are bound to each other and to their children by a chain that cannot be broken, and with yourselves it rests whether the links in the chain are going to be of gold or of steel. A chain of steel is the symbol of slavery; a golden one is the mark of honour, the ornament befitting him or her who has achieved success.

If your chain is to be of gold, I would say that the first link should be suitability between the two persons contemplating marriage. Fair little Miss Twenty-Two is attracted by that wealthy widower with snow-white locks

Don't. The strong love upon which marriage is to be built needs a firmer foundation than mere possession of money. Young Man who has done a brilliant University course believes he is in love with the parlour-maid who left the National School at the age of fourteen, having attained, with quite tolerable success, to the difficult art of writing her name and reading "Standard Sixth." Young Man will be well advised to discipline his affections. You are interested deeply in poetry or history or art; she, through no fault of her own, cannot rise higher than pastry or hanging out clothes to dry. For goodness sake, leave her alone.

Here is a little social butterfly who likes to flit about and give herself airs and who spends with such an assumption of recklessness that you would conclude she must have the Bank of Ireland at her back. And you, who contemplate marrying her? Well, you are an honest son of the soil, retiring in your ways, modest in your tastes and more modest still, if that were possible in your salary. Be wise and give her a miss. (A friend of mine would surely interject here: "Leave her a Miss!" But I spare you).

For the first golden link then, there must be compatibility of temperament. Before marriage it is easy to romance and to dream and to be dazzled by mere physical charm, or the glitter of money, or the prospect of social advancement. But in the stern school of experience the bitter lesson is too often learned that these things are not enough. Too late does the couple discover that they have no common topic of conversation. Too late does vivacious Miss Twenty-Two find out that she is expected to nurse her ancient husband through his attacks of asthma or lumbago, as she used to do for her dear departed grand-father! The pair contemplating marriage should, ordinarily, be more or less of the same age, education, and social position. They should share an interest in the same or kindred subjects. Without this combination of tastes there is real danger that the gold may very soon become, first discoloured, and that ultimately the link may even snap. Many a married man and married woman will read these lines and bear witness to their truth.

But surely it ought to be quite easy to persuade people contemplating marriage to sidestep such an obvious danger? Easy? Quite easy? Once again, dear fathers and mothers, I appeal to you to support me. It is one of the most difficult feats a man ever undertook. Before marriage the girl is certain she will reform the drink addict. Before marriage the literary man is persuaded that the girl's pretty face will be compensation abundant for her shallow mind. Before marriage he has learned that she is incapable of telling the truth and he has always held lying in abhorrence. She has indisputable evidence that his money was made by questionable methods and, whatever other faults she had, she always loved honesty. But can you get the couple, in these and similar cases, to look before they leap? Sentiment and imagination and infatuation, the

very natural and lawful desire to be settled in life, the consciousness that the years are creeping on, the memory of that smarting wound caused by a former chance that was lost,—all these rise up to sweep you into an unsuitable marriage, regardless of the consequences.

You may think I am forgetting, dear fathers and mothers, that this Letter is for you who have already taken the decisive step. Not so. From my heart I hope that the first link you are forging in the chain is of gold without alloy. But if it is not? If, for any of the reasons touched upon, or for any others, you and your wife grate upon each other? Can things be still put right? Often, quite often, they can be, but only at a price. Now that you are husband and wife “for better or for worse” you may depend upon God’s grace to enable you to make the sacrifices demanded by your vocation. Just as the priest and the brother and the nun may expect with all confidence that strengthening grace to keep their sacred obligations, so may a married pair depend upon God to grant them the union of hearts so necessary if the chain is to be wrought of gold.

But the price? For God will not force them to live in harmony. Hence, I would say that in every family there must be, between the members, a spirit of give and take. If you, dear wife and mother, have a nagging tongue,—apologies for the preposterous supposition!—there is not going to be much peace in the home till you set your face like flint against this tantalising habit. If you are short-tempered and sour, dear husband and father, you will have to lay yourself out to keep your wrath under your heel and smile. Dear husband, do not see all her mistakes and do not be continually hauling her “over the coals.” Dear wife, feign a little deafness now and then and do not hear when the storm is blowing. “A mild answer breaketh wrath, and, he that restraineth his lips is most wise.” A blind eye and a deaf ear may be a source of inconvenience in certain circumstances but they are an invaluable and indeed indispensable help to him or her who has to live in a family.

This is true of even a Religious family, of a community of men or women whose whole lives are consecrated irrevocably to the service of God and whose ideals and ways of life are therefore all cast in the same mould. Even here there is needed much of the give and take spirit. Allowances have to be made for individual character and talent and health and opportunity and spirit of initiative. Difficulties have to be tided over, differences have to be sunk unobtrusively. Let an ordinary rank-and-file member of a Religious family try to drive others into his way of acting, let him show habitual intolerance for the ways and the views of others, and I’m giving away no secrets, dear fathers and mothers, if I tell you that he is not going to contribute much to the spirit of harmony and union.

Illustration is always a help and my illustration this time is founded on fact. They were not agreeing, this husband and wife, and when the priest called to try to restore peace he was treated by each in turn to a lengthy diatribe on the iniquities of the other. And how did all this trouble begin? It transpired that, some three weeks before, the wife was kneeling at the fireplace one morning making violent but abortive efforts to get the fire going. Her amiable spouse paced up and down the kitchen floor, with the regularity of a policeman on his beat, “famished”—it was his own word,—waiting for his breakfast.

At last he exploded and proceeded to tell her she was all wrong and knew nothing about making a fire. If he were in her place the breakfast would be on the table long ago. Even now he would guarantee that he would have the kettle humming in ten minutes if his wife would let him set about it.

Whereupon the lady rose with becoming dignity, looked steadily at the clock which was pointing to ten minutes to eight, and proceeded to pace the floor upon her husband’s deserted beat. That good man had meantime got on his knees. There was much ceremony tearing up paper and breaking sticks and turf, seven matches were struck, as the lady subsequently averred, and quite three-quarters of a pint of paraffin, upon the unimpeachable testimony of the same eye-witness, were poured out as a libation. But fire? No, fire there was none and presently the mocking tones were heard of the old clock on the stairs proclaiming to the world that the eighth hour since midnight had arrived. Do you ask if the lady had any further remarks to make? Well she had, quite a number but perhaps you can supply them.

Now the point of the story is this: If that good woman had a spirit of give and take, if she had a blind eye and a deaf ear, all that storm could probably have been averted. When he began to fume and rage, if only she had said: “Well, to tell you the truth I was never much at making fires. And you, poor man, I know you are half starved, and to think of all the

hard work you have before you today, and here I am with no sign of breakfast for you!” Now what will be his rejoinder? I’m willing to take a chance that he might have thawed, even in the freezing temperature of a fireless kitchen on a November morning. He might well have replied: “Sure, it isn’t your fault at all, woman. That turf is soaking. I’ll run out and see if I can get a few dry bits of stick to give you a start . . .”

But could you make her say her piece? No, she would answer him back. And he? He too must let fly! “A mild answer breaketh wrath.” Hint number one, therefore, where you have disunion in the family is: keep a blind eye and a deaf ear.

Number two is: Be assiduous in cultivating those small signs of mutual affection and those small acts of thoughtfulness which, for all their smallness, are great and lasting in their results. The kiss when husband is going out in the morning to business and when he returns in the evening; the care on husband’s part to avoid throwing cigarette ashes on wife’s carpet or clean table cloth; the felt slippers placed by the fender for husband when he comes home tired; the bright smile of welcome she always gives him, and by which she is perhaps disguising some sorrow or loneliness; the restraint required in order to avoid discussing that unpleasant or dangerous topic in conversation; the birthday present remembered, though apparently forgotten beforehand, so as to give all the pleasanter surprise; these are a few of the thousand little ways and means of fostering that union and forging the first link of purest gold... Beware of letting them drop. If they have been dropped, pick them up again and do so right away.

We say nothing about the partner in marriage whose ways are openly a disruption of the spirit of union. To point out that if a husband is a habitual drunkard he must reform or have chaos in the home, or that if a wife’s interests are everywhere and anywhere except in her home and husband and Children,—this would be to stress the obvious. Of course, in these cases the spirit of self-sacrifice comes once more into its own. Such selfish parents must answer to a just God for fearful neglect of duty. This has been already stressed in another Letter.

Here we are concerned with a different type. You know the husband who in many respects an excellent man. He works hard and gives all he can towards the support of the family. He frequents the Sacraments regularly, and sees to it that his children do the same, and that they receive the best education his means can provide for them. But with all this and much more there is a serious want in the type of husband we have here in mind. It seems to him that hours off are given for the exclusive purpose of enjoying himself with friends outside the family circle. To the wife is assigned, in this man’s code, the task of keeping the home and rearing the children; his role is to supply her with the means to do so.

When he comes home in the evening he is always impatient to be off again. Tea is dispatched in ten minutes and then he is upstairs to groom himself. Tonight it is “the dogs.” Last night it was a smashing fine picture. Tomorrow is half-day and he and a few pals are planning to go and see that match. Where do his wife and children come in? All day she is at home; surely she has claim upon him for more than his salary? Does it ever occur to him to take her to a show? Or to go for a walk on Sunday afternoon with two or three of the kiddies and so give her a breathing-space? Does he think so poorly of his own wife and children that their company cannot satisfy him for even one night in the week? Now mark well, it is often husbands who are excellent in other ways who slip up here.

And you too, dear Catholic wives and mothers, can fail in somewhat similar ways. We have today that strange paradox of the unmotherly mother. She gads about,—to the houses of friends, to a cinema or dance or whist drive or bridge party,—anywhere, you would say, that will provide her with an excuse to escape from her own! The children grow up scarcely knowing their mother. They become accustomed to being flung to nurse or maid or to anybody accommodating enough to take them off mother’s hands and give her freedom!

When the children are old enough parents of this type will pack them off with a sigh of relief to a boarding-school. Oh yes, they will write to them while they are away and the letters these Catholic parents send to their Catholic children might just as well be the correspondence of a pagan mother or father. The letters abound in details about the latest film-star or dance. Lengthy accounts are rehearsed of the shallow gossip of the tea-cups. All this worldliness is stuffed into the child’s mind and fair promises are held out of the worldly treats in store during the holidays.

Doesn’t any thinking Catholic see in all this a lamentable lacuna? Does such a mother pay the slightest heed to the child’s account of the school retreat,—except perhaps to dismiss it with a patronising joke? Does such a father even make

a reference to the fact that his boy has been received in Our Lady's Sodality? Do these Catholic parents ever remind the child of prayer or ask him or her to pray for a special intention? Do they ever send the child a book or two of sound Catholic spirituality, or a volume unmistakably Catholic in tone? Not at all. But they will pamper the child with boxes of sweets and choice confectionery and, in pre-war days, with bags of fruit. Or you will hear the postman's groan as he dumps on the doorstep the weekly load of immoral or amoral "literature." No, do not say I'm too hard. I object and with sound reason. What makes one marvel and gives pause to think is the utter lack in such parents of anything distinctly Catholic is their relations with the child. Their Catholic faith is their greatest treasure but its influence on their attitude towards life is apparently nil. And this thoroughly dangerous mentality they are passing on to their children.

A friend of mine who had the patience and the kindness to read this Letter in manuscript tells me at the end of this section that I have wandered far from the proposed discussion of "hint number two." Mea culpa! In spite of that perhaps the remarks made in our last two or three paragraphs may be allowed to stand, for our contention is that the worldly attitude of such parents would never reach such a pass if true love had been fostered in the home by those signs of affection and thoughtfulness pleaded for earlier on. The unspiritual parent, the unmotherly mother, the father or mother who pamper their children,—these, we suggest, are the product of a household devoid of true love. The second link in the chain is wrought of steel. Home has been regarded almost as a prison from which to flee, or at any rate nothing more than a place where one drops in for food and sleep. Thoroughly impregnated themselves with the spirit and maxims of the world such parents do an injury to their children that may be irreparable.

Our next point can be dismissed in a single question, but so important is the question that it merits a paragraph all to itself. One would like to ask such parents,—whose children must at all costs compete with the children of Mrs. So-and-so, the wife of the city magnate,—is it true that while you have money to deck your youngsters out in every fashion and colour, while you can send them parcels stuffed with good things every week, that the unfortunate Superior of the College or Convent could tell a sad tale of long-standing bills unpaid?

This lack of interest in the child's spiritual welfare, this all-absorbing attention to and love for what is of the world, is undoubtedly a serious menace to that true union between the members of the family which these pages are discussing. If you are inclined to question this statement, dear fathers and mothers, may I remind you that the spirit of the world is cursed explicitly by Jesus Christ? Do you ever consider the world of twelve or fourteen years hence which is going to be the world in which your children will have to live, and serve God, and save their souls? What an aftermath this war is going to leave of irreligion and immorality! Are you preparing your children to be able to stand up to it? Fidelity to the ideals and principles of our holy Faith is none too easy at any time. Beyond all doubt your child will suffer ship-wreck in the midst of the waves of impiety that will inundate the world very soon, unless you take timely heed and give the child the grit and resolute will to conquer or die.

There is another unhappy arrangement obtaining in our times which militates seriously against the union between the members of the family. It has become common nowadays for the wife and mother to have "a job." This means that for the greater part of the day she is away from home and family,—the sphere where she belongs. I am well aware that many a Catholic mother regrets the hard necessity which makes this arrangement a necessity. But I am aware too that in many cases the "job" is another subterfuge to escape the boredom of one's own family circle. No. Mother's place and wife's place is the home; there she is to reign; men may build houses but only women can make a home. Let them stay at home and do so.

If union is to be maintained between you, dear parents, there is a certain class against whom you must protect yourselves. They are commonly known as your "in-laws,"—the relatives of your husband or wife. It is notorious that the "in-laws" can wreck your married happiness and drive a wedge between you and your partner. They can and they do. How? Well, you are scarcely a month married when dear mother-in-law appears on the horizon and proceeds to park herself with you, with charming naivete, for an indefinite period. When finally she moves off sister-in-law's turn comes, and when she decides to depart she thinks well to bear away with her your partner for a change. It looks as if the "in-laws" are taking over. Unless you are strong there is going to be trouble. They can be meddlesome and it is matter of history that they have

been known to sow the seeds of unhealthy and unwarranted suspicion in a hitherto guileless and unsuspecting partner.

There are “in-laws” who seem incapable of allowing you to manage your own affairs and who resent it if you do not act on their suggestions,—I had nearly said “orders.” There are “in-laws” who try to give you the impression that in marrying their sister or brother or son or daughter, you have entered upon an alliance with the entire family, whom you are expected to entertain and house without protest. There are “in-laws” too who are the direct opposite of all this,—who wish you well and show it, who are the soul of generosity and thoughtfulness, who would resent like a blow in the face any disparaging tale about you and who would be the first to contradict it. But with these we are not concerned. A wife is wise who, from the start, lets it be seen that now her husband has first claim. A husband is a good judge if he be not too ready to share confidences with his own family rather than with his wife. Both will combine in forging this first link in gold if they keep their secrets and the passing difficulties they meet with in life, within the circle of the home.

And you, dear dear “in-laws,”—although this Letter is not directed to you,—may I implore you to leave the married couple to manage their own affairs and to spare them and yourselves the quarrels your meddling interference is sure to cause? And may I say the same to all tale-bearers, busy-bodies, slanderers; to those who suspect only and speak as if they were certain; to those who weave the fabric of a detailed calumny out of the thinnest shreds of evidence? Your words may open a breach between man and wife which will never be bridged over. Your thoughtless yarn, like the huge stone flung into the lake, may send ripples of discord over a hitherto peaceful and blissfully happy surface. Beware!

The maid is a big responsibility for, as Catholics, you have to see to it that she is regularly at Mass and Holy Communion, that she says her prayers, and comes in at night at a reasonable hour. There are mistresses who seem to think they have no responsibility in these matters. The maid is just for their own convenience and provided she is efficient in her work they bother little if at all about her spiritual welfare. Often a little girl up from the country to a big city is allowed to wander at will till all hours at night. What is going to be the inevitable consequence, and how are you to answer for your serious neglect of duty? I am not for a single moment insinuating that the maids are all angels in the flesh and that all Catholic mistresses have lulled their consciences to sleep. But this a letter to you, parents, and therefore my task is to put in very clear light before your eyes your obligations in this sphere.

Mothers often say it is impossible to procure a good maid. It would seem to be at least difficult in many cases. May I proffer one word of advice? Unless you are absolutely certain of the girl, do not on any account, entrust her with your children. Pick the girl who is to take your children out, with the same care you would employ in choosing a friend to whom you propose telling an important secret. The importance of the choice can scarcely be overstated. It is possible for the children you love to be utterly ruined by a maid. From her and her companions they have been known to hear for the first time filthy suggestive language. Through her evil influence they have picked up scraps of knowledge from the gutter; dangerous curiosity has been prematurely awakened, often with calamitous results that continue for whole years afterwards. Take the children out yourself, or let them play all the evening in the small back-garden, or even manage them inside somehow and endure the noise, anything, rather than hand them over to a girl whose character you have sound reason to suspect.

Looking back over these pages I find we have stressed the need of compatibility of temperament. We have pointed out that in a family there must be a willingness to give and take.

The importance of little acts of thoughtfulness and little external signs of affection has been urged. And finally, we have warned our fathers and mothers against those who would lessen or destroy the union between them,—the “in-laws,” or the meddling tale-bearer, or in some cases the maid. A word has been added about your duties towards this last.

These things are important if there is to be a bond of union between you, dear fathers and mothers, and if you are to foster that spirit of mutual respect and trust so necessary for those who live together. But our next link in the chain is the strongest of all. It is imperative that husband and wife should be knit soul to soul by a common religion. Let a Catholic marry a non-Catholic and immediately this becomes painfully evident. A Catholic’s most precious gift from God is his faith which he knows to be built upon the solid rock of impregnable truth and which he loves with a devotion amounting often to passion. But his partner knows nothing about all that he holds so dear. The non-Catholic shows an apathy about

religion and perhaps never himself goes near a church of any kind. At once you can see the division that must arise between them.

A mission comes to the town and Catholic goes and is filled with enthusiasm; non-Catholic cannot even feign an interest or even pretend to understand what there is to be so excited about. Sunday comes and Catholic rises for first Mass and Holy Communion; non-Catholic objects to noise in early morning and doesn't see why religion should be allowed to disturb his slumbers. As the little children come along, Catholic teaches them about the beauty and truth of the Catholic faith; non-Catholic is listless and his evident indifference cannot but weight the dice against Catholic truth in the mind of the child. Catholic is all eagerness on the child's First Communion Day, but to non-Catholic it means nothing more than would mean a party or show for the youngster. If the rosary is said at night non-Catholic is conspicuous by his absence. And all this in the child's most impressionable years!

But in a mixed marriage there are even more frightening possibilities of disunion. Outside the Catholic Church today there are very free and easy views about divorce and about crimes against the Creator's purpose in instituting marriage which are given high-sounding grandiose titles. What is to become of the family union and of peace in the home, if non-Catholic insists that there are to be no more children and, to ensure this, proceeds to take steps which, for the Catholic constitute grievous sin? What is going to happen if the non-Catholic marches Catholic off to a divorce court, and, on paying a nominal fine and for the flimsiest of reasons, is permitted to abandon his partner and marry again?

In such an atmosphere, it is not to be surprised at if the Catholic often capitulates and ends by giving up his or her faith. The ceaseless bickerings and jibes, the constant strain found necessary to keep up to one's religious practices, the feeling of isolation, and often too the pointed remarks of the non-Catholic "in-laws,"—all this has often robbed a Catholic partner of a pearl of great price. And what harrowing anxiety must tear such a soul at the hour of death! And how such a one at that supreme moment hungers for the consolations of the true faith! And often one is deprived of them,—not because the mercy of Christ is not ready to forgive, nor because a priest could not be found. But the non-Catholic "friends,"—possibly with good intentions, for we must try to be fair,—guard with lynx-eyed vigilance every approach to the house against the entrance of a priest.

Now I am gratefully mindful of the truth that there are non-Catholic partners who do not come under these censures. They respect the religion of the Catholic, and they observe with scrupulous care the promises they made before entering upon the marriage. But, according to a distinguished English Bishop, such mixed marriages are in the proportion of about one in twelve! And even where the non-Catholic has all the goodwill in the world, it must be clear from what we have said that the strongest link in the chain is sadly missing.

Small wonder then that holy Church, loving souls with a mother's love, legislates so severely about mixed marriages. If there is danger to the faith of the Catholic party she will not,—for clearly she cannot,—even entertain the possibility of a dispensation. Even if there be no such danger, she is slow, especially in Catholic countries where the choice of Catholic partners is obviously more easy, to grant a dispensation. Then she does it with evident reluctance. The marriage will be in secret. She withholds much of her ceremonial and does not even bless the marriage! She exacts in writing from the non-Catholic beforehand promises that he will never interfere with the Catholic's practice of his or her religion, and that the children will be baptised and educated in the Catholic faith. The Catholic party, on his side, must promise to do everything possible for the conversion of the non-Catholic.

Do not say she is unduly severe in all this. This is not undue severity but deep love of souls. Her commission from her divine Founder is to preach and preserve the faith He has deposited with her. And she sees in mixed marriages a most serious danger to this faith. There are times when a loving mother has to be stern precisely because she loves. Remember that successful mixed marriages are in the proportion of about one in twelve!

It is now a fair number of years since I had a conversation with a zealous nun in a country many thousands of miles from Ireland. She was recalling some of her experiences in the work of saving souls and very remarkable experiences they were. It was clear that the woman was on fire with a truly apostolic spirit and I feel confident that to her unstinted labours and prayers many a soul owes his eternal salvation.

Yet as a child she had grown up in a distant part of Australia, where the priest came round once only in two or three months to say Mass and administer the Sacraments. “And how did you develop a religious vocation, sister, in such surroundings? And where did you get your zeal for souls?” Then came a eulogy on her father and mother. There, in the midst of the “bush” they taught their children to know and love Jesus and Mary. The rosary was said every night. The one concern, first and before all else, of those excellent parents was that their children should grow up into sterling Catholic men and women. And this splendid nun with the heart of a Paul or Xavier is the result of their training,—without Church or Mass or Sacraments except at rare intervals.

The saintly Curé of Ars was once asked how he acquired his wonderful spirit of prayer and unbroken union with God.

“From my mother,” he answered. “One of my earliest memories is that nobody was ever allowed to wake us in the mornings except herself. She would lean over us to watch us open our eyes in order to make sure, through her own individual observation, that our first thoughts in the morning were directed to God in prayer. I owe her much for this.” Yes he did indeed, for he is a canonised saint today, and by her hand were sown in the fertile soil of his soul the seeds of his marvellous sanctity.

Two anecdotes, dear fathers and mothers, to emphasise further what has been said already in another place concerning the immense power for good you wield over your children. But at the moment our purpose is to utter a word of serious warning about a danger calculated to drain the lifeblood, drop by drop, out of this influence Catholic parents possess. This danger is the non-Catholic school.

Here again our holy Mother the Church lifts up her voice in words of weighty warning. She tells you that it is a mortal sin to expose your child’s faith to the serious risk of being lost by handing over the religious education of your child to non-Catholics. But even without going so far it is clear that a Catholic parent who, without very serious reasons, entrusts even the secular training of his child to non-Catholics cannot easily exonerate himself from guilt.

I have met excellent Catholic parents who defended their action by assuring me that their son or daughter suffered no loss to their Catholic spirit in a non-Catholic school, but that on the contrary the faith was strengthened and the child became a veritable apostle. And these Catholic parents were most sincere, and I knew that their children had grown up into first-class Catholic laymen and laywomen.

None the less the Church’s uncompromising attitude suffers not at all from such an argument. Your child has come through with the proverbial flying colours, but in how many cases have the colours been dragged in the mud? The Church cannot make special legislation for your excellent child; she is the mother of all the faithful and she must protect those who cannot defend themselves. A while ago an English Bishop told us of one mixed marriage in twelve which turned out well for the Catholic party. If statistics were taken of the numbers of Catholic boys and girls who attend non-Catholic schools without suffering detriment to their faith, I wonder would the proportion be even as large?

Nor is it to the point to tell me that in that particular non-Catholic school there is a Catholic teacher who looks after the religious training of your child. What about the environment in which your child moves for the remainder of the day? Catholic schools have the crucifix on the wall and the statue of the Blessed Mother. Catholic schools begin and end classes with a prayer. Catholic schools, very generally, circulate Catholic books and periodicals. Catholic schools are often conducted by priests or religious. Catholic schools quite frequently have an annual retreat for the children, and it is pleasing to note that this excellent custom is growing. Catholic schools keep the thought of the foreign missions before the minds of the youngsters. Occasionally a missionary priest or nun comes along and gives a “talk” about the work for souls in China or India or Africa. Catholic schools often have Mary’s Sodality to enkindle the highest spiritual ideals in the youthful mind and heart.

Of course all this is bound to tell on the impressionable mind of the growing child. He lives and moves and has his being in an atmosphere impregnated with the Catholic spirit. And yet, with all these and other helps, often his devoted teachers have to lament and mourn his defection in later life.

But if this is so, please consider what chance at all has the Catholic in a non-Catholic school. Here there is no crucifix or statue of Mary. Here there is no retreat, no Catholic literature, no visit from missionary, no May devotions, no Sodality,

no prayer before and after class. Religion is relegated to the slender half-hour with the Catholic teacher (for I am assuming that his presence is the Catholic parent's argument). Again I ask, what chance has that Catholic child? One in twelve, perhaps, may weather the storm. Your child may come through unscathed. But by sending your child you may easily be furnishing an excuse to your neighbour to do the same, and if the neighbour's child does not stand up to it, how far is your example to blame?

Would you dream of taking such a chance in the ordinary affairs of your everyday life? You read today in your newspaper that in a certain area a dangerous disease has broken out. A violent epidemic is raging and all are warned to avoid the district in order to escape infection. And this evening, let me suppose, you deliberately wheel your pram with your precious six-months-old-baby down into the very heart of that infested place, and for two or three hours you permit little three-year-old and his sister to romp around in it at will. Nonsense. You would not dream of doing anything of the sort. It is not to the point to say that for the rest of the day you and your children move in a healthy atmosphere. Any sane man or woman knows that even a brief spell in such a place is fraught with grave danger.

And then you tell me you see no point in the Church prohibiting you sending your Catholic child to a non-Catholic school! You argue that for a small half-hour in the day the child moves in a Catholic atmosphere! But what of the rest of the day? What of the non-Catholic mentality of the other children? What of the conversations with teachers who at best have no sympathy with the faith of your child and may well be even hostile to it? What about the history, taught with a non-Catholic "twist" in which facts, knowingly or unknowingly, are distorted with a view to showing up the Church and Churchmen in an unfavourable and vicious light?

There may not be direct attacks upon your child's precious treasure, but believe me, dear fathers and mothers, in most cases the infected atmosphere will do its work, slowly perhaps but none the less surely. Look at this glittering steel razor I hold in my hand. It has been ground and set and has come back to me from the barber with a sharp edge and a bright shine. Now just take that razor and lay it to one side, open in a damp place. Come back and look at it in a week's time and already you notice a slight change. The shine some how is not quite so bright and you suspect the edge has lost some of its sharpness. Just leave it there for two or three months and you observe further deterioration. A year or two passes by and dust and cobwebs have accumulated round your razor and small spots of rust are beginning to appear. Finally, your grand razor, if you leave it there long enough, will become coated with rust and fit for nothing but to be flung on the scrapheap.

Now notice carefully that you have done nothing positive to ruin that razor. You just left it in the tainted atmosphere. Nothing else was required to destroy it. Little by little the work went on till the result was utter destruction. Need we press the point of the comparison? Your child in that non-Catholic school hears today a sneer at the expense of a priest. Tomorrow he is asked a question by a companion about his faith which seems unanswerable. Next day he absorbs a few pages of distorted "history." Another day he is treated patronisingly and made to feel that Catholics, with their record of ignorance and superstition, should be grateful to be tolerated in the midst of enlightened Protestantism. And so on in a thousand ways, little ways if you like, the deadly work goes on. And always remember that these impressions are being made at a most dangerous age when the child's mind is in its most receptive mood. Do not tell me, dear Catholic parents, you are so blind as not to be able to see danger in all this.

The danger is all the more terrible for being often so hidden. Have you ever heard of the Australian white ant? This is a most mischievous little insect which lays its eggs in the furniture of the house. Let the white ant get into your lovely mahogany sideboard and the fate of that sideboard is sealed. The tiny creatures will very gradually eat away the inside portion of your piece of furniture. For a long time you notice no alteration for the external appearance remains unchanged. But one fine day your sideboard collapses! The white ant has left nothing but the shell!

Now that child of yours in that non-Catholic school may unknowingly absorb into his system a microbe that will show its disastrous affects only after years have gone by. For quite a time your boy or girl seems genuinely pious, or at least a tolerably fervent Catholic. But the environment of that school has sown the seed; the white ant has got in. Your child may be the lucky exception. But is it fair to your child and to yourselves to take the sporting chance in a matter of such vital importance? Above all is it fair to the Almighty Who has given you and yours this priceless treasure denied to so many

others? Dare you trifle with it in this haphazard fashion?

A very eminent ecclesiastic is fond of telling that when he was a child he walked six miles daily to and from school rather than attend the Protestant one which was quite close to his home. He had no choice in the matter for the question was not even discussed. No child in that excellent Catholic family ever thought of any other course. Were that Catholic father and mother too exacting or narrow? Are you being narrow-minded when you shield your child from a tainted atmosphere?

* * * * *

A medical man died a few years ago in X. Although he attained to a fair degree of success in his profession he was all his life dissatisfied with it. And why? Because he maintained firmly that his real vocation lay in the ranks of the priesthood. In his youth he received no word of direction or encouragement so after school he just drifted into University and medicine.

It is quite conceivable that a young man or girl might easily miss the particular path in life for which they are best suited. Indeed it is beyond question that this calamity does indeed take place. And we call it a calamity because, first of all, such a man or woman will always feel like a square peg in a round hole, but worse still they may fail very easily to be the influence for good in the world which they would have been had they discovered their true calling.

Just as that doctor,—as he was convinced,—missed his vocation through lack of direction, so, on the other hand, a boy or girl might be pushed into a walk of life for which they have little or no aptitude. Many a noble-hearted father and mother cherish the holy ambition to see their boy a priest at God's altar or their girl consecrated forever to His service in a religious house. All honour to them for that! But, dear fathers and mothers, one has to be exceedingly wary of giving that boy or girl of yours the impression that you are going to be broken-hearted and disappointed if they on their side manifest no desire for that life, or if they give up the idea after a year or two of experiment. One needs to be most careful to avoid using undue pressure. A boy or girl may be trying to hold on, even against the advice of a confessor, through fear of giving you pain.

By all means pray for vocations amongst children. By all means foster vocations, but let it be always clearly understood that you realise a religious vocation or a vocation to the priesthood is a free gift of God. To such Our Lord says: "you have not chosen Me but I have chosen you." Catholic parents will be wise always to make their children understand that there is no word of censure awaiting the boy or girl who comes back to "the world" after giving the vocation a fair trial.

One has known another policy pursued by excellent Catholic parents regarding the religious vocation of their child. In this case the boy or girl tries to keep on, not so much for fear of causing pain or disappointment to the parents, as for fear of drawing down upon themselves the wrath of a parent whom they have learned to dread but not to love. You impress beforehand on the boy or girl the sacrifices you are making in the interests of their vocation. You have always considered yourself strong-willed and you have exacted unquestioning obedience to your commands. So far so good, but again that dictatorial attitude towards your boy or girl can make them try, with the possibility of terrifying results, to keep on in a state of life for which they know in their hearts and souls they are quite unsuited.

Hence, dear fathers and mothers, one would think that while you should, of course, be ready to advise, you should always allow the boy or girl to see that there is no question that they themselves have the casting vote. This is the emphatic teaching of our late holy Father, Pius XI. While he would have us do all in our power to cultivate true vocations he insists too that the priesthood and religious life make demands on human nature which are not to be lightly undertaken.

There is thus a double danger to be avoided. There is the Catholic father or mother who discountenances the very notion that the child may be called by Christ and who will oppose by every means, directly and indirectly, any attempt on the child's part to follow that vocation. Such parents shoulder a most serious responsibility; their unreasonable opposition may be the occasion of the eternal loss of many a soul! Against this, there are the Catholic parents who force on the vocation, blandly arrogating to themselves the office of the Holy Ghost! Here, as often, virtue lies in the mean. Encourage, advise, discuss your child's chances between yourselves and with the child, but shun undue pressure like the

plague.

We have spoken only of a vocation to the priesthood or to the religious state because a mistake here is fraught with such very weighty consequences. If there is a doubt let your boy or girl discuss it candidly with a prudent Confessor and do you, dear fathers and mothers, accept his decision from God's hand. But what has been said about this particular walk of life applies in due measure to all other careers too. As far as possible let the child take on the career for which he has a natural bent.

I am well aware that for many young people, especially in these hard times, the task is to find anything at all to do. There is often no possibility of a choice but they must be ready to take the first thing that offers. A most regrettable necessity this, and it accounts for many misfits in life and consequent unhappiness and failure.

But where at all possible it is highly desirable that your boy or girl should at least make experiment of the kind of career for which they show a preference. If the background of their lives has been such as we have envisaged in our three Letters,—that is if you have cultivated a true Catholic atmosphere in your home, you may depend upon it that your child will not choose rashly. He will give the question of career careful thought. He will examine it from every angle. He will welcome your suggestions and the advice of others competent to give it. This he will do, if he has been trained by you on right lines. Another mighty argument to bring out the importance of early training and the immense responsibility of parents.

If in the early years you have neglected to use your God-given authority, if you have allowed your child to follow every whim, you may take it that now he or she will not listen to you when you proffer advice. The young modern of the type we have here in mind knows better than you, ageing couple, who do not understand youth of today! So the child follows impulse, the impulse of the moment, in the momentous choice of a career, because the child has all his life been allowed by you, dear fathers and mothers, to do exactly as he liked. Soon he tires of the proposed career and tries another which he throws up after another four or five months, or weeks, or days! And he or she ends up,—nowhere!

At the same time it is sometimes well to give a child the chance of experimenting with a career. If you have brought your boy or girl up properly, it might be most desirable that he should try to become a priest or doctor or salesman or auctioneer or soldier or sailor. It might be well worth the girl's while entering that convent even if she does not persevere there, or embarking on a solicitor's profession even if she turn back. It might. Why? Well you see if the child has an idea of that sort rooted in mind and never gets a chance of trying it out the result will very likely be dissatisfaction and a feeling of being useless and a failure all through subsequent years.

A very important proviso has to be inserted, though, when the boy or girl is thinking of a vocation to the priesthood or religious state. Such a vocation should be at least fairly sure before the attempt is made. There are certain definite signs of a vocation, and certain conditions to be verified in the proposed candidate. If these be wanting no man in his senses would advise your child to entertain the idea of accepting the weighty obligations of a divine vocation. In other walks of life the choice is not irrevocable, but the priest or religious binds himself to the service of God for life. Hence he must give clear proof beforehand, or at least reasonable probability, of having received this call from God.

Take again that doctor who thought he should have become a priest. If he had sought advice from a prudent Confessor, who would be qualified to judge of the probability of the existence of a true vocation, it might have happened him to enter a seminary or novitiate. In such a place, the purpose of which is precisely to test the truth and worth of vocations, he might have seen clearly in six months that he was quite unsuited to a life of this kind. Superiors will see that, while it is true that he is a genuinely pious lad, and with sufficient ability and physical health (which qualifications gave rise to the reasonable hope of his having a vocation), still there is a want which leads them to decide his place is in the world.

Result? Well, probably a temporary disappointment, but soon he realises, as a result of his having tried, that they are right. He now settles down with an easy mind to another career. Throughout the rest of his life he has the comforting assurance that he made the offer to his God, and that it was his firm purpose to have seen it through were it not for the light and grace received to see that that vocation was not for him. "Not all take this word but they to whom it is given." Just because he has tried he is satisfied for the rest of his life. It was because he had not made the attempt that our medical

friend carried with him to the grave such a feeling of dissatisfaction.

You will understand of course, dear fathers and mothers, that we do not want you to allow your child to follow every will-o'-the-wisp idea that enters his head. Our only contention is that often where a boy or girl is very keen on a certain career it is advisable to let them discover for themselves, by trying out their idea, that they are not suited for it. If you block them in these cases you may only succeed in souring them for life.

(Allow me, please dear parents, to fit in here, in parenthesis, a word to your sons and daughters. Many good Catholics set their hearts on a certain career and then they proceed to storm heaven to secure it. You want to be a doctor and your entrance exam to University is coming off in June. A wave of unwonted piety sweeps over your soul. Daily Mass and daily Holy Communion, a promise to go to Lough Derg if you succeed, wholesale appeal for prayers, an assiduity at study that makes your fellow-students blink with amazement—this becomes your programme.

Or the very very lawful desire enters your heart to be settled down in married life, and a young man or a young lady appears on the scene who seems to your fascinated gaze to combine in a proportion quite phenomenal the qualities that make for elegance and eligibility. Once again your battering-ram is produced to lay siege to the gates of heaven. You hear now for the first time of Saint So-and-So who, it would appear, has charge of the department in which you are interested, and from that moment the good man has no peace, or he would have none if your persistence could lessen the peace of heaven.

And, in spite of all you do not get that exam or Mr. Elegant or Miss Eligible looks the other way. What is wrong? This. You forgot the most important element of all in embarking on your career. Many people, St. Ignatius reminds us, first set their hearts on an object, and then beg God to give it to them, trying to sway God's Will to their own rather than accommodate their will to the divine Will.)

Hence, dear fathers and mothers, when your child's future is in question, do beg for light about it in prayer, and teach your child to do the same. God has planned a certain walk in life for your child, and you and your child will see it only in the clear light that sincere prayer will shed into your hearts.

It is therefore a perversion of right order to make up your mind first and then pray. The fundamental question about your child's career is: Does God intend it for the child? When you sit back and consider isn't it the height of insolence to leave God out, as many Catholics unthinkingly do? The right course is, to lay aside all ambition, all consideration of mere earthly advancement, all personal bias in either direction, and in this frame of mind to see, as far as you can, how the scheme proposed will affect God's glory, how it will help or hinder the advancement of your child's soul, and the souls of others.

Your little girl is obsessed with a longing to train as a nurse in England. The salary is tempting, the change alluring,—at least when contemplated from a distance. But she knows in her heart that she is going to be exposed to serious dangers to her soul. The question therefore becomes at once: Given my character, given my past record in preserving my virtue, given the opportunities I shall have over there of going to Mass and Sacraments, do I sincerely believe that I am not exposing my soul to undue temptation? And if she prays in this spirit and is convinced as a result that the risk is too great to her soul, she will abandon the idea despite the protests of well-meaning friends.

Pray, therefore, dear parents, by all means, and secure the prayers of others, that your boy may pass his exam or your girl be picked for that post, but insist sternly with yourself that your petition is conditional. Examine the proposal from God's point of view. You will see clearly, if you pray in this spirit, how wide of the mark our decisions often prove to be. The girl accepts suitor X and turns down suitor Y, because X can put wealth at her feet. But Y might possibly be a much finer character and he might teach her to put wealth under her feet which would probably prove an immense help to her soul. Does she ever look at it in this light? Does it ever occur to you, dear parents, to discuss the proposal with her from this angle? How much sense of the supernatural do we bring to bear upon our decisions? Do we first pray for what we have decided we want, instead of first begging for light to make a right decision? It is a common mistake and throws considerable light on the problem of "unanswered prayers." It is an easy mistake to make, for worldly ambition or clamouring daily needs impel us to beg urgently for what we want, rather than for what a loving God sees fit to give.

These scattered notes may help you, dear fathers and mothers, to foster that union and see your noble vocation with the eyes of Him Who gave it to you. It is obvious that the suggestions we have set forth are capable of more development than is possible in a small booklet. But our idea is, not to give you a finished article, but rather to provoke thought and discussion, and afford, it may be, some practical hints. This is our Third Letter to you, dear fathers and mothers. Many of you have spoken favourably about numbers one and two. If there are still any points you would like to see put forward, be good enough to tell us and we may succeed in inveigling the printer into accepting the manuscript of number four!

We ended Letter Two by urging you to have your home and family consecrated to the Sacred Heart and to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. If you have done so, well done! If not you are still in time. Once again praying for all our Catholic families the blessing of God and the special protection of Mary!

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