

THE CHILD FROM ONE TO HEAVEN

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The art of raising Christians requires a deft ability to coordinate and inspire the ordinary techniques of good child care with a single motive: the love and service of God. The secret of this art is simple but not easy: to raise Christian children, you must first be a Christian yourself.

To be Christian is to extend in time the life and work of Our Lord by loving God, living in grace and serving others. This has never been easy. In monasteries it has never been easy. In lay life it is less easy. It is even harder in a decaying and secular society like ours.

To be a Christian parent is harder yet. The family is a group organism. Its growth demands the continual subjugation of the individuals comprising it, lest the interplay of personalities make the home a battlefield. Thus it must often seem that those practices and preoccupations which for the individual prepare the way of perfection, the ascent to Mount Carmel—solitude, recollection, formal prayer—are submerged when one becomes a parent in the flood of trifling, mundane concerns which characterize the group life. Sometimes years of resentment must be borne before parents come to see that this perpetual self-sacrifice, far from smothering their souls, has softened their egotistic bent for personal spiritual success with those traits of abandon, suppleness in circumstances and dependence on the Will of God, which are the mark of truly Christian souls. Parenthood requires a constant preoccupation with the physical needs of one's family and therefore a stake in the things of this world. To organize efficiently the minutiae of daily life and yet keep alive the love of each member of the family for the others and of all for God is indeed a difficult task.

There are many ministries. Preachers en flesh the Word in tones that quicken us to faith. Philosophers enshrine the Word in crystal thought which error cannot cloud. Saints materialize the Word in heroic action. Priests substantiate the Word as none of us can by changing bread to Christ.

But parents can make the Word flesh in a unique and almost literal sense. From the moment they conceive a child until his last work of degrading or ennobling the world is done, the work of their hands and hearts can incarnate the Word as can no other ministry.

Therefore must parents live in grace, lest their ministry be blamed.

It is so easy for them to be wrong, to misconstrue the relation of religion to life. They can drift into thinking of religion as a decoration, a cultural flourish to be added to "The Australian way," or as a substitute for life, a drug to ennoble in rosy vagueness the harsh outlines of a wicked world.

Parents who mistake Christianity for a social grace bring up cynical and secular children who lead shallow, undisciplined lives cluttered with movies, TV, lollies and comics. The failure of these parents is not always recognized. They are reasonable people, a credit to the town, good friends and neighbors. It is not noticed that they are not Christians.

Parents who seek "comfort" in religion are more readily detected as maladjusted. Christianity afflicts these people like a disease. They are full of tracts and medals and esoteric devotions to unknown saints. They entertain the clergy often and at such times butter their conversation with private understandings with the Blessed Mother and churchly chitchat about Father Jamey getting Good Shepherd parish after all.

Such people seldom concern themselves with the merely natural aids to parenthood, like the P & F, or parents' magazines or the Montessori system. Teaching Tom to use simple tools or working out a schedule of chores and allowances for him is less important to them than seeing that Tom wears a scapular.

Such parents lack a sense of proportion. They are somewhat silly. But they are less reprehensible than the middle-class type. They do realize that there is a dog beneath the skin and that the natural order is not to be complacently accepted as it is.

How do parents who love God and live in grace and have got straight the connection between religion and life approach the task of raising Christians?

They begin with a study of sound child care. They know that the liturgical life is neither a substitute for the world nor an endorsement of it: it is a critique. They use the love of God as a touchstone, a divining rod by which to select

and transform those things in the natural order which can honour Him. Therefore they use the ordinary means of learning how to bring up children. They have no facetious attitude toward government pamphlets like *The Child From One to Six* or nursery clinics or books on child welfare. They use these aids with discretion, but their approach is careful rather than critical. They have much to learn.

Wise parents begin early to inculcate self-reliance. They allow the walking child to fall down without comforting him. They let him cry a little if he cannot assemble his blocks to his own satisfaction. Occasionally they encourage him with a word or a smile. But as a matter of course, the child is expected to work things out for himself. In doing so, he is strengthened spiritually. Can a Christian be chicken-hearted? Is virtue a valentine of pink bows and baby talk?

Self-reliance can be over-learned. The child trying to walk or shovel sand wants to try it all the time, through naps and meals and other needs. It is here, before the child is one, that wise parents teach a reasonable respect for authority, for Mother's quiet work, for Father's silent look. They do not call out at the child or give in to his whims. They show their dignity by self-control and sensible consistency. The infant learns that No means No. There is no contest of wills, no testing of the strength of No. Mother said "No" or "Bed" or "Give it to me." That is all. It is right, inevitable. When the child is twenty and Mother says, "I want to talk to you, Tom," Tom will come. Mother is probably right. In any event, she is Mother. If Tom gets it into his head to chase women or drink liquor or do any of the things that young men think makes them a real man, Father can call Tom aside and talk sense to him. But only because the event was prepared for in the playpen and the sandpit.

Thus good Christian parents develop the child from one age to the next. As he grows older, physical problems diminish, moral and spiritual ones increase. Less time is needed for physical projects like bathroom training or throwing a ball or sewing a sock. More time is given to discussion of the ethical situations arising in school, of the nature of the earth and the universe, of basic religious concepts, prayer, faith, grace. But there is no separation of physical and spiritual. When Father shows Tom how to hold a bat, he may slip in a word about the place of play in the imitation of Christ. Tom will not pay attention, of course, if he is any kind of a boy. He is too interested in learning the game, in hitting a ball. But there will be hundreds of similar opportunities for Father to make his point. An occasion will present itself to tell the story of the child saint who was playing with a ball. He was asked what he would do if he had five minutes to live. He replied that he would go right on playing with a ball. Tom will unconsciously dovetail this with the other things Father has said. When Tom is older he will understand the relation of sports to sanctity without knowing how he knows.

Mother is teaching the girls to bake. Little Joan is in tears—her cookies turned out badly. Did you read the recipe carefully, dear? Yes, Mommy—but it seemed like such an awful lot of sugar, I just thought... Mother makes a few, casual remarks about the value of following rules, of paying attention to details. The mailman arrives with a package. It is a beautiful blanket for the new baby. The girls interrupt their cooking to admire the gift. Mother smiles as she reads a motto on the label: "Quality is never an accident." "What is quality, Mommy?" Mother explains. She relates the principle to Joan's cookies. Joan is beginning to learn a lot more than just making cookies....

But this moralizing in situations will seem false and will not be accepted by the children unless, from their birth, they are brought up in a home that radiates affection, idealism and a common life of grace. The infant in his highchair cannot talk yet, but he watches his parents pray before meals.

He wonders what they are doing. Later he imitates the position of the hands. It doesn't matter that he doesn't know what he is doing. It matters only that prayers are as much a staple of existence as diapers or oatmeal.

The Germans have an expression for this principle. They say, "He does not know the words, but he understands the music." That is, the child grasps in an intuitive way many attitudes and meanings. Wise parents utilize this principle in teaching everything. They listen to music and read poems and look at sunsets and pray at Mass, and the child understands only the music. Later, he will learn the words more rationally. But if there has been no music first, the child rightly suspects that what he is being taught is affectatious, not lived out, said for his benefit. Consequently he learns unwillingly and superficially. He does not learn by the blood but by the tongue. And he forgets as soon as he can get away with it—which is often tomorrow. If a child is taught grace before meals with self-conscious airs of piety and coy talk about being a little soldier of Christ, he senses the insincerity of his parents and is led to believe that the whole rigmarole is a gag to fool little kids into being good.

Sincere Christian parents do not produce this reaction. Their children cannot remember a time when Mother and Father were not going to daily Mass or reading spiritual books to each other or discussing current events in the light of Our Lord's teaching. As children grow older and study religion formally, they see they are merely receiving explicit instruction in the facts and attitudes they have always lived by.

Even after catechetical age, the greater part of the children's spiritual instruction goes on at home. Public affairs, heard on the radio and discussed at school, are rehashed at home. What is communism? Why are they after Cardinal Mindszenty? Why do they want to stamp out religion? A Maryknoll magazine arrives. It features a full-page photo of a ragged Chinese peasant sitting on the ground, crying like a baby in despair and grief. His bony horse stands beside him. There is nothing to eat. Nothing at all. The picture is tacked up on the family bulletin board in the kitchen. The children ask about it. It is explained to them. Why we should pray for the poor and hungry. Why we should eat our own good food with thankfulness. A copy of Life magazine lies on the living-room table. Mother fetches it, turns to the section: "Life Goes to a Party." She shows the children the pictures of the well-dressed guests, stuffing themselves with delicacies, laughing too much and doing foolish things. She compares them with the Chinese peasant. Is this right? Is it Christian?

Needless to say, wise parents do not sicken their young with an overdose of piety. They take the attitude that God made the world and it is fundamentally good. They inculcate a "relaxed" piety which presumes a Christian viewpoint without tiresomely insisting on it all day long. It is not necessary to evoke the saints hourly, to collect holy pictures, to deck oneself out in the paraphernalia of piety. To follow Christ is to love God and to do everything for His sake—that is enough. God is everywhere: parents need not feel that He can only exist in virtue of their personally planting Him about.

Christian parents, therefore, explain natural and mechanical phenomena reasonably. They discuss the anatomy of rainbows, how radios work, the hydrologic cycle and how babies are born, in a matter-of-fact way, using such aids in the way of blackboards and encyclopedias as they can afford. They are careful, however, to avoid the scientific spirit. The explanation of ant-hills and bee-hives is complete only when it directs the attention of the child to the wisdom and humor and engineering skill of God. Yet the eternal aspect of material things is shown with such a fine sense of proportion that the children are able to talk freely of the things that interest them—frogs and hockey and what Natalie Hubbard did in school—without fearing that the conversation will inevitably veer around to the ten commandments.

As the child enters puberty, all that has gone into his formation is put to a crucial test. The contrast between the ethical pattern by which he has been brought up and the cynical values of the "outside" world becomes more and more obvious. He goes to school, visits the homes of his companions, sees advertisements and billboards and hears the radio, and everything he does and sees and hears shows him plainly that while the rest of the world is "having fun," he is restricted in a thousand ways by the dictates of religion. He has been led to believe that kindness and gentility and love of one's neighbor are natural and expected virtues, and he has behaved accordingly. Now he is called a "sucker." And as he looks at his friends with their pockets full of coins, their movies and soda pop and comic books, he wonders if he is one. His friends don't do chores or go to daily Mass. They can see Neptune's Daughter. He is not allowed. Why not? Is he being taken in? Is Catholicism real? Or are the values of the world around him "real"?

Many children are lost forever to their parents at this age. The instinct of the child is to pull away from his elders, to become emotionally independent. It is psychologically necessary for him to do so. If the attitude of his parents is sympathetic and honest, he is enabled to detach himself from them emotionally without rejecting their spiritual pattern. If his training till now has been Christian, his struggle for personal identity will not unduly alarm his parents. They will not try to fetter him with idiotic demands for affection and blind obedience. They are confident they can hold him with the silken threads of love and respect for their example—threads which may have an elasticity, which give but never snap, struggle though he may. Let him thrash his wings a bit.

Thus wise parents handle this fight for identity, this youthful war on the outcome of which depends the success of all their efforts, with tactful understanding. They adjust themselves to a granting of concessions, a paying out of slack in the silver cord. But this is never done on a bargaining basis: you do this and I'll let you do that. The loosening of the ties that bind presumes the idea of equity—adult behavior meriting adult privilege. And in keeping with this, the conflict between the child's two worlds, his home and his outside experience, is honestly faced.

There is a difference between life in a Christian family and the pleasure-seeking existence which is the “American way.” Our neighbors do things which we may not do. There are things our secular friends see and say and think which we may not, and still be Christians. This does not mean that our friends are not worthy people, better perhaps by their lights than we by ours. But they live differently than we do, and the difference is important.

Christian parents gain nothing by glossing the facts, by narrowing the chasm between the following of Christ and the following of self, as though secularism could be sanctified and Christianity “humanized” and the two somehow be made to appear the same. They are not. And the time has come for a frank appeal to the child to embrace the life of grace and reject the life of self-seeking, knowing the implications of both,,

Wise parents give this appeal a positive statement by stimulating a sense of vocation. They teach their children the use of the Missal and a real participation in the liturgy of the Church. They develop an understanding of the Mystical Body, a sense of living the life of Christ by extension in time. The saints are introduced as models of behavior. Their achievements are studied in preparation for feast-days and name-days, first in the little introductions in the Missal, later and more completely in books given as gifts. The children are led to see that saints are people, that a saint is not a special kind of person, but that every person can be a special kind of saint. Here is a saint who was a farmer, this one a mother, that one Chancellor of the Exchequer, here a philosopher, there the founder of an Order. What are you going to be, dear?—I want to be a nurse, a wife, a doctor, a sheep farmer. Do you? Why? Will it help you to serve God and people? You don’t know, you just think it would be fun? Think it over, dear, think it over....

Thus, with piety and patience, good parents raise Christians from one to heaven—that the Word may be made Flesh. A hard apostolate, but can they wish less?

Can they wish to raise Quiz Kids, brilliant with the fantastic values of television, atomic physics, jazz and beanies-with-propellers-on-top? Or culture-worshippers, prattling smartly of Picasso, Rouault, Hemingway and Waugh?

Eric Gill asked it rightly: “Do you think good taste can save us? Only one thing can save us. We must desire to be saints.”

The achievement of holiness is the work of grace, of Him Who made us and knows what He will have of us. We need not see the fruition of grace in ourselves or in our children. Enough that we try.

But to wish anything less for us or for them is to cheat them of their birthright, deny our vocation, and degrade the sacrament of marriage to the status of an obscene playing with dolls.
