

Teaching the Way of Love

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Is Your Family Important to You?

Last week, my husband and I went to dinner at a local restaurant. The hostess sat us in a booth near two different families. After ordering, both families caught my attention – but for very different reasons. Let me explain.

While both families had several children, one group interacted and the other did not. At one table, there was laughter, eye-contact, and even a gentleness in the corrections given to sit patiently until the meal arrived. At the other, the parents were immersed in their cell phones while the kids did whatever they could to get their parents' attention. (For the record, the parents gave them LOTS of negative feedback at quite a high volume!)



When the meals came the difference in family life continued to be revealed. At the first table, the parents led the family in a prayer, the kids used their utensils and napkins and the conversation continued to flow. At the next table, everyone leaned in and gobbled up the food without a hint of meaningful interaction (save the constant threats by the parents to send the kids to the car if they didn't behave).

It was clear to me (and to the other restaurant patrons) that one family enjoyed their evening out while the other tolerated the experience. One seemed to leave the restaurant satisfied in body and soul. The other – not really.

By default, we all are part of a family. Social scientists tell us that the family socializes us and teaches us to live in community. They say that families protect us and meet our basic needs. Their studies also confirm that family life gives us mental stability and emotional security. The caveat – parents have to decide to provide these elements. They must see importance in family life. With intention, families can flourish. Without intention – not so much.

How important is your family to you? Do you cherish your spouse and your children? Do you make them a priority each day?

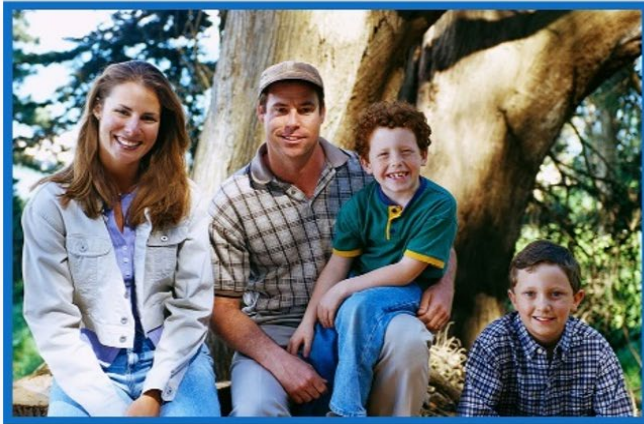
From the beginning of recorded time, God has told us that 'it is not good for man to be alone (Gn 2:18). Thus, He created an expression of human love that allows a husband and wife to procreate children and start their own family, which is the most basic building block of society. In God's plan, the family is *the place* where we learn what it means to be in relationship with Him and with others.

This is exactly why each of us needs to make our family life important. We need a community of persons that will not abandon us; that will not kick us out. We need a place where we will be welcomed no matter what we do. We need a place to share our talents and contribute. We need a group of people that will charitably correct us and teach us we are part of something much bigger than ourselves.

Obviously, this is a challenge for all of us. It takes great virtue and effort to put our family before our own wants and feelings. It is not easy to live in a way where the common good trumps your own good. Changing your “me” into a “we” is only possible when you make love your mission and goal.

Love is *the mission* of the family. With love, families can create an environment that is virtuous, secure, and safe. Moms and Dads can take full responsibility for the upbringing of their kids. Children can obey the just requests of their parents. With love, God can enter the family and make it flourish. And, with love, families can eat a meal together in a restaurant and leave satisfied in both their body and soul.

How important is your family to you? Is your home a place where God’s love is revealed and communicated? Is your family an awesome school of humanity or just something so-so? Would people who see your family in public observe loving interactions or not?



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Teaching the Way of Love

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Who Has the Greatest Influence On Your Children?

My wife and I have entered into a new phase of parenting. Both of our children are now high school students. Even though it's early in the year, our son and our daughter have each begun to express their independence in various ways. Our daughter is the thoughtful one, enjoying questions and debate. Our son is more straightforwardly rebellious, rejecting his family's beliefs and values outright and finding it more comfortable to conform to his friends and culture.

In both cases - but especially in the case of our son - my wife and I have faced the temptation to give up. After all, we have already done our best to pass on our Faith to our children, to teach them to value the truth, and to encourage them to become good people. We did our job, right?



When our children were young, they loved to imitate us. They believed everything we told them (even if it was outlandish). Our influence on them was clear and obvious. But as children get older and begin to exercise their free will, parental confidence can be shaken. It's natural for teenagers to reject the teachings of their parents, isn't it? The last thing our kids want to hear is nagging from us. Let's just give it a rest and let our children make their own choices. Teenagers are more influenced by their friends anyway. They've stopped listening to us. They are listening to the loud, influential voices that challenge all that we taught them. It sure can seem like parents lose their influence as our children get older. Do we have any influence at all?

Actually, studies show that we do. Even into adulthood, children continue to listen to and value their parents' input on their lives. These studies have led to public service announcements urging parents to talk to their kids about drugs, suicide, and bullying. Children listen, even when they don't seem to be.

The Church recognizes the vital role that parents play by calling parents the "primary educators" of their children. This title indicates that parents offer children their first lessons in loving God, loving neighbor, and embracing truth, goodness, and beauty. Parents lay the foundation upon which children will build their life experiences and form their free will.

But there is a catch. Parents can't give up. Parents need to continue **striving** to be influential in their children's lives. We can't give up. One of the best ways to continue having an influence on your children is through dialogue.

In my experience as a parent and a teacher, dialogue works much better than lectures. As I said, my daughter loves to question and debate, so that's pretty easy with her. The challenge with her is that I really have to know my stuff or at least be willing to learn along with her. I can't expect her to believe what I say just because I say it. With my more reticent son, the challenge lies in getting him to talk in the first place. My discussions with him usually center around me asking him questions to challenge the assumptions he brings home. He's not usually interested in debate, but I find that consistently asking him good questions can at least make him think so he doesn't automatically swallow the ideas he picks up from his friends and the culture.

Another important way for parents to be the primary educators of their children is through their example. If your children see that you seek truth, appreciate beauty, and strive for goodness, they are more likely to see the importance of transcendent goods that lead to God. If your children see you making efforts to love and serve others selflessly, they will be more likely to seek out ways to do the same as they become adults. If your children see you loving God through prayer and Sacrament, they are more likely to see a relationship with God as important in their adult lives.

What has the greatest influence on your children? Are their friends and culture having a greater impact on them than you are? Have you given up your role as the primary educator of your children? If so, how can you reclaim your rightful place in their lives? How can you become the primary influence on them? It can be difficult, especially as your children get older. But it's worth the effort. You can't control your children's free will. But you can remain influential.



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Teaching the Way of Love

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Do you really listen to your family members?

One of the greatest gifts that you can give a child is to convince them that they are (and will always be) a part of your family. Children must be confident that they will always find love within the family; that they will always be part of your community of persons no matter what happens. As the parent, you are the one who can make them confident that they will always have a place at your table. And how do you do that? By learning to listen with an undivided heart.

Becoming a good listener take practice and commitment. It is not something that comes naturally to most of us. In fact, I learned the hard way that I was a poor listener when my son came up to me, tugged on my leg and said, “Mommy – I want to show you something.” I was totally focused on something else, so I asked him to describe what he was holding. I felt another tug at my leg and heard a second request to pay attention. Again, I attempted to multi-task rather than look at him. What came next is forever etched in my memory. My son tugged for a third time and said, “Mommy, I want your eyes to listen to me.” Clearly, my son realized that I wasn’t fully listening. And, I am sure that he was wondering if I really cared about him or just pretended to.



Listening is how you convince someone that you care deeply for them and what to enter into a closer relationship with them. It is how you enter into their invisible world and grasp what is happening *inside* them. Listening gives you access to both the *what* and the *why* of their feelings. When you take the time to fully attend, children can share their deepest thoughts with you – both those that are good and bad –in hopes that you will say, “I still love you and I commit to help you think this thru.” Listening is how you validate their worth and their importance as they grow into an adult. It is how you convince the other that they will always be part of your clan.

How do you become a better listener? Begin with a decision to listen – just listen. When a child begins sharing something with you, resolve to remove all the distractions that pull you away from the conversation. Put down your phone. Stop what you are doing. Look your child in his or her eyes and FOCUS on them.

As you listen, show them that you are paying attention with an occasional nod. Affirm them by saying, “I understand”, “Yes, go on”, “I see” or “I didn’t know that.” These small gestures visibly reassure your child that you are “all there” and they are securely within the family.

As possible, repeat what you hear and give any underlying emotion a name. For example, if your child says, “school is a waste of my time,” you can say, “school is frustrating you right now. Help me understand why.” Rephrasing and naming feelings can keep the conversation going because it creates a meaningful exchange.

At some point, you may need to comment on what you are hearing because your child has told you something that is immoral or harmful. Be mindful that comments are meant to guide your child towards what is right and good. They are meant to develop your child’s ability to choose the good with his or her free will. Therefore consider if your comment should be shared immediately or if it can wait. Your child may just need to be heard. They just want you to know what they are thinking. They do not want you to “fix” them or the situation. Rather they just want you to reassure them and demonstrate love. If you are in doubt about whether your child just wants you to listen or if they want input, ask them. You can simply say, “Do you want me to just listen, or do you want me to comment?” If they say, just listen, save your comment for a later conversation. It is perfectly fine to let them know that will wait to comment. Just remember to set a time to share your guidance and thoughts. A good rule of thumb is to do so within 48 hours.

All children need to be assured that their parents will hear them out. They need to be confident that the questions and ideas they want (and need) to express will be received rather than rejected. As a parent, you have the privilege to create an environment in your home where each member can come to the table and share what is happening to them. It is your honor and duty to listen and then guide them to what is the right, good, and best direction. This is how you strengthen your bond with them, convinced them of your unconditional love and create a community of persons that is strong, safe, and enduring.



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Are You Teaching Your Family the Way of Love?

“Why are we hiking on this trail? Why can’t we just go back to the car?” My daughter’s sulky complaint came from further behind me, as she had sat down on a bench yet again.

“We want to go see Lake Superior,” my wife responded.

“Nobody wants to see the stupid lake,” my daughter grumped.

That conversation pretty much summed up the entire family vacation this past summer. All I wanted to do as a father was to spend some quality time with my family and share with them the beauty of God’s creation. My two children wanted nothing of it. This happens to me a lot as a father. I have in my head an ideal of parenting that I would share certain values with my children in fun, meaningful ways and they would enjoy the learning experience. But with my two head-strong children, that ideal has not come true. It’s frustrating. However, this is a valuable lesson for me to struggle with.



Marriage (and by extension parenthood) is a vocation to learn to love my wife and my children with the complete, self-sacrificing love of Christ. My vocation is not necessarily to use my God-given talents to shape my children’s interests. It’s not even primarily to help my children be successful in life. It’s certainly not to shape my children in my own image. My vocation is to love my children and in the process to teach them what authentic love means. I am learning that self-sacrificing love may even mean letting go of my ideals for parenthood.

In his apostolic letter, *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II calls the family the “school of love.” He points out that the family is the first place that children encounter authentic love. Therefore, the family is the first place that children encounter the love of God. The primary job of the parent is to introduce children to authentic love through the love of the family so the family can move together closer to the love of Christ.

What Is Authentic Love?

Authentic love is more than an emotional bond or the recognition of the good in others. Authentic love means making the choice of putting the good of the other person before your own good. The love that Jesus Christ modeled for us and then commanded us to have for one another is to pour ourselves out for the other in loving sacrifice for the sake of their good.

How Do We Teach the Way of Love?

The family is the best place for people to learn about love. Father Stan Fortuna (and others) teach the acronym **FAMILY Forget About Me I Love You**. Family life offers many teachable moments in which you can encourage every family member to forget about themselves and to put others first. Of course, this all starts with you as a parents. Let's look at a few examples of how to do this.

The most important teachable moments come in your own examples of selfless love. Do your children see you sacrificing yourself for them? When I was a child, one theme of my family was parental prerogative. Mom and Dad got their selection of food first. Kids got what the parents didn't want. Parents got seconds on dessert. Kids got only one piece. As a parent, I decided not to claim the parental prerogative. Instead, my wife and I ask our children what food they would choose and we negotiate. Sometimes I give up my preference for my children, other times I ask them to give up their preference. In this way, I hope to model sacrificial love and give them a chance to practice it as well.

The most powerful example of selfless love I can give my children is to love them even when they oppose my ideals. Embracing Jesus's call to love selflessly means sacrificing the ideals of parenthood I had in my head. It means parenting the children God gave me, not the ones I wanted.

It's also important not to adopt a "poor me" attitude when we sacrifice for our children. The temptation might be to make your children painfully aware of the sacrifices you're making for them. You want them to acknowledge your sacrifice and even to feel bad about it. I am often tempted to point out that I gave up my teaching career to be a stay-home father. It's not a decision I ever regretted, but sometimes I feel like my children owe me for my sacrifice. But that's not really love, That's self-serving sacrifice. Sacrifice that is born out of love is done joyfully. It's done with joy for the good received by the beloved. Selfless love is not an easy lesson to learn. It takes time and effort to overcome the selfishness we inherited from Original Sin. But with consistent lessons and role modeling, you can teach your children the way of love.



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How do You Fill a Home with Goodness and Virtue?

A group of young parents discussed their concern that children today seemed to be more interested in themselves than in the common good. They shared multiple examples that illustrated their point: the uptick in bullying, increased school violence, soaring depression, and isolation. Their worry led them to ask me, “what can we do to reverse this trend?”

“Teach your children how to seek the good, choose the good, and share the good with others – beginning in your own home,” I said. After a few moments of silence, the young parents asked the inevitable question. “But how do we do that? Isn’t the world’s influence on our children too strong for us to counter?”

Are you concerned about your kids like these parents? Are you worried that the world is jading your children? Do you want to know how you can guide your children towards the good that God has intended for them? Let me offer a few ideas for creating a home where goodness is taught, chosen, and practiced.



Your first step towards a home filled with virtue is to remember that God has given you the authority to form your family in goodness, even if the world outside your door doesn’t do that. What you say and how you act profoundly influences your children. Even if they don’t appear to listen to you, they are. They will follow your lead in the long run because you matter greatly to them. God created a bond of love between you that is very hard to break. Be confident in this truth.

Use that bond of love that God provides you as a foundation to turn your home into a school of deeper humanity. Lean into your power and ability to create an environment that reflects God’s goodness, beauty, and peace. Model a lifestyle that reflects Christ-like virtues and do so with joy.

Will this be easy? Not really. But it is totally doable if you remember that a virtue is a firm habit to do what is right and good. As the parent, you are the primary educator for your children. As lead teacher, you oversee the tone for daily living. When you are charitable, forgiving, and patient, you set a virtuous expectation that your children can see and learn from. While it is not a given that they will watch and immediately comply, they will likely catch on over time. Of course, this means that you must be consistent in your demonstration of virtue – especially when they act contrary to your lead.

This brings up another important point about bringing goodness into your home through virtue; it takes time and practice. Like all of us, your children need to practice the virtues because they suffer from a fallen nature. It takes time to learn how to choose the good. They need to practice what they have learned

before they can do it without thinking. In fact, most of us need to practice over and over and over again before we get it right. What does this mean for you as the parent? You must be patient and persistent.

Here is one more important reality about creating a school of virtue; it requires a shift in your priorities. Teaching your family about virtuous living must rise above your personal desires. Because it is not a one-and-done kind of project, it requires regular attention and maintenance. Think of it like a coach working with athletes who want to improve their game. First, they learn. Then they practice. Then they pay attention and maintain their level of play. If the coach or the athlete stops paying attention, what was gained is often lost, and the process must start over again. So it is with virtues and their development. You must regularly check to see how they are being lived and course-correct as needed.

After reading this article, there are a few practical ways to begin setting up your school of virtue. The first and most important one is establishing a time every day when your family can gather as one. Logically, this would be over a meal where people can share what they are thinking and doing. But it could also be time shared just before everyone settles in for the night. Be bold and do what it takes to find the right time for your family to be together every day.

Another key way to develop goodness in your home is to give each person chores that contribute to the care of the home. Yes, this does mean figuring out who gets to clean bathrooms, haul trash and do the laundry. Acts of mutual service require great virtue and offer lots of practice time.

Finally, assess how prayer-friendly your home environment is. Goodness comes from God, and God connects with you in prayer. Romans 12:2 tells us this. *Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.* To ensure that goodness comes into your home, do your best to provide the peace and quiet needed to pray by quieting the sounds of media. Find ways to build a margin into every day so that you can stop and pray for and with each other. Carve out time to pray together and call upon God to enter your family life and activities.



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Is Your Family a School of Prayer?

The title of this article may stop you in your tracks. As a parent, were you even aware that your family is supposed to be a school of prayer? In his general audience for January 4th, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI gives us a beautiful reflection that explains the importance of developing a family prayer life. He reminds us, “The family is the domestic Church and must be the first school of prayer. . . *if one does not learn how to pray in the family it will later be difficult to bridge this gap.*” The Church calls the family the “school of prayer” because children learn how to pray by praying with the family. Pope Benedict shows us what God wants us to do as a family. But as we all know, there is a wide gap between what we should do and what we actually do.



I recently had a mother from my parish ask me, “Why is it so difficult to get my kids to pray?” She proceeded to describe how her children, who range from a 3-year-old to a college-aged young adult, can be sitting in the living room talking or doing homework, but as soon as she mentions prayer they get up to leave, start complaining, or start fighting with each other. “What is it about prayer that brings out the worst in them?” This faithful Catholic was trying her best to create an environment of faith within her home. I was able to share with her that my family is not much different. Even our daughter, who enjoys going to Mass and learning the Catholic Faith, complains about family prayer time. I told the mother to keep in mind that prayer time with one’s children doesn’t have to be “successful” in our own minds in order to allow the Holy Spirit to bear fruit in their hearts.

To be a school of prayer means introducing your children to the person of Jesus and to the discipline of prayer. It doesn’t mean teaching your children to pray the same way that you pray. You’ve had your entire life to increase your mental focus and to mature in your prayer style. Sometimes, parents have to set aside their own vision of what family prayer looks like and meet their children where they’re at. Your goal is simply to lift the minds and hearts of your family to God.

This was a difficult lesson for me to learn as an idealistic theology teacher. I have heard many other parents struggle with it as well. However, some families have really mastered the art of meeting their children where they’re at. One family with young children allowed their children to make up a song that they use for prayer. The song doesn’t really make much sense, but it’s fun, it proclaims love for Jesus, and it asks for blessings on everyone in the family (including a few stuffed animals and dolls). The family holds hands, sings the song, and dances in a circle. Some people might criticize such a practice for not showing children the seriousness of prayer. But I have come to realize that this family is teaching the children something far more important - to come to Jesus every night and celebrate being a family with Him.

Families with teenagers often have an even greater challenge. It's common for adolescents to isolate themselves from the family and avoid formal (i.e. stuffy and boring) family events. Their aversion to family prayer doesn't necessarily indicate an aversion to God. It may simply be an expression of their desire to do things their own way. The solution will really depend on your child. Some adolescents respond well to leadership roles. If you have younger children, ask your teenage children to help the younger ones with their prayers. Ask your teen to set up the prayer space, choose a scripture verse to read, find a prayer to share with the family, or lead a spontaneous prayer. If your older children don't respond to leadership roles and resist coming to prayer at all, find simple ways to incorporate prayer into your day. Even the most sour-faced adolescent can stand still for a quick morning offering and a blessing before everyone heads out the door in the morning. Bless them again before they go to bed.

The key to making your family a "school of prayer" is to show your children how to lift their hearts and minds to God. If you're able to sit your family down for thirty minutes of focused prayer time, consider yourself blessed, and by all means do it! There is a benefit to some degree in requiring children to learn a discipline that they resist learning. But if you find your family struggling so much that the effort seems more damaging than helpful, don't force it. Meet your children where they're at.

One last point before ending is this: Children who see their parents joyfully pray are the most likely to develop a personal prayer life. Let your sons and daughters see and hear you pray. Let them see your reverence in the Holy Mass. Give your family opportunities to observe you in silent reflection, away from your mobile devices and media. Expose them to the various forms of prayer you enjoy and encourage them to explore them on their own. Studies have shown that the role of the father as the spiritual leader of the family is very real and very important. If the father has a strong relationship with God and is vibrant in his example, his children are more likely to be attracted to the faith as adults. More powerful still is the witness and example of a husband and wife working together to lift the hearts and minds of the family to God. When you have regular conversations with Jesus, you are building the foundation for your family's "school of prayer."



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Does Your Family Impact the Culture or Not?

A group of parents sitting next to me at a local sporting event engaged in a lively conversation about their children's education. The basic question that they discussed was, *whose is responsible for deciding what a child should learn, the parents or the schools?*

It was a compelling discourse and most of the parents agreed that they were responsible for the decision. In fact, many of them were quite adamant that they should be informed about the curriculum and what it contained. These parents seemed convinced that they wanted to be engaged in their son's and daughters' education, especially on matters relating to morality and ethics.



The exchange continued with a parent asking the group, "How do we actually step in and become more responsible for what is being taught in the schools? We can't just sit here and say we want to be engaged but not do anything." A few parents recommended going to school board meetings and being vocal. Others thought they should request copies of the curriculum. One parent thought it would be good to attend their children's classes. The conversation was ramping up again and many good ideas were offered, but it was the next parent's statement that caught the most attention.

A father who had listened quietly up to this point said, "If you really want to change what is taught in the schools, start by teaching your children what you really want them to learn inside of your home. Give your children a firm foundation about what is right and wrong. Teach them how to share and serve others. Teach them how to think and choose what is really good so that they aren't swayed by fly-by-night ideas in school. If you want to change education, man up at home."

The father's comments struck a nerve within the parents. His point was this – families form schools. Schools exist because of families. Families and the school structure are so intertwined that they rise and flourish together or fall together. Therefore, families can change the school simply by teaching their children about basic human dignity at home and preparing them to act accordingly at school.

The Catholic Church has taught this truth consistently. Whether it is a school or a workplace or society at large, the family is the basic cell of a culture. It is from the family that students, citizens and co-workers come to birth. It is within the family that people learn how to love and express

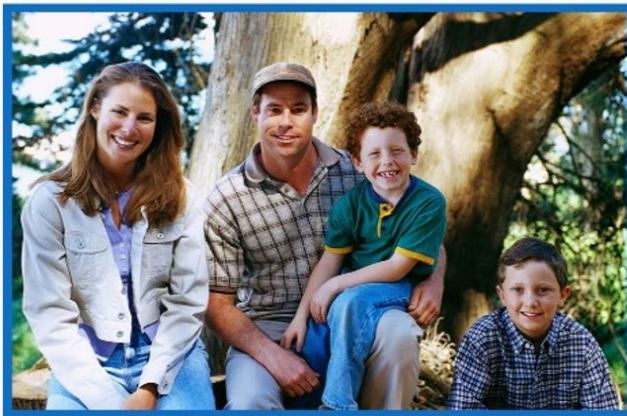
respect. The family is where authentic communion begins and matures. It is where human dignity is fostered and respected. Family is the dwelling place of generous service, heartfelt acceptance, and fraternal correction.

As the family goes, so goes society. This well-known slogan points out the obvious. When families accept the responsibility to educate their children in what is right and wrong, the culture prospers. The reverse is also true. If families shirk their obligations, society falters and declines. In fact, society becomes burdensome and frightening.

Perhaps it was the deterioration of the culture within the schools and society that triggered the conversation at the game. The parents were reacting to the dehumanizing behaviors that they were hearing about outside their front door. All the stories of disrespect, violence and unrest that filled their social media had caused them enough concern to be moved to discussion. And, because of one man's bold advice, they now had reason to reconsider what their family was doing to either make life better within the school and society or contribute to its decline.

Each of these parents left the game with a challenge to engage in the development of the school's society. Each family has the duty to come up with its own tactics to prepare its household to add value to the world. They have the responsibility to become a school of virtue where the good of God is guarded and transmitted. They can teach and expect the practice of personal accountability. They can figure out how to prepare their children to go outside their home and consistently behave civilly and charitably. They can come up with a strategy to teach their kids about the common good, authentic freedom, and personal accountability. They can impact the culture... or not. It all depends on what they choose to do.

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How Can You Run an Ordered Household?

“Why is our life so full of chaos?” That’s the question my wife and I found ourselves discussing with friends while eating out with them. They are parents of children ranging in age from preschool to college. Our children are both in high school. The answer seemed pretty obvious at first. Our lives are chaotic because we are typical, busy families. On the other hand, all four of us know that order is important for our families. The members of our families face chaos all day at school and work. We all need space and time that is ordered and peaceful. Children especially thrive in a family environment that is predictable, where they feel safe, and where they know the parents are in control. Accepting the chaos as “normal” isn’t an option. But how can we run an ordered household in a crazy, busy world? The breakthrough came from our friend, the father of five. He said, “When it comes down to it, I guess we just have to lay down the law.”



To understand why this insight is so correct, we can reflect on how our Heavenly Father manages the human family. Genesis tells us that God’s first act of Creation was to bring light to the darkness and to separate the “waters above” from the “waters below” by creating the dome of the sky. In the Hebrew understanding of the cosmos, darkness and water represent chaos. God’s first act of creation was to bring order to the chaos by establishing His Divine Law. This understanding of creation brings new meaning to the story of Noah and the flood. Fallen from Original Sin, people preferred to live without God’s law. So when God flooded the world, He was actually giving people what they wanted. He removed His law from Creation. Without His Law, chaos reigns. Darkness and water reclaim Creation in the flood. God’s message is clear. Law provides order. Without order, we drown in the chaos.

If you want to give your family the gift of order, you need to provide them with the family law. Assigning chores makes the roles in your household clear and shows each family member that he or she makes an important contribution. Set routines for homework and meals bring predictability and stability to otherwise chaotic daily schedules. While teenagers can rail against

rules and restrictions, having clear expectations about things like drugs, alcohol, sex, curfew, and safety can actually free young people from the anxiety of facing decisions about these things on their own or in the face of peer pressure.

When God revealed the moral law to Moses, the Hebrew people acted very differently from the people in Noah's time. The Hebrews struggled to follow God's law perfectly, but they didn't treat it like a set of irrational restrictions. In fact, they celebrated it. Proclamations like Psalm 147 declare the goodness of God's law: "He has not done this for any other nation; of [His] laws they know nothing. Hallelujah!" The Hebrew people recognize that God's law is a gift. It teaches how to love Him. It leads us to the truth about God and ourselves. It also leads us to true goodness. God's law brings order into our lives.

Your children don't need to see your laws as a gift. That doesn't make them any less so. Parental authority exercised in love leads your children to the truth about God and themselves, leads them to authentic goodness, teaches them how to love, and brings order into their lives. That's a gift. The laws that you create for your family lead them to thrive.

Lay down the law for your children. If they are too busy, put limits on how involved they can be. Make your expectations about drugs, alcohol, sex, curfew, or safe driving explicit. Don't assume your children know what you expect. Require your children to eat, do chores, and attend Holy Mass as a family. Give your children the gift of laws that bring order to their lives.

*This newsletter series is brought to you by Alice Heinzen and Jeff Arrowood, creators of **Teaching the Way of Love**. **Teaching the Way of Love** is designed to help you become a faithful, joyful and confident parent. Visit www.twl4parents.com for more strategies on how to become the best parent you can be. Consider becoming an annual member of the **Teaching the Way of Love** program. Members receive practical and timely parenting resources. Go to twl4parents.com/membership for more information.*



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Why is Your Family So Important?

A question that people often ask me is *why is a family so important?* You might think that I would have at least one pat answer to the question after working with families for over 3 decades. However, my life experience gives me multiple reasons why the family is both important and vital to everyone. Ready to learn why your family is so important?

Reason #1 – Your family is important because God made it very clear from the beginning that ‘family’ is foundational to His plan for humanity. God could have created human beings in any form imaginable. Yet, He chose to create humans as males and females. Adam and Eve, His first man and woman, were immediately drawn into relationship with each other and given the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Even small children can see and understand how intentional God was about creating people to be part of a family.

God’s plan for family is built upon a man’s love for his wife, a woman who loves her husband, and children conceived within their parent’s stable, lasting, and fruitful union. Obviously, this structure can be embraced or ignored. Those that choose to form families as God designed from the start or those who come back around to the design later are most likely to enjoy each other and find fulfillment.



Reason #2 – Your family is the foundation of civilization. It is likely that you have heard the phrase – as the family goes, so goes the nation. A simple Google search will point to scads of research articles and papers that explain how the family, which is the basic cell of a society, has a direct, worldwide impact. All these scholarly papers point out the obvious: strong families equal strong societies. They also conclude that when families struggle, the culture struggles.

It is always impressive when secular research agrees with the Church. Shortly after becoming Pope, Francis had this to say. *The family is important, and it is necessary for the survival of humanity. Without the family, the cultural survival of the human race would be at risk. The family, whether we like it or not, is the foundation.* This leads to the next point.

Reason #3 – Your family is the best environment to learn about love and experience its fullness. If you remember that love means to will the good of another it is easy to understand why a houseful of

people provides a perfect place to love. The close quarters of a home offer each family member ample opportunities to pay attention to those they live with.

Because no family can love perfectly, arguments and disagreements will happen. When your family chooses to work through these difficulties in love, it can grow in charity and consequently learn to love more perfectly. This is why your family can refer to itself as a school of deeper humanity.

Reason #4 – Your family is meant to be other-focused. It has the power to smother selfish desires and replace them with generosity. It is where you teach each other how to be interdependent not independent. It is where you stop competing and begin to collaborate. Your family is where you practice manners, civility, and respect for others. It is where you see the value in laying our lives down for one another.

Reason #5 – Your family is the safest place on earth. It is where you step away from the pressures and pace of the culture. Your family is an oasis for everyone; a place to rest, rejuvenate and just be. It is your haven to catch your breath and experience harmony.

Reason #6 – Your family bonds you together. Like it or not, you will always be part of the lives of those in your family. Your thoughts and actions, dreams and fears, aspirations and failures intertwine. They weave a pattern of belonging for you that can never be undone. Your family helps you discover who you are in God's image and receive guidance on how to live out your vocation in His name. Your family bonds you to your family of origin and to the greater family of God. This is how you become 'fully human'.

Reason #7 – Your family makes you holy. Well, it can make you holy when you learn to see each person is an instrument of God's love. No matter what your clan does to annoy, hurt, scare, or delight you, they always provide you with a choice to either love them or not. You become holy when you choose to love in all situations. Holiness is what you become when you center your family life in Christ; when you reach beyond the world's wisdom towards God's divinity. Your family was designed by God to bring you to heaven. That is why it is so important to you.



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Can You Celebrate Your Family in the Face of Imperfection?

Over the past ten months, we have reflected on various themes about what it means to be a family. In doing so, we have been joining the Church in an ongoing reflection. This reflection could be said to begin with Pope Saint John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Familiaris Consortio*, "The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World," written in 1981. The bishops of the United States continue it today in response to the Synod on the Family in 2014. One purpose of this ongoing reflection is to give families a vision of the profound meaning of the family and the lofty mission God gives to

parents. Another goal is to examine the concrete reality in which the modern family lives, including how modern culture can empower families and the obstacles modern culture puts in reaching the fullness of God's plan. Along the way, we hope to pick up tools and strategies to help the family "be what you are," as Pope Saint John Paul II challenges us in his Apostolic Letter.



Being a father of teenagers makes me painfully aware of the gap between the ideal that God gives us for the family and the reality of my own family. Building a community within my family was more difficult than my wife, and I thought it would be. Some of the values we tried to instill in our children are now points of conflict as our kids become young adults and start exercising their free will in earnest. Perhaps you felt the same awareness and frustration as you have reflected with us on the family over these past months.

God does not offer us high expectations and ideals to shame or frustrate us. His Fatherhood is the template of good parenting. He provides high expectations only in the context of His infinite love. The reason the image He offers us of the "ideal family" is to invite us into the fullness of His goodness. However, God also knows that parents are fallen human creatures, as are children. He does not hold it against us. Instead, He continues to invite us to perfection and to offer His wisdom and grace to help us as we strive to reach it.

So how can you and I, as parents, respond to God's goodness in a way that blesses our families? The first step is to take the time to celebrate your family. One thing our culture does that blesses families is to

commemorate Mother's Day and Father's Day. These public celebrations of family remind us of the value that we add to society and all of humanity by raising children to be good citizens and loving, virtuous adults. But we don't need to wait for official days to celebrate our families. No matter how far you think your family is from the ideal, family is always a blessing worth celebrating. Why not declare a Sunday afternoon this summer as "family day"? Do a backyard cookout. Eat and play together. Then affirm each member of the family and your relationship with each other. Tell each other, "I love you," and pray in thanksgiving for your family. My teenagers may say that's a stupid idea. Regardless, they will get the message that they are loved and worth celebrating. It's also good for us as parents to see the goodness in our family as they are.

The second step in responding to God's goodness is to continue striving for the God-given meaning and purpose of family. Continue doing the work of parenting, and try to do it with charity and joy. Charity means making necessary corrections for the good of our children because we want them to grow into virtuous adults. Joy means the fulfillment of our mission as parents. It doesn't mean feeling good about parenting all the time. But even amid frustration, we realize that we are doing God's will in loving each other and drawing each other to Heaven. Recollect the ideals that spoke to your heart over the last ten months. Work positively, moving your family closer to the goal.

Being parents means striving to build your family into a well-ordered community that listens to each other and cares for each other. It means to do the hard work of instilling virtue in your children so your family can, in turn, have a positive impact on the culture. It means building a school of prayer and holiness. Those are lofty goals. But we don't do it alone. God blesses us with His grace even as He calls us to greater aspirations. Being a family is not easy. It's not supposed to be. Nonetheless, it can be joyful, and we should celebrate every step!



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