

Becoming an Effective Parent

By Jim Seghers

The Second Vatican Council makes a profound observation about the relationship of parents to the guidance of their children: "The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute."¹ When the Church speaks about educating children the emphasis is not on SAT scores or earning PhD's but forming children to become saints. Personally, I find this to be my greatest challenge as a parent, because I am reminded of the wise saying: "You can't give what you don't have!" Thus there is a very real sense that my effectiveness as a parent depends on what I become rather than what I say to the children. The awareness of my inadequacies in this area together with recent comments by Pope John Paul II has led to a great deal of reflection on the subject of personal holiness, which is the key to effective parenting and the subject of this essay.

In a recent address Pope John Paul II spoke about the holiness of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In particular he observed that her humility was foundational to the profound relationship she has with God. Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. observes in his classic work on the spiritual life that "humility is considered in all Christian tradition as the foundation of the spiritual life, since it removes pride, which is, says Holy Scripture, the beginning of every sin because it separates us from God."²

St. Teresa of Avila calls humility "walking in the truth," because it recognizes our correct relationship with God: creature to Creator, sinner to Holiness, nothingness to Everything. Pride, on the contrary, inflates our value by attributing qualities to ourselves as if they did not come from God's goodness. Blessed Josemaria Escrivá observed with humor: "The best business in the world would be to buy men for what they're worth and to sell them for what they think they're worth."

The Blessed Mother gives a wonderful lesson in humility in her Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). She is aware that she is the Mother of God, but at the same time she is profoundly aware that her prerogatives are gratuitous gifts from God. She marvels in awe at God's bounty: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden." Yet, at the same time, she acknowledges that it is all God's work not hers: "for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." When Mary was invited to be the Mother of God, the angel Gabriel addressed her as "full of grace," (Lk 1:28), but Mary viewed herself as "the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38) - God's slave girl.

A good examination of ones progress in the virtue of humility is to evaluate ourselves in relationship to St. Anselm's seven degrees.

1. To acknowledge ourselves contemptible.
2. To grieve on account of this.
3. To admit that we are so.
4. To wish our neighbor to believe it.
5. Patiently to endure people's saying it.
6. Willingly to be treated as a person worthy of contempt.
7. To love to be treated in this fashion.³

If God asked us, as he did St. John of the Cross: "What do you wish for a reward?" how many of us would reply like this saint: "To be scorned and to suffer for love of Thee." Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange reports St. Francis of Assisi telling Brother Leo: "If when we arrive this evening at the door of the convent, the

¹ *Gravissimum Educationes*, # 3, October 28, 1965 cited in the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), # 2221.

² *The Three Ages of the Interior Life: Prelude of Eternal Life*, Volume II, p. 117.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 126;

brother porter does not wish to open the door for us, if he takes us for thieves and receives us with blows and leaves us outside all night in the rain and cold, then we must say: Santa Letizia, that is, what joy, O Lord, to suffer for Thee and to become a little like Thee." Jesus tells us to learn from him because he is "meek and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29).

Pride is contrary to the virtue of humility. It inclines us to follow our own will and to seek what exalts us. Pride makes us resistant to be directed by others while desiring to command and guide others. Pride chafes at obedience. It also creates a kind of spiritual blindness. In this regard I'm reminded of the man who boasted: "If there is one thing I am proud of it is my humility!" Pride is also like a poisonous, multithreaded snake. Once we lop off one head we are under attack by another. To define the multifaceted manifestations of pride would require a book. Listed below are examples of pride that challenge good people who are sincerely making an effort to commit their lives to Christ.

Self-confidence.

Peter is the classic example of the good-hearted man who loved Jesus, but was crippled by self-confidence. As a result he relied on himself and neglected prayer. We are all familiar with the disastrous results in the courtyard of the high priest as Peter denied his Lord three times. Subsequently, St. Peter would write: "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pet 5:5). I am sadly familiar with the deception of self-confidence as I fell under its influence. When my training was completed I believed I had it together—a disastrous conclusion. This led to too much work and too little prayer—and disastrous results.

Perfectionism.

This manifestations of pride has multiple faces. It easily hides behind Jesus' command, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). The deception lies in the fact that doing things "my way" becomes the norm of perfection. I once heard the story of a religious who cruelly rebuked a subordinate because she failed to place a dust mop in the "right" position in a broom closet. Years ago I was associated with a very successful professional who placed himself on a pedestal of perfection from which he could hurl thunderbolts of criticism at lesser mortals. Once, when he was on a vacation, his secretary spent two weeks of her own time reorganizing his filing system. On his return he exploded over her incompetence because she used two inch tabs instead of two and a half inch tabs. It required two hours of listening to her weeping to bring her some consolation. Another manifestation of this evil is the condescending attitude of superiority one spouse (the perfect one) has toward the other spouse (the imperfect one, also know as the sinner).

Spiritual Body Building.

Spiritual exercises and the acquisition of virtues are a vital means to grow spiritually when they are based on our understanding of Jesus' words: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Genuine spiritual exercises like attending daily Mass and saying the Rosary and striving to practice the virtues are only meaningful when they involve our surrender to God and our service to others. Spiritual body building, on the other hand, is self-focused as the means become the end. God and others are squeezed out of the picture.

Humility with a Hook.

This is the fool's gold of humility. It glitters, but it has no substance or value. The purpose of this false humility is to elicit praise by sounding humble. The humble protestations, of course, always engage areas in which the person possesses obvious gifts - forgetting, or course, that the praise is due the giver not the recipient. Imagine the following scenario. Elizabeth greets Mary with the words: "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Then Mary replies: "Well, Elizabeth, after all being the mother of God isn't so special. It could happen to anybody."

The In-Group.

The in-group as opposed to the out-group is a form of pride that attributes a superiority by association. Being a Catholic is a great blessing, but it doesn't make me superior to Protestants, Jews or anyone else. There are many wonderful organizations within the Catholic Church: Knights of Columbus, Holy Name Society, Regnum Christi, and the Charismatic Renewal—to name a few. However, belonging to any or all of these organizations does not cover one with a mantle of holiness. Nor should they ever breed an air of superiority over non-members. Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity have received worldwide attention. In a recent interview with her successor the new Mother General stated that the one thing she feared is that the Sisters would not become saints. That process begins with the recognition of our nothingness and our complete dependence on God. That core relationship never changes.

Recently, I was studying the passage in St. Matthew's gospel where Jesus warns about scandalizing the "little ones" (Mt 18:6). What struck me about the passage is that in Jesus' eyes we are all "little ones." Thus when we see ourselves from God's viewpoint, as helpless little children not quite out of diapers, it radically changes our whole perspective. This is the reality upon which humility is based. Let me conclude with a powerful quotation from St. Augustine.

This citation comes from his letter to Dioscorus: "... I wish you to prepare for yourself no other way of seizing and holding the truth than that which has been prepared by Him who, as God, saw the weakness of our goings. In that way the first part is humility; the second, humility; the third humility; and this I continue to repeat as often as you might ask direction, not that there are no other instructions which may be given, but because, unless humility precede, accompany and follow every good action which we perform, being at once the object which we keep before our eyes, the support to which we cling, and the monitor by which we are restrained, pride wrests wholly from our hand any good work on which we are congratulating ourselves."⁴

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⁴ William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Volume I, pp. 445-446.