

THE FAMILY AND THE SCHOOL

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ONE of the points most strongly emphasized in the two great encyclicals of Pius XI on Christian Marriage (*Casti Connubii*) and The Christian Education of Youth (*Divini Illius Magistri*) is that the foundation of true education is the family. That is where education begins and where the ground of human personality is first prepared for its full growth to maturity. If this basic education is missing or defective all further education is liable to be like building an elaborate superstructure on faulty and insecure foundations or trying to cultivate plants in poisoned or exhausted soil.

Unfortunately there seems to be a growing tendency, even among practising Catholics, to shift the responsibility for the basic education of the young from the family circle to the school. A tendency to imagine that the good nuns or other teachers from the infant school onwards, will do all that is necessary in the way of teaching religion. It is almost taken for granted in consequence that the father and mother, and elder brothers and sisters, have no immediate concern with the religious atmosphere in which the younger children are growing up. It can happen that a family, which regularly attends Sunday Mass, will pass the whole week in the family circle without any mention of the things of God, or of God's concern with the daily round of ordinary life. Morning and night prayers may or may not be said by the individuals who make up the family, the very young children may have their prayers heard by mother or elder sisters. But there is no family prayer in common and no attendance at week-day Mass, except when the children attend it in a body as part of their school routine. Above all there is little or no mention in ordinary conversation, of God, our Lady, the saints, of spiritual duties or obligations, little or no consciousness of an unseen spiritual world close around us, which is the source of our true life and the real home to which we belong and are travelling. All this, it seems to be presumed, is being done by the Catholic school which the children attend day by day. Its importance is not denied; the responsibility for it is shelved.

Meanwhile, in the Catholic school itself, especially if it is a primary day school, the teacher is confronted with a large class of perhaps fifty children. In many of these this fundamental sense of the existence of a spiritual world as our true home is almost, if not quite, non-existent. Even if it exists at all it will often be overlaid by a very urgent sense of the reality of the material world around them and of the preponderant claim of material things. A bare hour a day, if that, is set aside for religious teaching in these schools, and during that time it is taught, conscientiously may be, but by sheer necessity on mass production lines, and to a great extent in rather abstract propositions, known as religious doctrine or catechism. If the truths of religion had already been absorbed from babyhood, in the family circle, not in the form of abstract ideas, but spontaneously, by a sharing of the atmosphere of a living faith, even the more advanced and abstract teaching of the school class-room would come to life in the souls of children thus prepared. But as it is, in many cases, this teaching falls on ground which is barren only because it has never been cultivated. Is it surprising that an alarmingly high proportion of the children from our Catholic schools lapse altogether from the practice of their religion, or keep up for a time a half-hearted attendance at Mass and the sacraments, and when trouble or temptation and the lure of the world begin to press hard upon them they easily fall away?

This terrible 'leakage' is by no means wholly the fault of our schools, though they are often made to bear the blame. The fault lies in the weakness, on its religious side, of our Catholic family life, which is too often content to absorb a great deal of the pagan-humanist atmosphere of the contemporary world, and to leave the work of educating young children, which is its primary responsibility, almost entirely to the school. The school is thereby incapacitated from doing its own work effectively, since the vital preparation for it has never been given in family life.

The remedy is concentration, by every means in our power, and especially in the working of our parishes, on the paramount necessity of integral Catholic family life, as the basis of all true education. There are many difficulties, which come from the environment in which we live, in the way of putting this into practice, but none of them is insuperable; the overcoming of them is a matter of the spread of knowledge and the cultivation of good will to implement the knowledge.

Education in the family, as in school, is learning the true meaning of life and putting it into practice. The foundation of true education is a vivid realization of the existence of the spiritual world. The starting point of this realization is love. That is why marriage has been created by God as a companionship, and a society, based on the mutual love of husband and wife, which is itself based on the love of God. It is very important to have a clear mind about the nature of love, which is the foundation of all true living. All human love, men's love for God, the love of husband and wife, of parents for children and friend for friend is of the same nature. Its essence is giving, not getting. It wills the good of the person we love, it is the giving of ourselves that they may have that good. *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.* The source of this love is the will, not the emotions. Such love may produce very deep emotion, but unless it is based upon the will it cannot be true love. True love unifies; to love a person truly is to have that person constantly present to heart and mind.

Because such love is self-giving, to love God is to give ourselves to him in obedience. *If you love me, keep my commandments.* By giving ourselves to him in obedience we are willing his good, willing that his holy will may be done, and by our obedience God becomes present in our souls through knowledge and love, and thus our life is united with his. On this love of God our love for one another is based. Husband and wife give themselves to each other, willing each other's good, in accordance with God's will. It is this that unifies them, so that they live in each other's hearts and minds. In a special way this is the work of the sacramental grace of Matrimony, and from this work flows the love of parents for their children, and children for their parents; they give themselves to each other, willing each other's good, in accordance with God's will, and so they are bound together into a unity. It is only when selfishness enters that this mutual self-giving becomes imperfect, because one or other begins to think more of getting than of giving. Then love is damaged and perhaps in the end destroyed.

True human love, therefore, of its very nature implies obedience to God's law and will. That is why parental authority and the obedience of children to that authority is of the very essence of the Christian conception of the family. Obedience and authority

are not popular conceptions nowadays. We are still suffering from reaction against the rigid ideas of parental authority characteristic of the Victorian era. Such authority tended to be arbitrary, demanding unquestioning and blind obedience. True parental authority is based upon the obedience of the parents themselves to God's will. It is a scaffolding, by which the character of the child is gradually built up, in accordance with God's will. The scaffolding is gradually removed as the building progresses towards completion. The character thus becomes complete, in so far as the external authority of parents becomes absorbed into the personal life of the child, and external control gives place to self-control.

It is clear, then, that the successful living of family life (as of every other kind of life) depends, in the last resort, upon a vivid realization of the necessity of doing God's will. Love is the basis of marriage and family life and true love depends upon self-giving according to God's will. Self-giving according to God's will is dependent upon obedience; of parents to God, and of children to parents through whom they also learn obedience to God. This constant and vivid realization of the necessity of doing God's will depends upon the extent to which God and the world of spiritual values is real to us. We can think and even talk about God's will, but that does not necessarily mean that they are real to us; as real and urgent as our physical and mental needs. There is only one road by which God, and the world of spiritual things, becomes real to us in that sense; the road of *prayer*. Prayer alone, on our side, can bring us into personal contact with God.

We are often discouraged, in seriously pursuing this road, because we misconceive what is the essence of prayer, and do not realize how far our apparent failure to make progress is in the sphere of what is less essential or even not essential at all. What is most essential in the act or state of prayer is the will; what the catechism calls the heart, or the will lovingly and freely given. The work of the mind in prayer is necessary since the will cannot be used at all apart from the mind. But in prayer the intellectual functioning of the mind in discursive reasoning may be at the very minimum. In the higher states of prayer it may disappear altogether in an intuitive perception of God. But in ordinary prayer it may be reduced to a mere act of attention, and even wandering attention. What God asks of us in our prayer, as its

principal contribution, is our wills: the only thing over which we have a kind of absolute control. He knows what is in our minds, he realizes our emotional feelings, but our wills are our complete possession, to give or to withhold. He will not force them. He wants them as a gift of love. So when we pray our minds may be blank, grim, grey and leaden, or full of teasing distractions. We may be feeling depressed or rebellious, or just dead. But whatever our mind is doing, whatever our feeling may be, we can always offer him our loving wills—our hearts. We can just kneel, and give our hearts by just going on kneeling, even if we can think of nothing, feel nothing, say nothing. The late Abbot Cuthbert Butler once said in a retreat: 'If you rise from your knees after prayer, depressed and discouraged because you seem to yourself to have prayed so badly, ask yourself three simple questions: did I want to pray? did I intend to pray? did I try to pray? And if you can honestly say yes to each of them, take courage. You have prayed and probably prayed well because you have been faithful.'

That faithfulness, persevered in, will bring awareness of God's presence and guiding providence. Husbands and wives ought to agree that all their married life they will, when possible, pray together. In this way prayer will become the foundation of their lives laid together in mutual companionship. Out of this will grow an increasing realization of the reality and nearness of God and the spiritual world. God's will will be seen as the one thing of vital and paramount importance. This atmosphere, generated by prayer, will surround the family. Children learn a hundred times more by what they absorb from their background and environment than from what they are explicitly taught, especially when that is contradicted by the atmosphere in which they live. They are unconsciously quick to detect inconsistency. But they enter into and absorb their surroundings with amazing swiftness.

In a Catholic home the external manifestations of its atmosphere will be prayer in common, Mass when possible, and family rosary. Great feasts of the Church, anniversaries, birthdays, Patron Saints' days, these will be important landmarks, because our Lord, our Lady and the Saints and Angels will be not vague shadows, half-existing in some remote and almost legendary world, but real people: inhabiting that world which lies just behind the thin veil of material things, ever present in intimate contact with our own lives. In this atmosphere the gulf which

sometimes yawns between religion and real life, between sacred and secular, will disappear, leaving only the distinction between good and evil; good to be loved because sanctified by its accordance with God's will, evil to be hated and fought in the power of God's grace. This sense of being given to God will unconsciously pervade even the most frivolous entertainments, the most uproarious parties, as well as the deeper and more serious sides of life.

The life of prayer for Catholics living in the world, if this ideal of family life is to be aimed at, must include something more than Sunday Mass and morning and night prayers. There should be, as an essential part of it, spiritual reading, a prayerful studying and absorbing of the truths of the Faith. Parents have a duty of explicit teaching of the Faith which cannot be left to the schools. When the children grow up there is a duty too of sharing and guiding conversation and discussion, on every kind of topic, where the application of a Christian standard of values is essential if an atmosphere is to be maintained in which these values are recognized as real. Neither of these things can be done as they should be without a background of intelligent spiritual reading begun earlier in life and kept up with regularity. In days gone by, in Protestant England, the Bible was studied diligently even in the poorest homes, and today in the simplest and least educated Catholic homes the truths of religion can be made the food of thought and prayer through the use of suitable literature. We devote time and trouble to professional study, and find leisure for recreational reading, hobbies, films and other forms of entertainment. It should not be impossible to find adequate time also for this.

Only by making the family the centre and source of a deeper realization of God and spiritual things can it become, as God designs it to be, the foundation of Christian education, and only in this way can the right order of things be restored, the leakage reduced and our schools enabled to fulfil their function adequately.