

Parenthood

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Then they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when His disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him and said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:15-16)

The rebuke the Lord gave His disciples when they interfered with little children coming to Him also rings in the ears of those responsible for the instruction and raising of children. How often, when we watch children enter into states of evil, does it appear that in some way we (the responsible adults) have failed in leading them to the true path of life? How often do we feel despair in our sincere efforts to allow little children to find the happiness of being present with the Lord? How often do we fear that we are acting like the disciples: interfering with the leading of providence, in some way destroying the innocence and beauty of childhood, and blocking the path to God which seems so open in those states? What is the role of a parent in seeking to cooperate with the Lord in bringing children to Him? What teachings from the Word can help us as we look to this sacred goal?

First, it is important that the goal be clearly outlined. Parent-hood is a temporary responsibility. In process of time we must be ready to relinquish all claim to the title of parent, as the Lord disowned His parents at twelve and again at thirty. Two more examples from the Word illustrate this as well. The people who lived on earth just prior to the great flood were the worst people ever to inhabit the earth. Yet, we are told that "they gloried in the great number of their children; and that they had their children with them wherever they went, who walked before them in a curved line" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1272). The sole desire of these wicked people was to see themselves reflected in their children, to relive their lives in them. Such a desire is evil stemming from the love of self. These people refused to allow their children the freedom to lead a life of their own. Such parents would enslave their children even to eternity if it were possible.

On the other hand, Mary, the mother of our Lord, gives a perfect example of true parenthood. Once Swedenborg talked with her in the spiritual world. Mary told him that although she was the mother of our Lord as far as His natural body was concerned, she is unwilling "that any one should acknowledge Him as her Son, because in Him all is Divine" (*Continuation of the Last Judgement* 66). In other words, Mary recognized the fact, which sincere parents also see, that children accept what is spiritual of their own free will, and that they are not sons or daughters as to their spirits but are equals in the eyes of the Lord. For this reason, after death parents meet their children and renew their friendships, but in a short time they renounce any parental claims, acknowledging that all people have one spiritual father, the Lord, and one spiritual mother, the church. Still their love for their children, now adults, continues. They sorrow if their children have chosen to follow evil loves that lead them to hell.

It is the duty of parents to promote the spiritual development of their children in such a way that they can indeed share in true spiritual freedom: the freedom to follow a good love. But what are the means by which this goal may be reached? Obviously little children are not ready for full

spiritual freedom. In fact, the Word specifically states that infants have nothing of spiritual freedom, which is a gift granted only in adult life. Nevertheless, parents do have a responsibility to allow their children to “come” to the Lord. They must gradually increase the freedom that children have in order to open the doors of heaven to them.

The first duty of parenthood is to love their children, a love that both warms the relationship between parent and child, and enhances the marriage between husband and wife. Indeed, love of children is instrumental in the increase of love truly conjugal or true marriage love. But note that love and respect demand full acceptance of the responsibilities of parenthood. They demand love only of the good, the use, which a child is capable of showing. This, in turn, demands the painful work of disciplining the evil that flows into children from the hells (see *Conjugal Love* 405).

A second responsibility of parenthood is to provide for one's children. We are told that parents should provide not just the necessities of life, but also such things as a “right” upbringing, a happy home, an example of orderly conduct, and most importantly, the good and truth which parents promise to teach their children at baptism. Family worship and family fun are both responsibilities of parenthood in cooperating with the Lord to allow our children to come to Him.

A third responsibility of parenthood is to control our children. Establishing a conscience in children is essential for their future happiness. Conscience is formed when order is imposed upon a person's native or inborn will, that is, when order keeps a person's selfish desires in check. In adults, this order must come from within, but this cannot be the case with children. Until a person has adult freedom, conscience is only in a formative stage; it is an unopened spiritual plane. Parents owe it to their children to help control their native wills by imposing rules to curb their outbreaks (*Spiritual Experiences* 4421).

But, beyond controlling the natural will, parents have a fourth responsibility—the responsibility to train their children. Training is more than just control. It looks toward building a child's conscience. Such training, as is the case with all things of love, is done by example more than by words. Parents know more about the heredity of their children than anyone else in the world. For this reason, they are best qualified to help their children; they know the special weakness of their heredity. Parents can help their children face these weaknesses and combat them. So training should be specific as well as general, directed to fight against special weakness as well as to show the example of a useful life.

Beyond training, a fifth parental responsibility is teaching. In the Most Ancient Church, described in the story of Adam and Eve, educating the young so that they could become productive angels was the highest of uses. This use is no less important today. Parents have a Divine command to instruct their children about religion. They have a duty to provide a “right” upbringing, that is, the correct means through which a child's potential for use can be realized. In our complicated world, education is quite specialized, with qualified educators and well-developed school systems. Yet unless parents take an active, interested role in their children's development, they are not truly committed to the principle of right education. Further, family worship and regular home discussions form the necessary firm foundation from which schools can work. Parents who love their children want them to have good things. They do seek a right education, which will provide the vessels of truth necessary for their children's entrance into the adult life of regeneration.

The role of parenthood, then, has as its goal the happy acceptance of one's child as an equal in God's sight. This goal is attained through the means described in the Word: first, by loving and respecting our children; second, by striving to provide not just material things which will keep them naturally healthy, but also a spiritual environment to strengthen the soul; third, by controlling the evils of their heredity; fourth, by seeking to train them in the ways of the Lord and in the path of civil, moral and spiritual good; and fifth, above all, by striving to teach our children the ultimate path they can follow into true adulthood. By following these teachings, we can rest assured that we are cooperating with the Lord, that we are not blocking our children's way to heaven, but are instead heeding the Lord's words, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:16).