

Respecting And Honouring Our Elderly Parents

A Catholic Guide To Family Happiness

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“LISTEN and hearken to your father, that beget you: and despise not your mother when she is old,” counseled the wise man of long ago. (Proverbs 23:22) “I would never do that!” you may say. Instead of despising our mothers - or our fathers - most of us feel a deep love for them. We recognize that we owe them a great deal. First of all, our parents gave us life. While God, our Father and Creator, is the Source of life, without our parents we simply would not exist: Nothing we can give our parents is as precious as life itself. Then, just think of the self-sacrifice, anxious care, expense, and loving attention involved in helping a child along the path from infancy to adulthood. How reasonable it is, therefore, that God's Word counsels: “Honour your father and your mother, which is the first commandment with a promise: That it may be well with you, and you may be long lived upon earth” which is the way Saint Paul reminded his converts of the Fourth Commandment in Ephesians 6:2-3. How often were we drilled in our youth on our knowledge of the Ten Commandments? How could we ever forget: “Honour your father and your mother... that it may go well with you and you may live a long time on the earth”?

Review Question. What debts do we owe our parents, and therefore how should we feel and act toward them?

RECOGNIZING EMOTIONAL NEEDS.

HONOURING OUR ELDERLY PARENTS.

The apostle Paul wrote to his disciple Saint Timothy and asked him, as bishop left behind to administer one of the growing and newly established churches, to teach the new Christians: “But if any widow have children, or grandchildren, let her learn first to govern her own house, and to make a return of duty to her parents: for this is acceptable before God.” (1 Timothy 5:4.) From this we learn that all children and grandchildren must learn first to practice godly devotion (‘governing one’s house’) in their own household and to keep paying a due compensation (‘the return of duty’) to their parents and grandparents, for to do this is acceptable in God's sight. Grown children offer this “due compensation” or return of due or debt by showing appreciation for the years of love, work, and care that their parents and grandparents spent on them. One way children can do this is by recognizing that like everyone else, older ones need love and reassurance - often desperately so. Like all of us, they need to feel valued. They need to feel that their lives are worthwhile.

Review Question. How can grown children pay “due compensation” or “return of duty” to their parents?

FAMILY HAPPINESS.

So we can honour our parents and grandparents by letting them know that we love them. (1 Corinthians 16:14 says: "Let all your things be done in charity.") If our parents are not living with us, we should remember that hearing from us can mean a great deal to them. A cheerful letter, a phone call, or a visit can greatly contribute to their joy. Margaret, who lives in Jamaica, wrote when she was 82 years of age: "My daughter [whose husband is a traveling lay missionary, working with the Roma or gypsy peoples of Eastern Europe] tells me: 'Mother, please "travel" with us.' She sends me their scheduled route and telephone number for each week. I can open my map and say: 'Ah. Now they are here!' I always thank God our Father for the blessing of having such a child. Thank you, Lord Jesus."

Review Question. How can we honour parents and grandparents?

ASSISTING WITH MATERIAL NEEDS.

Might honouring one's parents also involve caring for their material needs? Yes. It often does. In Jesus' day the Jewish religious leaders upheld the mere human tradition that if a person declared that his money or property was "a gift dedicated to God," he was freed from the responsibility to use it to care for his parents. (Matthew 15:3-6 tells the full story. "But Jesus answering, said to them: Why do you also transgress the commandment of God for your tradition? For God said: Honour your father and mother: And: He that shall curse father or mother, let him die the death. But you say: Whosoever shall say to father or mother, Anything I have that that I might have used to help you is a gift dedicated to God. And he shall no longer have a duty to his father or his mother: and you have made void the commandment of God for your tradition.") How callous! In effect, those false religious leaders were encouraging people not to honour their parents but to treat them with contempt by selfishly denying their needs. Never do we want to do that!

The Pharisees had taught that the offering that someone shall make verbally to God, shall be instead of all those things that which he should otherwise expend for the profit of his aged parents. This tradition of the Pharisees was calculated to enrich themselves; by exempting children from giving any further assistance to their parents, provided they once offered to the temple and the priests, that which should have been the support of their parents. But this was a violation of the law of God, and of nature, which our Saviour here in these verses has condemned in no uncertain terms. Let us recall that Deuteronomy 27:16 says: "Cursed be he that honours not, and fails in his duty to, his father and mother: and all the people shall say: Amen."

Review Question. How did certain Jewish religious traditions encourage callousness toward elderly parents?

HONOURING OUR ELDERLY PARENTS.

In many lands today, government-supported social programs provide for some of the material needs of the elderly, such as food, clothing, and shelter. In addition to that, the elderly themselves may have been able to make some provision for their old age. But if these provisions run out or prove inadequate, children honour their parents by doing what they can to meet parental needs. In fact, caring for aged parents is an evidence of true godly devotion, that is, one's devotion to God our Father, the Originator of the family arrangement, is shown, in part by our devotion to our own parents.

Review Question. Despite provisions made by the governments of some lands, why does honouring one's parents sometimes include giving financial help?

LOVE AND SELF-SACRIFICE.

Many adult children have responded to the needs of their infirm parents with love and self-sacrifice. Some have taken their parents into their own homes or have moved to be near them. Others have moved in with their parents. Frequently, such arrangements have proved to be a blessing to both parents and children.

Review Question. What living arrangements have some made in order to care for the needs of their parents?

Sometimes, though, such moves do not turn out well. Why? Perhaps because decisions are made too hastily or are based solely on emotion. "The discreet man considers his steps," the Bible wisely cautions in Proverbs 14:15. For example, suppose that your elderly mother is having difficulty living alone and you think she might benefit by moving in with you. In shrewdly considering your steps, you might consider the following: What are her actual needs? Are there private or state-sponsored support services that offer an acceptable alternative solution? Does she want to move? If she does, in what ways will her life be affected? Will she have to leave friends behind? How might this affect her emotionally? Have you talked these things over with her? How might such a move affect you, your mate and spouse, your own children? If your mother needs care, who will provide it? Can the responsibility be shared? Have you discussed the matter with all those directly involved?

Review Question. Why is it good not to act hastily in making decisions regarding elderly parents?

FAMILY HAPPINESS.

Since the responsibility for care rests with all children in a family, it may be wise to hold a family conference so that all may share in making decisions. Talking to parish clergy and other mature members of your parish circle or to friends who have faced a similar situation may also be helpful. Proverbs 15:22 in the Bible wisely warns: "Designs are brought to nothing where there is no counsel (or confidential talk): but where there are many counsellors, they are established."

Review Question. Whom may you be able to consult when deciding how to help your elderly parents?

BE EMPATHETIC AND UNDERSTANDING.

Honouring our elderly parents requires empathy and understanding. As the years take their toll, older ones may find it increasingly difficult to walk, eat, and remember. They may need help. Often the children become protective and try to provide guidance. But the elderly are adults with a lifetime of accumulated wisdom and experience, a lifetime of caring for themselves and making their own decisions. Their identity and self-respect may center on their role as parents and adults. Parents who feel they must hand over control of their lives to their children may become depressed or angry. Some resent and resist what they may see as efforts to rob them of their independence.

HONOURING OUR ELDERLY PARENTS.

There are no easy solutions to such problems, but it is a kindness to allow elderly parents to look after themselves and make their own decisions to the extent possible. It is wise not to make decisions about what is best for your parents without talking to them first. They may have lost much. Allow them to keep what they still have. You may find that the less you try to control your parents' lives, the better your relationship with them will be. They will be happier, and so will you. Even if it is necessary to insist on certain things for their good, honouring your parents requires that

you afford them the dignity and respect they deserve. God's Word counsels: "Rise up before the hoary head and gray hair, and honour and show consideration to the person of the aged man: and fear the Lord your God, for I am the Lord." Leviticus 19:32.

Review Questions.

- (a) Despite their advancing age, what consideration should be given to elderly ones?
- (b) Whatever steps a grown child takes in behalf of his parents, what should he always give them?

MAINTAINING THE RIGHT ATTITUDE.

Sometimes a problem that adult children face in honouring their aged parents involves the relationship they had with their parents in earlier times. Perhaps your father was cold and unloving, your mother domineering and harsh. You may still feel frustrated, angry, or hurt because they were not the parents you wanted them to be. Can you overcome such feelings?*

[*Footnote: We are not here discussing situations in which parents were guilty of extreme abuse of their power and trust, to what may be viewed as a criminal degree (though even here we must always remember that God has called us to heroic virtue and that His Mercy and Justice are beyond human imitations and standards).]

FAMILY HAPPINESS.

Stanislav, (Stan to his friends,) who grew up in Poland, relates: "My stepfather had been an SS officer in Nazi Germany. He easily lost his temper, and then he was dangerous. He beat up my mother many times in front of my eyes. Once when he was angry with me, he swung his belt and hit me in the face with the buckle. It hit me so hard that I tumbled over the bed."

Yet, there was another side to the picture, Stan adds: "On the other hand, he worked very hard and did not spare himself in caring for the family materially. He never showed me fatherly affection, but I knew that he was emotionally scarred. His mother had thrown him out when he was a young boy. He grew up with his fists and entered the war as a young man. I could understand to some degree and did not blame him. When I grew older, I wanted to help him as much as I could up until his death. It was not easy, but I did what I could. I tried to be a good son to the end, and I think he accepted me as that."

Review Question. If an adult child's relationship with his parents has not been good in the past, how can he still handle the challenge of caring for them in their advanced years?

In family situations, as in other matters, the Bible counsel of Saint Paul applies: "Put on, all of you, therefore, as the elect of God, holy, and beloved, the bowels of mercy [sincere compassion], benignity [kindness], humility, modesty, patience: Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if any have a complaint against another: even as the Lord has forgiven you, so do you also." - Colossians 3:12-13.

Review Question. What scripture applies in all situations, including those that arise in caring for elderly parents?

HANDY HINT.

It is unwise to make decisions for a parent without talking to that one first.

CAREGIVERS NEED CARE TOO.

HONOURING OUR ELDERLY PARENTS.

Caring for an infirm parent is hard work, involving many tasks, much responsibility, and long hours. But the most difficult part is often emotional. It is distressing to watch your parents lose their health, memory, and independence. Chris, who comes from Panama, relates: "My mother was the nucleus of our family. It was very painful to care for her. First she started limping; then she needed a cane, then a walker, then a wheelchair. After that it was downhill until she passed away. She developed bone cancer and needed constant care -day and night. We bathed her and fed her and read to her. It was very difficult-especially emotionally. When I realized that my mother was dying, I cried because I loved her so much."

Review Question. Why is caring for parents sometimes distressing?

FAMILY HAPPINESS.

If you find yourself in a similar situation, what can you do to cope? Listening to God our Father by Bible reading and speaking to him through prayer will help you greatly. Unite yourself with Our Lord on the cross. Share with Our Lady her sorrow as she watched her son die on Mount Calvary. Remember Saint Paul's advice in Philippians 4:6-7: "Be nothing solicitous; but in every thing, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your petitions be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." In a practical way, make sure that you eat balanced meals and try to get adequate sleep. By doing this, you will be in a better condition, both emotionally and physically, to take care of your loved one. Perhaps you can arrange an occasional break from the daily routine. Even if a vacation is not possible, it is still wise to schedule some time for relaxation. In order to get time away, you may be able to arrange for someone else to stay with your ailing parent.

It is not unusual for adult caregivers to have unreasonable expectations of themselves. But do not feel guilty for what you cannot do. In some circumstances you may need to entrust your loved one to the care of a nursing home. If you are a caregiver, set reasonable expectations for yourself. You must balance the needs not only of your parents but also of your children, your spouse, and yourself.

Review Question. What advice may help a caregiver to keep a balanced view of things?

STRENGTH BEYOND WHAT IS NORMAL.

HONOURING OUR ELDERLY PARENTS.

Through his Word, the Bible, God our Father lovingly provides guidance that can greatly aid a person in caring for aging parents, but that is not the only help he provides. "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him," wrote the Psalmist King David, under inspiration. "He is near to all that call upon him in truth. He will do the will of them that fear him: and he will hear their prayer, and save them." (Psalm 145: 18-19. It is Psalm 144:18-19 in the Vulgate.) God our Father will save and eternally preserve his faithful ones through even the most difficult situations.

Marina, in the Solomons, learned this when caring for her mother, who was made helpless by a stroke. "There is nothing more depressing than to see your loved one suffer, unable to tell you where it hurts," writes Marina. "It was just like seeing her drown little by little, and there was nothing I could do. Many times I would bend my knees and talk to God our Father about how tired I was. I cried out like David, who beseeched the Lord to place his tears in a bottle and remember him.

I remember reading Psalm 56:8 so often, at that time: "You have kept count of my tossings on the bed; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?" [The same verse in the Vulgate (Psalm 55:9) reads "I have declared to you my life: you have set my tears in your sight, As also in your promise."] And as God Our Father promised, he gave me the strength I needed. My parish priest, who was a great support throughout my mother's illness, gave me another psalm to meditate upon. It is Psalm 18:18. "They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but the LORD was my support." God Our Father really did come to be as a support for me." [The same verse in the Vulgate (Psalm 17:19) reads: "They prevented me in the day of my affliction: and the Lord became my protector."]

Review Question. What promise of support has God our Father made, and what experience shows that he keeps this promise?

It has been said that caring for aging parents is a "story without a happy ending." For A Catholic Christian this is never really the case since we eagerly look forward to our eternal home in heaven. "For we have not here a lasting city, but we seek one that is to come." (Hebrews 13:14) Despite even the best efforts at caregiving, older ones will eventually die, as did Marina's mother. But those who trust in God our Father know that death is not the end of the story. The apostle Paul said: "I serve the Father and my God, believing all things which are written in the law and the prophets: Having hope in God, which these also themselves look for, that there shall be a resurrection of the just and unjust." (Acts 24:14-15) Those who have lost elderly parents in death take comfort in the resurrection hope along with the promise of a delightful new world of God's making in which was seen in a vision by Saint John who described it thus: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes: and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things are passed away." - Revelation 21:4.

Review Question. What Bible promises help caregivers to keep optimistic, even if the one they are looking after dies?

FAMILY HAPPINESS.

True servants of God have deep regard for their parents, even though these may have grown old. (Proverbs 23:22-24 says: "Hearken to your father, that beget you: and despise not your mother when she is old. Buy truth, and do not sell wisdom, and instruction, and understanding. The father of the just rejoices greatly: he that has begotten a wise son, shall have joy in him.") Yes, servants of God honour them. In doing so, they experience what the inspired proverb says: "Let your father, and your mother be joyful, and let her rejoice that bore you." (Proverbs 23:25) And most of all, those who honour their elderly parents also please and honour the Lord God our Father.

Review Question. What good results come from honouring elderly parents?

HOW CAN THESE BIBLE PRINCIPLES HELP...

US TO HONOUR OUR ELDERLY PARENTS?

We should give due compensation (the return of duty) to parents and grandparents. - 1 Timothy 5:4.

All our affairs must take place with love and Charity. - 1 Corinthians 16:14.

Important decisions should never be made hastily. - Proverbs 14:15.

Elderly parents, even if sick and failing, must be respected. - Leviticus 19:32.

There will come a time when death will be no more and since we will be living in eternity, the term 'growing old' will be meaningless. - Revelation 21:4.
