

Advice To Parents

By Saint Alphonsus Liguori.

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(Saint Alphonsus, founder of the Redemptorist Order, Bishop and Doctor of the Church expounds on the privilege and responsibilities of parenthood as a special vocation from God.)

The gospel tells us, that a good plant cannot produce bad fruit, and that a bad one cannot produce good fruit. We learn from this, that a good father brings up good children. But, if the parents are wicked, how can the children be virtuous? Have you ever, says Our Lord, in the same gospel, seen grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? (Matthew 5:16)

So, it is impossible, or rather very difficult, to find children virtuous, who are brought up by immoral parents. Fathers and mothers, be attentive to this sermon, which is of great importance to the eternal salvation of yourselves and of your children. Be attentive, young men and young women, who have not as yet chosen a state in life. If you wish to marry, learn the obligations which you contract with regard to the education of your children, and learn also, that if you do not fulfill them, you shall bring yourselves and all your children to damnation.

I shall divide this into two points. In the first, I shall show how important it is to bring up children in habits of virtue; and, in the second, I shall show with what care and diligence a parent ought to labor to bring them up well.

A father owes two obligations to his children; he is bound to provide for their corporal wants, and to educate them in the habits of virtue. It is not necessary to say anything else about the first obligation, than, there are some fathers more cruel than the most ferocious of wild beasts; for these squander away in eating, drinking, and pleasure, all their property, or all the fruits of their industry, and allow their children to die of hunger. Let us discuss education, which is the subject of this little sermon. I shall write it out shortly so others can benefit from the article.

It is certain that a child's future good or bad conduct depends on his being brought up well or poorly. Nature itself teaches every parent to attend to the education of his offspring. God gives children to parents, not that they may assist the family, but that they may be brought up in the fear of God, and be directed in the way of eternal salvation. "We have," says Saint John Chrysostom, "a great deposit in children, let us attend to them with great care." Children have not been given to parents as a present, which they may dispose of as they please, but as a trust, for which, if lost through their negligence, they must render an account to God.

One of the great Fathers says, that on the day of judgment, parents will have to render an account for all the sins of their children. So, he who teaches his son to live well, shall die a happy and tranquil death. He that teaches his son... when he died, he was not sorrowful, neither was he confounded before his enemies. (Ecclesiasticus 30: 3 and 5.) And he will save his soul by means of his children, that is, by the virtuous education which he has given them. Mothers too, have this duty. She shall be saved through child-bearing. (1 Timothy 2:15)

But, on the other hand, a very uneasy and unhappy death will be the lot of those who have labored only to increase the possessions, or to multiply the honors of their family, or who have sought only to lead a life of ease and pleasure, but have not watched over the morals of their children. Saint Paul says that such parents are worse than infidels. But if any man have not care of his own, and especially of those of his house, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel. (1 Timothy 5:8)

Were fathers or mothers to lead a life of piety and continual prayer, and to communicate by going to Holy Communion every day, they should be damned if they neglected the care of their children.

If all fathers fulfilled their duty of watching over the education of their children, we should have but few crimes. By the bad education which parents give to their offspring, they cause their children, says Saint John Chrysostom, to rush into many grievous vices; and thus they deliver them up to the hands of the executioner. So it was, in one town, a parent, who was the cause of all the irregularities of his children, was justly punished for his crimes with greater severity than the children themselves. Great indeed is the misfortune of the child that has vicious parents, who are incapable of bringing up their children in the fear of God, and who, when they see their children engage in dangerous friendships and in quarrels, instead of correcting and chastising them, they take compassion on them, and say: "What can I do? They are young; hopefully they will grow out of it." What wicked words, what a cruel education! Do you hope that when your children grow up, they will become saints? Listen to what Solomon says: A young man, according to his way, even when he is old, he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6) A young man, who has contracted a habit of sin, will not abandon it even in his old age. His bones, says holy Job, will be filled with the vices of his youth, and they will sleep with him in the dust. (Job 20:11)

When a young person has lived in evil habits, his bones will be filled with the vices of his youth, so that he will carry them to the grave, and the impurities, blasphemies, and hatred to which he was accustomed in his youth, will accompany him to the grave, and will sleep with him after his bones are reduced to dust and ashes. It is very easy, when they are small, to train children to habits of virtue, but, when they have come to manhood, it is equally difficult to correct them, if they have learned habits of vice.

Let us come to the second point — that is, to the means of bringing up children in the practice of virtue. I beg you, fathers and mothers, to remember what I now say to you, for on it depends the eternal salvation of your own souls, and of the souls of your children.

Saint Paul teaches sufficiently, in a few words, in what the proper education of children consists. He says that it consists in discipline and correction. And you, fathers, provoke not your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and correction of the Lord. (Ephesians 5:4) Discipline, which is the same as the religious regulation of the morals of children, implies an obligation of educating them in habits of virtue by word and example. First, by words: a good father should often assemble his children, and instill into them the holy fear of God. It was in this manner that Tobias brought up his little son, young Tobit. The father taught him from his childhood to fear the Lord and to fly from sin. And from infancy, he taught him to fear God and abstain from sin. (Tobias 1:10) The wise man says, that a well educated son is the support and consolation of his father. Instruct your son, and he will refresh you, and will give delight to your soul. (Proverbs 29:17)

But, as a well instructed son is the delight of his father's soul, so an ignorant child is a source of sorrow to a father's heart, for the ignorance of his obligations as a Christian is always accompanied with a bad life.

It was related that, in the year 1248, an ignorant priest was commanded, in a certain synod, to make a discourse. He was greatly agitated by the command and the Devil appeared to him {apparently under instructions from the Most High God, instructions the Devil could not ignore}. The Devil instructed him to say: "The rectors of infernal darkness salute the rectors of parishes, and thank them for their negligence in instructing the people; because from ignorance proceeds the misconduct and the damnation of many."

The same is true of negligent parents. In the first place, a parent ought to instruct his children in the truths of the Faith, and particularly in the four principle mysteries. First, that there is but One God, the Creator and Lord of all things; secondly, that this God is a remunerator, Who, in the next life, will reward the good with the eternal glory of Paradise, and will punish the wicked with the everlasting torments of Hell; thirdly, the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, -- that is, that in God there are Three Persons, Who are only One God, because They have but One Essence; fourthly, the mystery of the Incarnation of the Divine Word — the Son of God, and True God, Who became man in the womb of Mary, and suffered and died for our salvation.

Should a father or mother say, "I myself do not know these mysteries," can such an excuse be admitted? Can one sin excuse another? If you are ignorant of these mysteries, you are obliged to learn them, and afterwards to teach them to your children. At least, send your children to a worthy catechist. What a miserable thing to see so many fathers and mothers, who are unable to instruct their children in the most necessary truths of the Faith, and who, instead of sending their sons and daughters to Christian doctrine, employ them in occupations of little account, and when they are grown up, they do not know what is meant by mortal sin, by Hell, or eternity.

They do not even know the Creed, the Our Father, or the Hail Mary, which every Christian is bound to learn under pain of mortal sin.

Religious parents not only instruct their children in these things, which are the most important, but they also teach them the acts which ought to be made every morning after rising. They teach them first, to thank God for having preserved their life during the night, secondly to offer to God all their good actions which they will perform, and all the pains which they will suffer during the day, thirdly, to implore of Jesus Christ and Our Most Holy Mother Mary to preserve them from all sin during the day. They teach them to make, every evening, an examination of conscience and an act of contrition. They also teach them to make every day, the acts of Faith, Hope and Charity, to recite the Rosary, and to visit the Blessed Sacrament. Some good fathers of families are careful to get a book of meditations to read, and to have mental prayer in common for half an hour every day. This is what the Holy Ghost exhorts you to practice. Do you have children? Instruct them and bow down their neck from their childhood. (Ecclesiasticus 7:25) Endeavor to train them from their infancy to these religious habits, and when they grow up, they will persevere in them. Accustom them also to go to confession and communion every week.

It is also very useful to infuse good maxims into the infant minds of children. What ruin is brought upon children by their father who teaches them worldly maxims! "You must," some parents say to

their children, “seek the esteem and applause of the world. God is merciful; He takes compassion on certain sins.” How miserable the young man is who sins in obedience to such maxims. Good parents teach very different maxims to their children. Queen Blanche, the mother of Saint Louis, King of France, used to say to him: “My son, I would rather see you dead in my arms, than in the state of sin.” So then, let it be your practice also to infuse into your children certain maxims of salvation, such as: What will it profit us to gain the whole world, if we lose our own souls? Everything on this earth has an end, but eternity never ends. Let all be lost, provided God is not lost. One of these maxims well impressed on the mind of a young person, will preserve him always in the grace of God.

But parents are obliged to instruct their children in the practice of virtue, not only by words, but still more by example. If you give your children bad example, how can you expect that they will lead good lives? When a dissolute young man is corrected for a fault, he answers: “Why do you censure me, when my father does worse?” The children will complain of an ungodly father, because for his sake they are in reproach. (Ecclesiasticus 41:10) How is it possible for a son to be moral and religious, when he has had the example of a father who uttered blasphemies and obscenities, who spent the entire day in the tavern, in games and drunkenness, who was in the habit of frequenting houses of bad fame, and of defrauding his neighbor? Do you expect your son to go frequently to confession, when you yourself approach the confessional scarcely once a year?

It is related in a fable, that a crab on day rebuked its young for walking crookedly. They replied, “Father, let us see you walk.” The father walked before them more crookedly than they did. This is what happens to the parent who gives bad example. Hence, he has not even courage to correct his children for the sins which he himself commits.

According to Saint Thomas, scandalous parents compel, in a certain manner, their children to lead a bad life. “They are not,” says Saint Bernard, “fathers, but murderers, they kill, not the bodies, but the souls of their children.” It is useless for parents to say: “My children have been born with bad dispositions.” This is not true, for, Seneca says, “You err, if you think that vices are born with us; they have been engrafted.” Vices are not born with your children, but have been communicated to them by the bad example of the parents. If you had given good example to your sons, they would not be so vicious as they are. So parents, frequent the Sacraments, learn from the sermons, recite the Rosary every day, abstain from all obscene language, from detraction, and from quarrels, and you will see that your children follow your example.

It is particularly necessary to train children to virtue in their infancy, bow down their neck from their childhood, for when they have grown up, and contracted bad habits, it will be very difficult for you to produce, by words, any amendment in their lives.

To bring up children in the discipline of the Lord, it is also necessary to take away from them the occasion of doing evil. A father must forbid his children to go out at night, or to go to a house in which their virtue might be exposed to danger, or to keep bad company. Cast out, said Sarah to Abraham, this bondswoman and her son. (Genesis 21:10) She wished to have Ishmael (Ismail), the son of Hagar (Agar) the bondswoman, banished from her house, that her son Isaac might not learn his vicious habits. Bad companions are the ruin of young persons. A father should not only remove the evil which he witnesses, but he is also bound to inquire after the conduct of his children, and to seek information from family and from outsiders regarding the places which his children frequent when they leave home, regarding their occupations and companions. A father ought to forbid his

children ever to bring into his house stolen goods. When Tobias heard the bleating of a goat in his house, he said, Take care, perhaps it is stolen, go, restore it to its owners. (Tobias 2:21)

Parents should prohibit their children from all games {the reference is to vicious games and games of an excessive gambling spirit – not to pleasant childhood games}, which bring destruction on their families and on their own souls, and also dances {the reference here is to certain traditional but lewd and immoral dances common in Italian villages at the time}, suggestive entertainment, and certain dangerous conversations and parties of {immoral} pleasures. A father should remove from his house books of romances {the Saint is referring to the erotic literature commonly available at the time}, which pervert young persons, and all bad books which contain pernicious maxims, tales of obscenity, or of profane love. He should not permit his daughters to be alone with men, whether young or old. But some will say: “But this man tutors my daughter; he is a saint.” The saints are in Heaven, but the saints that are on earth are flesh, and by proximate occasions, they may become devils.

Another obligation of parents is to correct the faults of the family. “Bring them up in the discipline and correction of the Lord.” There are fathers and mothers who witness faults in the family and remain silent. Through fear of displeasing their children, some fathers neglect to correct them, but, if you saw your child falling into a pool of water, and in danger of being drowned, would it not be savage cruelty not to catch him by the hair, and save his life? He that spares the rod hates his son. (Proverbs 13:24) If you love your children, correct them, and while they are growing up, chastise them, even with the rod, as often as it may be necessary.

I say, with the rod, but not with a stick; for you must correct them like a father, and not like a prison guard. You must be careful not to beat them when you are in a passion, for you will then be in danger of beating them with too much severity, and the correction will be without fruit, for then they believe that the chastisement is the effect of anger, and not of a desire on your part to see them amend their lives. I have also said, that you should correct them while they are growing up, for when they arrive at manhood, your correction will be of little use. You must then abstain from correcting them with the hand, otherwise, they will become more perverse, and will lose their respect for you. What use is it to correct children with injurious words and with imprecations? Deprive them of some part of their meals, of certain articles of dress, or shut them up in their room.

I have said enough. Draw from this discourse the conclusion, that he who has brought up his children badly, will be severely punished, and that he who has trained them in the habits of virtue, will receive a great reward.
