

## **Developing Families with Personality**

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In the 1960s, the Church made a "preferential option" for the poor. Since we are all poor, it was in a certain sense just another way of putting our Lord's sayings "the poor have the gospel preached to them", and "blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God". The present Pope has made it clear that the Church's special option today is for the family, which has always been considered the fundamental nucleus of society and of the Church itself. The family is the natural school of love and understanding, of the spirit of give and take, of forgiveness... And of many other things, among them that unique and irreplaceable sex education which takes place between brothers and sisters as they argue and fight and puzzle over what really makes boys and girls different, and begin to sense some of the deeper and truly human differences. This and much else is the potential of the family. But the family today is not just neglected and marginalized, as are the poor, but is under siege.

The family is under siege today, and it is weak. It is taking a battering and in many places is going under. You are aware of the situation; perhaps you are not sure of what to do. Supernaturally you have to do a lot: to pray more, rely more on the sacrament of marriage and its particular sacramental graces. And, humanly, you have to give a lot to your family: not material things, but personality. This is the point I want to make to you tonight: you have to give more personality - much more personality - to your family.

Is yours a family with personality? I don't mean is your house distinctive, with superior flooring or better furniture... Does your family stand out from others, from those of your neighbours, not for its comfort or for the number and quality of its gadgets, but for its vitality, for the quality of its family life? Are your children attracted more to neighbouring houses, or are neighbouring children drawn more to yours? Or are yours and theirs drawn more to the nearest malls? As happens to families that are a little more than places to sleep or be fed or watch TV in, but don't draw or inspire or wake people up to life, because they lack the personality to do it.

What does the idea of a family with (or without) personality suggest? One way of defining a strong personality in an individual is to say that the person influences (for good or for bad) more than he or she is influenced. A family with a "weak personality" is going to be influenced, and perhaps dominated, by the values or anti-values surrounding it. So a question you need to put directly to yourself is: does your family influence the social atmosphere it is involved in, or is it more influenced by it?

When I was a boy I don't think I ever thought about whether the family I grew up in had personality. I just liked it. And I doubt my parents ever asked themselves the sort of question I am putting to you now: what sort of personality does our family have? They did not have to, because, thank God, all of the families that were our friends had plenty of life, plenty of children, plenty of values. There was no TV then of course. We went to the movies once or twice a week (and that was a sort of special occasion to look forward to), but for the most part we just mixed together and did normal things together. And the normal things were almost always good things. It just happened that way. It doesn't so easily just happen that way today.

Today we are all being influenced, and not for good, on a massive scale. We need to realize it and to find the human force, along with the grace of God, to withstand it. We are a market, and the marketeers want us to be as captive a market as possible. They are trying to manipulate us. Are we aware of this? Happy, or maybe just passive, before it? Asking ourselves what we can do about it?

### ***The family as a school***

What can you do about it? You can turn your family back into what it is meant to be - a school! The first natural school.

Before public education became the norm (less than 100 years ago), the vast majority of parents literally had to educate their children, bring them up, themselves. That might be an idea to return to. But few parents are in a position to undertake total home teaching, imparting to their children full courses in Literature, Physics and so on. Leave that for the established schools (though you should know what are the value-standards operating among the teachers and fellow-students of your children). What you have to teach is *values*: not just moral values, but *incarnated* values reflected not just through the moral principles that the parents hold but in the whole atmosphere in which the family lives. You have to be the source not mainly of knowledge and not only of life, but also of inspiration, ideals, strength for your children.

100 years ago, and maybe even 50, parents could reasonably enough trust the standards their children received at educational establishments outside the home. This whole situation has been significantly modified over the last few decades in a way that goes well beyond the question of the values absorbed in school. It is not only that the outlook of young people is molded nowadays more by the atmosphere of the recreational or sporting centers they frequent than by what they hear in the classroom. We have gone far beyond that. The real "school" which dominates the making or unmaking of social and personal values is constituted by the media; and this school is potently present within the home itself.

The progression from films to TV to videos and now to the internet, means that social values can no longer be considered an *outside* factor with regard to family life. Through the media, the social culture makes its way daily into practically all Western homes, profoundly influencing the values (if any) that are being inculcated there. It has become the home school, displacing - if there is not enough family personality to counter it - the family itself as the real domestic school.

### ***The attraction of evil***

I guess all of us have seen Mel Gibson's film on the Passion, and were struck by that androgynous figure of evil or the Devil that he introduced, with a face that was in some way handsome or attractive but spooky... You probably also saw the TV interview where he was asked why, if he wished to represent evil, he gave it a powerful and even attractive face. And his answer, clearly backed by his own life experience: because Evil does attract. But the more of it you let into yourself, the emptier you become.

Evil is attractive. However, it is anything but vital; it deadens you, draining life and leaving you empty. It is persuasive, but not inspiring; on the contrary it sucks every good inspiration or ideal or hope out of you. I don't know if you are a J.K. Rowling fan or not, but there are passages in the Harry Potter novels that can make people think. Do you remember the Dementors: "Dementors... glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope and happiness out of the air around them. Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory, will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself - soulless and evil. You'll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life" (*The Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 140).

### ***Experiences of good***

That is why it is so important for each life to be backed by good experiences. None are more important than those acquired in the family: being loved despite not being too lovable, being forgiven and being taught to forgive, being corrected justly (and sometimes not altogether justly) and learning to accept it. Having a good time and learning to help others have a good time. If such family experiences are strong, they build up into a capital that even the most prodigal son or daughter (because prodigals there will be) cannot fully dissipate. With God's grace, it will in the end prove enough to draw a person home to Heaven.

But such a family atmosphere has to be built up. It is a wonderful task. Yet it naturally takes an effort. It is built on small but original little memories, where my family remains not just the place of cokes and raiding the fridge, but of Mom's apple pie or home-made cookies or of Dad's reminiscences - and by that I mean almost anything just so long as it is an expression of Mom's or Dad's personal way of giving time and showing thought and affection.

No family atmosphere or personality is being built in those anonymous and mass-produced homes where all sit passively together as an homogenized audience before the same TV program, or each goes off and gets lost separately watching his or her favourite program, or wandering in virtual isolation as an internet browser.

The more TV you watch, the more you are indistinguishable from the family next door or down the street, and the less personality you have as a family. In such a nondescript and insipid family, what is there of worth to be remembered? And yet the family has to be a place to remain cherished in one's memories. If evil is making its way into your house, try to stop it as much as you can, with your own self-control to begin with. But if evil is making its way in, it is there, in your home, that you have to produce even more goodness.

With confidence in the attraction of goodness and in the power of God to help you create it. I often recall one of St. Thomas's most marvellous phrases: *bonum potentius est quam malum*: "good is stronger than evil"; and, in the end, attracts more. You have to put it there. The closer you are to God, who is Goodness itself, the more help and inspiration you will get.

### ***Censorship or inventiveness?***

So, what to do about the values or anti-values picked up in a TV-internet dominated home atmosphere? Remain passive? No. Some concerned parents may try to regulate the entry to the home of these anti-values. It will not be an easy task, and could provoke a negative reaction in young people if they feel they are being controlled or subjected to censorship, in comparison with their friends. These negative reactions may be avoided or at least reduced by means of regular family councils where, among other matters, the programs to be seen during the coming week are decided on; perhaps with a final say reserved to the parents. When borderline cases are allowed, it would then be specially important not only for one or both parents to be present, but also to have an open discussion at the end of the program where its positive and negative values are discussed. Properly handled, these sessions can develop an adequate critical appreciation in the children and even put them in a position not only to defend the family practice among their peers but also to get them to take part in it.

In any case, it is no use acting just as one's own parents may have acted, even if you, like me, had the great fortune of having very good parents. Times have changed. The efforts and sacrifices that may have been enough for parents 20 or 40 or 60 years ago, to put into building their families, are no longer enough. You have to put more. We have said what the goal is (and you are not doing your job as parents unless you set out to achieve it): to endow your family with a strong and distinctive personality, because families without personality are at mercy of the cultural environment.

What more can be said about what this involves in practice? It means creating a forceful, interesting and attractive family atmosphere or family life, expressed not only in active care, friendship, loyalty and solidarity, but *also* in *activities* that both develop talents in the children and, above all, *interest* them. What sort of activities? It would probably be a mistake to over-specify them. They will have to be looked for, tried out, improved, discarded and replaced by others, and carried out either simply by the family members themselves or, more reasonably and ideally, in conjunction with other like-minded families. Amateur theatrics, musical groups, sports mini-competitions, chess championships, debates... are a few of the activities that come to mind. Inventiveness will discover many others, and family personality will be all the richer for having its inventiveness tested.

Parents can know they have come up with a winner - for the time being - when their house begins to attract other children, who come because "at So-and-so's one always has a good time". This sort of endeavor is helped by having a large family. It is equally helped by having a large number of like-minded friends. You need a network of friendly strong families to sustain this culture of your own home. But in the end what is most decisive is the initiative and dedication of the parents themselves.

### ***Generosity towards life***

A child is a gift of God that sometimes it is not possible to receive; just as it is at times not possible to receive all of his other gifts. But then we should miss them, feel the deprivation involved in not being able to have them.

G.K Chesterton was one of those truly remarkable men from whom we always have something to learn. His Autobiography tells more about his philosophy than it gives details of his adult life. But it does say a lot about his childhood and his family background - which was the forging of his life. Chesterton's mother - Marie Grosjean - was one of 25 children. She married Edward Chesterton, a man of a mild Victorian Protestantism, but of extraordinary inventiveness whose first hobby and enthusiasm was his family.

Maisie Ward, Chesterton's biographer, writes: "These two had no fear of life; they belonged to a generation which cheerfully created a home and brought fresh life into being. In doing it, they did a thousand other things, so that the home they made was full of vital energies for the children who were to grow up in it. Gilbert recalls his father as a man of a dozen hobbies, his study as a place where these hobbies formed strata of exciting products, awakening youthful covetousness in the matter of a new paint-box, satisfying youthful imagination by the production of a toy theatre... Edward Chesterton did not use up his mental powers in the family business [he inherited from his father]". She does not add the obvious conclusion; he kept a large portion of those powers to spend them on the business of his family.

In Chesterton's own words: "The old-fashioned Englishman, like my father, sold houses for his living but filled his own house with his life". It costs money to fill your house with things, good things. It costs more to put your life there, to fill your home with yourself, not with your whims and likes and dislikes but with your self-gift, with your dedication, with your small, silly, love-inspired games and do-it-yourself entertainments. They may seem ineffective, but God always makes love effective...

When you and your spouse make that your goal, and work on it together (and that is the marvellous common enterprise of spouses), then, in the words of St. Luke, you are really turning your hearts as parents towards your children, you are sanctifying your own married and family life as God wants, and you are being an efficacious channel of God's grace and protection for your children. You take care of them that way, with all your ambition and generosity; and God will take care of them with all the power of his saving grace.

Then the world will turn more and more to Christian families as witnesses to the vitality and personality that attract and inspire more than the poverty and impersonality of contemporary family life or what remains of it.