

Shea, James M.
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FORMING CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES IN YOUR CHILD



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FORMING CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES IN YOUR CHILD

By James M. and Catherine D. Shea

One of the most significant tests of his lifetime was given to a seventh-grade boy not in the classroom but in a public transit bus. He passed gloriously, too, though no grade was entered in his formal record.

It happened this way: a middle-aged Negro woman sitting anxiously near the front of the bus asked the driver how she could get to a certain street. When he gave her a short and unhelpful reply, she sat back rebuffed and confused.

Up rose the boy, who had witnessed the unhappy scene. He approached the woman politely, explained where the street she

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had asked about was to be found, told her where to leave the bus and how to find another, explained the transfer cost, and even had a guess about the approximate time it would take.

Moreover, the boy, who happened to be white, gave his explanation in a manner so engaging that the woman continued to chat with him until it was time for her to leave the bus.

In her conversation with the youthful stranger, the Negro woman relaxed and smiled as her expression changed from hurt to happy.

Attitudes Show

No less happy were the parents of the boy when they learned of the incident. They had made positive efforts to teach him to be willing to become involved in the problems of others in imitation of Christ and for love of Him. They had found ways to teach him also to have regard for persons as God's creatures bearing His image, and without consideration of their color or any other nonessential features.

As for the bus schedule information, this he taught himself, for he happens to be a

bus buff, and one of his most cherished possessions is a discarded destination sign which gives visitors the impression that his attic room is heading in the direction of an intersection called "8th and Baymiller."

This boy's parents — he's the oldest of seven children — never worked up a course of study in human relations and social justice. These things aren't learned by prescriptions and quizzes, or by reading books about them. To his parents, disinterested love and respect for human dignity are among their foremost values. And all parents know that their children have no difficulty discovering what it is their parents value.

Little Things? Perhaps

It happens that the parents of the seventh-grader never allow the use of ugly or disparaging terms for persons of other races or colors or faiths. They avoid them because the terms themselves are an injustice. At the same time they are teaching their children, by most effective example, not to fall into the smug and insulting habit of using degrading names for groups to which they themselves do not belong.

These parents take people as they find

them, and not as they fall into stereotypes or community prejudices. When a Negro family — the first, in fact — moved into their block, they treated the occurrence as something perfectly normal, greeted the new neighbors, welcomed the Negro children into their yard. This was worth a thousand lectures to the children. Moreover, their response to the new neighbors proved to be a stabilizing force among other neighbors who had shown signs of initial panic.

We dwell somewhat on this example because it lies in the area of one of the nation's most critical domestic social problems. It is an area in which very many adult Americans who happen to be white exhibit deplorable bias. Even when they deny any prejudice against Negroes, they display real prejudice in their attitudes toward open occupancy, fair-employment practices, integrated schools, use of public parks and swimming pools by Negroes, and the candidacy of Negroes for public office.

Many of them have gone to schools where teachers labored to instill religious and democratic ideals into them. But what teacher, what school, is able to counteract the effect of parental example?

Many Areas for Action

Pope John XXIII, in his magnificent encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, declared that the laity now more than ever before must not only know the Church's social doctrine but also must "translate it into social reality."

There are many ways of doing this, and many places where it needs to be done. But one of the most basic and most essential is by the example of parents in the lives of their own children. Children know very clearly whether their parents value honesty, truth, generosity, mutual love, hospitality, prayer, learning, Sacred Scripture. They know sometimes even more clearly than their parents to what purposes and things the parents devote their time, their money, their affection, what they look for in life, where their ambitions lie, what place God has in their scheme of things.

Children may go to Catholic schools, read the papal encyclicals, and be instructed by their parents in the application of justice and charity to everyday situations. Nevertheless those children won't grow up to give society the human and Christian note Pope John called for un-

less they see their teachers — especially their parents — honestly doing it themselves, translating principle into practice, trying their hardest to show their love of God in love of neighbor.

Academic Excellence

Race relations is just one area — one very significant area, to be sure — where this translation must be made. But take another. Consider, for example, the complicated and confusing world of the school child, to whom excellence in academic achievement is held out as a high value.

Teachers urge him on to achievement, and parents are apt to be unrelenting in their desire — even demand — for top performance. But if the child pays close attention to his parents' dispositions and attitudes as well as to their words (and you may be sure his antennae are finely tuned), will he discover perhaps that social and athletic achievement are valued even more highly than the academic kind? What will a sixth-grade boy believe when his father solemnly tells him how important history and political affairs are, and then buries himself in the sports pages with scant or no attention to the newspaper's account of current history? What

judgment will an eighth-grade girl make about her mother's values if the mother obviously is more concerned about her girl's social desirability than about her school accomplishments?

In all likelihood, the girl won't make any formal judgment of the matter, but will very naturally adopt the value scheme which her mother cherishes, and not the one her mother talks about.

"Turn off that radio," Dad yells upstairs. "Hit those books!" But parental noises of this sort are tuned out as easily as the drone of a monotonous sermon. Dad may have high aspirations for his son's future career and genuine interest in his son's present mental outlook. But if he hopes to lead his boy into a love of reading, without which an education is impossible, he himself must give evidence of a love of books, must lead his son into adventures of reading and learning, must appreciate and share his son's joy at discovering new frontiers of knowledge, must make it clear that he respects intellectual power and achievement. This is how a father teaches his son about the use of God-given talents — not by commands or penalties.



Joy in Learning

Have you ever seen the look of joyful surprise on the face of a six-year-old girl as she discovers that a three-letter word such as bit turns into an entirely different word when another letter is added to it? For a parent to share in that joy and surprise is to strengthen the child's conviction that learning is indeed one of life's most wonderful experiences.

What is a child to think of books and their treasures if his parents shun them, or relegate them to a decorative but little-

used shelf? How much respect for learning will a child develop if his parents speak disparagingly of teachers, without reference to their high role in transmitting the cultural heritage of the race? Children often seem to learn bad things more readily than the good, and it is cruel to create for them a climate in which the teaching profession is downrated or derided, for this "mother's-knee" lesson is the one they will remember.

Children may rise to heights of intellectual achievement out of an environment where appreciation of learning is absent, but they do so in spite of its absence. Parents who expect their children to turn precept into practice had better see to it that they themselves have done so.

Love or Constraint?

Perhaps it comes closer to the heart of the matter to look at an example in the area of the child's religious life. For us it has been a conspicuous and deplorable example of failure to translate teaching into life that so many children who attend Mass every school day, when they must do so, fail to attend Mass in the summer, when there is no such compulsion.

Here you find priests and religious dele-

gated to provide the children's formal education and well equipped to see to their religious formation. Yet they witness the refusal of many of the children to shift over from "I have to go to Mass" to "I want to go to Mass."

So even here the parents' example is foremost in forming the child's conscience and unfolding his religious sensibilities. Especially here. With God's help, the child accomplishes this formation most successfully, as a rule, when he senses the dedication of those whom he loves best to the Christ-life, the life of prayer, the things of the spirit.

"Kneel up! Quiet!" These are common formulas for disposing the children to prayer in the evening. They are about as effective as "Turn off the radio!" and other blunt imperatives.

Family Prayer

Our experience of speaking to engaged couples in our diocesan pre-Cana (marriage preparation) course leads us to believe that few Catholic couples embark on a matrimonial career without some kind of determination to establish a program of family prayer.

But for many of them it will take sheer determination, for they have no well-formed habits of family prayer to bring from their own background into the new family they will form. They may have been taught to pray, and they may indeed have prayed as a family group, but unless it was a meaningful experience, and a reasonably happy one, the inclination to make it work in the new family may not be strong enough.

You shudder at the prospect of young couples rearing a new generation of children in the "Kneel up and pray!" scheme. If all we possessed were a few prayer formulas and a puritan tradition, you would expect a prayer life of little richness. But when you consider the treasury of prayers from which we may draw, the vast library of hymns and verses, and the changing aspects of the liturgical year, then you realize there is little excuse for family prayer to be dull or painful.

Imagination is required here, as well as knowledge. It takes imagination to break out of old concepts of family prayer, and it takes knowledge to be able to provide the depth and richness and variety that our prayer life ought to have.

When parents relate family prayer to the

Eucharistic Sacrifice at the altar, they are on the way to a family prayer program likely to carry over into the children's lives.

Sometimes others have to lead the way. For example, a Marianist Brother in a local high school makes it a daily custom in the morning "counselor period" to write the Collect of the day's Mass on the blackboard and engage his class in a brief discussion of its meaning and its relevance to their lives on that particular day.

This in turn recalls the magazine editor who for many years has added the Collect of the day's Mass to the prayer of thanksgiving at the evening meal.

Color It With Liturgy

But it is the changing seasons of the liturgical year that best color family prayer and give it a variety which not only adds interest for children but — what is more essential, of course — makes it reflect the Church's own plan of prayer and sacrifice.

As Pope Pius XII wrote in his encyclical on the Sacred Liturgy, "the liturgical year, which the devotion of the Church nour-

ishes and accomplishes, is not a cold and inert representation of those things which took place in former years, nor a simple and bare recalling of events of previous times. But rather it is Christ Himself, who persists in His Church, and who continues the way of His immense mercy, which He undertook with loving design in this mortal life, when He went about doing good, in order to place human souls in contact with His mysteries and make them live through them."

Against such a background, doesn't it seem strange that family prayer should ever be routine, colorless, or dull? In the presence of so much divine extravagance, is there any reason to be niggardly with the prayers we shall encourage our children to speak?

Once we heard a retreat master criticizing some reasonably well-educated people for reciting the rosary at Mass. "I have nothing against the rosary," he assured his audience, "but it was out of place in this instance. I come out and announce to the people that I will go unto the altar of God, and I hear this man in the front pew mumbling, 'Hail Mary, full of grace. . . .'"

"Later in the celebration I encourage

the congregation to 'Lift up your hearts,' and again I hear this man, 'Hail Mary, full of grace.' "

Sing the Singable

Poverty of prayer resources is an affliction for which there is little reason. In the cycle of liturgical seasons, for example, the hymn to Our Lady sung in the Church's night prayer changes several times. Each of the hymns is very beautiful, and good missals include translations into singable English. Here is a prayer with the extra dimension of song and the added beauty of variety. Children in fact delight to learn these hymns and, for the most part, to sing them. Inhibitions about singing aloud occur in various children at various ages, and some accommodation has to be made. You don't simply command, "Sing!" and expect to achieve much in developing the child's prayer life.

On the other hand, parents with inhibitions, long accustomed to silence in Church and embarrassed to sing these beautiful Marian anthems even within the family circle (or perhaps especially in the family circle) owe it to their children to overcome their inhibitions. Why should they deprive the next generation of the

treasure that was denied to them? If they seriously desire all good things for their children, let them realize that here is a singular value of which their children ought not to be deprived.

Enlist Creative Talents

Another, more subtle way of introducing a spirit of liturgical prayer into a home is to alter the atmosphere of the home with the Church's seasons. Children are formed somewhat by the immediate home environment — by the kind of art with which the home is decorated, by the prominence given to, say, the television set as compared with that given to the crucifix. Even the colors of the walls, it is said, can have an influence on their minds and attitudes.

So it seems psychologically effective, as well as spiritually imaginative and alert, to introduce into the decorations of the home certain features that will reflect the changing liturgical seasons. This can be done with wall hangings, statues, pictures, bulletin-board drawings and cut-outs. Moreover, it is a domestic activity in which the creative talents of the children can be enlisted.

One family we know has a large bulletin board which is a source of much meal-

time conversation. On it are placed examination papers with excellent grades, reports of the current spiritual bouquet (a list of sacrifices, most recently, for the intention of an aunt who was seriously ill), postcards from traveling relatives and friends, and signs of the liturgical times. These signs often are pictures clipped from a magazine or newspaper — of St. Nicholas, or a blessed candle, or Christ crowned with thorns, or the Palm Sunday procession, or tongues of fire.

This kind of thing takes parents who themselves are alive to the liturgical year and its inexhaustible riches, and who are willing to discuss the bulletin board's latest addition on various levels with as little preachiness as possible.

Preachiness will kill it. Children are interested in color, and form, and pictures, and stories. All of these can be used in telling them of the beauty and joy of the Faith they possess. And they should be used. Moralizing is overdone. Preaching is hated by children. They need far more than that, and deserve far more.



What Is God Like?

A famous British author who was one of the world's leading Communists before entering the Church, said that in his own home when he was very young he had no concept of God except as a stern judge and taskmaster. God's love and mercy never were made manifest to him, and it took this man a good many years to discover what had been denied him by well-meaning but misguided parents.

What better way is there for a young child to begin to grasp the concept of God as a loving father than through the evidence before him that a father is a loving person who desires for him all that is good?

Fathers who are seldom seen, or always abrupt and peremptory, or little given to affection offer their children a warped understanding of fatherhood.

This is just one of the many religious lessons taught by parents, and too often taught wrongly or badly, almost without any awareness of their role as teacher.

Certainly the parents need not always be conscious of their teaching role, but no less certainly they need to be ready for it. Teaching in the family circle is almost like breathing, it goes on so naturally and constantly.

Teaching Marriage

Take marriage itself — sacrament, vocation, career, full commitment. Parents are too busy to spend very much time teaching their children — especially the young ones — about the nature of marriage. Nevertheless, parents are always teaching their children about marriage in a most informal manner. They instruct their children in the value of marriage by the way they speak about it in the children's presence, by their attitude toward each other, by the pleasure they take in each other's company, by the respect they show each

other, by the kind of couples they seek out as close friends, by the books they cherish, the shows they watch, the heroes they admire.

Ask any social worker the effect of unhappy marriages upon the children. Parents involved in such a marriage hardly need to give their children a blueprint; their lives make it emphatically clear to the children that they consider marriage less than a holy institution, less than a divine vocation.

We worry about methods of getting children to translate religious instruction into the habits and dispositions of their everyday lives. But in this area of marriage and family life, the carry-over into life is so common and so complete that it's frightening. Mothers and fathers who wouldn't dream of wrecking their young daughter's chances of a good marriage may be undermining those chances every day of their lives by the example they give their daughter. A man who finds it possible to telephone a stranger in Calcutta and transact serious business with him in a pleasant and agreeable fashion may come home and find himself unable to communicate with his wife across the dinner table.

Marriage manuals and textbooks and

classroom teachers and pre-Cana instructors will have a very difficult time — if not impossible — compensating for the ugly lesson about matrimony learned over and over again at home.

Perhaps this seems too dramatic. But what about the couple living in the grace of the sacrament of marriage who make it seem not ugly or frightening, but drab and monotonous? Aren't they teaching their children in a most effective way that marriage is a frustrating bore rather than an opportunity to grow in God's love and each other's?

Begin With the Parents

Father Dan Lord, famed Jesuit writer, sodality leader, and authority on youth, said shortly before his death that if he had it all to do over again he probably would have chosen to work among adults rather than young people. His reasoning was that adults shape the world in which children grow up, create the educational philosophy, the clothing styles, the literature (and the pornography), the political climate, and all the other elements that help or hinder the growth of the Mystical Body of Christ.

He was saying in effect that children are formed and educated by the institutions

of society, and that adults are responsible for the character of these institutions. Thus, the father who ignores politics or condones corruption or buys political favors or uses his voting franchise wretchedly not only gives a bad example to his children but also reduces the likelihood that outside influences will help them overcome his example.

One Glorious Example

All of this merely emphasizes the responsibility parents have to strengthen their faith, deepen their knowledge — especially of spiritual values and religious truth — and develop their wisdom. Fortunately, they can do this in the very process of rearing their families.

One glorious example that sticks in our memory is that of a great priest who went from Italy to the Far East, where he established an English-language and a Chinese-language newspaper and published leaflets, pamphlets, books, and magazines for the missionaries and their beloved people. His work was very extensive, and no one could possibly begin to estimate the number of people he must have affected for good in the course of his educational apostolate.

That priest told us that when he was growing up in a village near Perugia, it was the custom of his father to take the family Bible every night after dinner and read from it for 15 minutes. Nothing was allowed to intervene. And before he was able to understand the meaning of the words, that small boy who was to become a great missionary knew that the Sacred Scripture was a book to which his beloved father attached the highest value.

No small lesson in itself.

This priest credits his father's practice of Bible reading as the principal influence in his own response to a religious vocation.

Bible As Teacher

Reading the Bible — especially now, when excellent translations are available, as well as intelligent abridgments for family reading — is a practice of so much worth and so many benefits that it would seem unnecessary even to mention it. But the truth is that many parents are afraid of the Bible, and manage to transmit this fear to their children. No small lesson, either.

Not long ago a boy knocked on our door and shamefacedly asked to borrow our

Bible. A teacher had required him to write a chapter of it as a penalty. Well, it's no role of ours to judge his parents for ignoring the Bible, but the boy will form a judgment. Regrettably, his judgment may be that if his parents didn't consider a Bible something essential, then it very likely isn't essential, no matter what some teachers may say.

Values? What kind of values do parents possess when they will unhesitatingly invest two or three hundred dollars or more in a television set, and insist upon immediate repairs in the event of a failure, but find it impossible to fit the cost of a Bible into their budgets? How is it that so many parents consider a charge account at the local department store an absolute necessity for family life, but remain strangers to the local Catholic bookseller?

You could center the entire discussion of parents as teachers on this one book, the Bible. To some extent you could fairly estimate their effectiveness as teachers of religion by their respect for Scripture. You could guess to what extent they recognize their role as religion teachers by their use of this one God-written volume.



Mass and Communion

As for Holy Mass, the Christian's "chief duty and supreme dignity," parents may find it difficult to set an example of taking part in it daily but they can endeavor, nevertheless, to make it clear to their children that the true Christian spirit has its source and center in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. They can show their children the meaning of the signs, the family-meal character of the Eucharist, the foretaste it brings of the heavenly banquet.

We can welcome the growing trend toward giving back to parents the happy responsibility of preparing their children to receive the Eucharist for the first time, and the corresponding de-emphasis of non-essential matters such as the First Communion suit or dress, the procession in frozen rigidity, and that sort of thing.

Moreover, if parents intelligently and diligently provide for their children's religious formation from their earliest years, especially in respect to the home's religious climate and the parents' own example, the children's transition to the relative maturity of teendom is more likely to be successful. At this time, a child's desire to pray and worship must take over from the formal schedule of the family, and his parents must be ready to allow him to choose and to exercise his own responsibility. This requires patience and reserve on the part of parents, and success here can only be the fruit of successful parenthood earlier. Evidences of growing independence on the part of an adolescent often bring a corresponding toughening of the parents' attitude. Rules are needed for all children's behavior, of course, but the adolescent boy or girl needs the chance to develop as a person — and that includes religious and spiritual development.

Giving Vocation a Chance

At such a time the call to the priesthood or religious life, if it comes to a child at all, will very likely be strongest. From all sides we hear of the need for more young men and women to respond to religious vocations. No one doubts that God distributes these vocations generously, but it seems clear that the response is often less generous.

How does this work out in family life? If a boy, for example, grows up with the conviction that God is a kind of absentee landlord of the world, reflecting his parents' conviction, then he is more apt to consult his own personal selfish interests in choosing his life's work. If his parents have made it clear that a career is measured in terms of money and prestige only, and if they never relate the choice of a life's work to the will of God or the needs of His people, a religious vocation may have a hard time being heard. And, of course, if parents actually downgrade the priesthood and religious life, or discourage consideration of such a vocation, the response is likely to be silenced.

A Happy Family

We have friends who have 12 children,

and to us they are a model of how parents can best dispose themselves so that their children will grow up in circumstances most favorable to putting God's will first. Their house is plain, their furniture somewhat haphazard, their automobile aging. Nothing in the exterior aspect of their lives is particularly noteworthy, unless you include the number of their children.

But they are happy, and that's a remarkable quality in today's world. They enjoy each other's company. There is a sense of peace in their home. The parents are examples of patience and forbearance. They are the most generous of good neighbors. They have long since learned how to accept suffering. In short, there is love in their family — love made visible, almost tangible.

At a wedding reception a few years ago their pastor mentioned this family to us and admitted that they had been an inspiration to him. He spoke of their example of wholesome family life — not simply because they have a large number of children, but because they live in full acceptance of God's will. When you recall St. Paul's words, "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me," you think of people like these in whom the world — or at any rate the

parish and the neighborhood — can see Christ. And what is more important, in whom the children can see Christ.

To live the Christ-life may sound like a pretentious term, but is there a better one? We live it for the sake of Christ, not as a means of instructing our children — but no better instruction of our children is available to us.

Love and joy are the marks of this life. It overflows in hospitality, in generosity, in social responsibility, in reverence for persons and indeed for all of God's creation.

Family and Neighborhood

You can see it — only too seldom, however — in the neighborhood, when a family goes out to greet the newcomers into the neighborhood, offering to care for the young children or provide a lunch on the day of moving in, asking what is needed without falling into the temptation of curiosity. You can see it when someone dies in the neighborhood, and a family offers not only sympathy but solace and help.

Actions of this sort make the most pro-

found impression on young children, especially when they are the actions of their own beloved parents. Precepts about hospitality, generosity, social responsibility are easy enough to speak and write; example is harder to give. But the precepts are hollow without the example. And when the example is consistent, precepts are almost unnecessary.

We have a boy under four whose favorite story at the moment is "the one about the robbers" — that is, the story of the Good Samaritan. But while such stories can be a spiritually enriching experience even to the very young, we know that it is up to us to prove to him by our dispositions and actions that we're on the side of the story's hero.

Life outside of the family, except for much-appreciated islands of what the Bishops have called "genuine Christian living," makes it hard both for parents to live the Christ-life and for children to take the teaching and example of their parents and put it into practice in their own lives. Moving in a sea of selfishness, materialism, deceit, mediocrity, and vulgarity, they are handicapped, frustrated, often defeated. Conformity in many neighborhoods calls for a kind of living that is at odds with Christian living.

But parents know they cannot protect their children from other influences, and extreme attempts to do so often lead to disaster for the children. What is imperative in the present times and circumstances is that parents themselves learn the deepest meaning of love and practice it in their own lives without stint or compromise.

All You Add Is Love

Where love and charity are, says the Holy Thursday hymn, there is God. Love is the one thing needful, the highest virtue, the noblest condition of man, the clearest reflection of God. Love is active, vital, creative. It is a dynamic expression of the Christ-life in us.

And it is contagious. Children are especially susceptible to it, and it is without a doubt the best gift that parents can give them.

So the chief question that parents as teachers must ask themselves isn't how shall we teach our children, but how shall we love them. And the chief lesson to be learned by the parent-teachers is the lesson of the meaning of love.

In any event, the human person who is our child will develop freely in the sight of

God, and nothing we do or fail to do will alter his God-given freedom. But since we understand our responsibility to do all in our power to help the child develop in the direction God desires for him, we need to remove as many obstacles as we can to his progress. And the most formidable obstacle to our child's progress can be ourselves, unless we not only instruct him in the Gospel but show him an example of consistent, self-sacrificing, generous, wholehearted, joyful loving.

NIHIL OBSTAT—John L. Reedy, C.S.C.
Censor Deputatus

IMPRIMATUR—✠ Most Rev. Leo A. Pursley, D.D.
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

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**FORMING
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