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FAMILY QUARRELS



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**HOW TO SETTLE
FAMILY QUARRELS**



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*Quarrels within the family are
the source of much unhappiness
and sin. This booklet concerns
their causes and remedies.*

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HOW TO SETTLE FAMILY QUARRELS



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There is an old Chinese saying which goes like this:

“Over no home can the sign be hung:
There is no trouble here.”

Most people will be prepared to admit the truth of that saying. This pamphlet is concerned with trouble in the family. It is concerned more particularly with trouble in the form of family quarrels.

A family quarrel may be a more or less serious thing. At one extreme it can manifest itself in slaps, blows and thrown dishes. At the other it can be nothing more than a polite, but forceful disagreement between two or more members of the family. But whether in greater or lesser degree, a family dispute brings with it a

certain measure of discontent and unhappiness. It is, consequently, something to be avoided so far as it is humanly possible to avoid it, and to be settled amicably once it has arisen. These pages will be concerned with suggestions as to how to do these things.

First, let us take a long range point of view, and look at the causes of family quarrels. If the root causes can be properly dealt with, then the disputes themselves will die on the vine.

TEMPERAMENT

It should be recognized at the start that one basic cause of disagreement in families as well as in any other group of human beings is the variety of temperaments with which God endowed the human race. No two people are exactly alike, nor do they share in exactly the same way the same tastes and the same attitudes towards life and the happenings of each day. This accounts for a great deal of the friction in human affairs.

Consider the situation that can be present in an average family.

John and Mary X, let us say, have entered their marriage with a deep sense of responsibility and a keen awareness of their duties. As time goes on, their family grows, and they do their best to raise their children in accordance with God's law, while at the same time giving them the love which children need so greatly if their personalities are properly to develop.

John and Mary X quickly learn, however, that their children seem destined to develop differently, and each has his own particular traits and characteristics. Their first child, a boy, whom they name John, after his father, turns out in fact to be quite a different kind of individual than his father. John senior is of a mechanical bent. He works in a factory, repairing delicate machines, and he likes nothing better than to spend his spare hours at his lathe in the basement of his home, or tuning up his car in the back yard. He reads the paper each evening, and glances through a few magazines, but his interest in reading does not go much beyond that.

John junior on the other hand shows even from an early age that he is of a somewhat studious bent of mind, even as a small boy he likes to curl up in a corner

with a book. As he gets older he reveals (somewhat to the exasperation of his father) a lamentable ignorance and clumsiness in mechanical matters, and what is worse, doesn't seem interested in improving his knowledge of this field. He makes occasional efforts to manifest interest in his father's hobbies, but it is evident that his heart is not in what he is doing, and he would in fact rather be doing something else.

The second child of John and Mary is a blue-eyed and blonde boy named Jimmy, with delicate features, whom one might suppose would be horrified at the sight of a spot of grease on his finger. But Jimmy belies his looks by manifesting the same interests as his father. When new toys are received, they must be immediately dismantled (if at all possible) and put together again. When daddy is out in the yard tinkering with the motor of the family car, Jimmy must be there too, glorying in the grease spots which he manages to accumulate on his person. As he gets older, his mechanical bent becomes more pronounced. He has much in common with his father, but with this difference, that he considers his father to be

old-fashioned and unenlightened in his mechanical techniques.

Mary is the next child to be born, and she also is blonde and blue-eyed like her mother, and has the same cast of features. Like her mother also she is of a friendly and gregarious disposition with a sanguine outlook on life. Her feelings and emotions are quickly aroused, but they are not deeply rooted. Unpleasant happenings are quickly forgotten and she uniformly presents a pleasant and cheerful front to the world.

Frances, their fourth child, represents yet another type of temperament. She is dark-haired and brown eyed, and is by nature moody, sensitive and withdrawn. She is capable of deep affection, and under the wise guidance of her parents, her nature develops without being twisted or warped. But her sensitiveness is her own greatest cross, and makes her difficult to live with. The unintentional slight, the hasty word, the oversight: these things tend to rankle in her heart, and she finds it very difficult to forget and forgive injuries.

Here, then, in one family, you have quite a wide variety of temperaments and

dispositions, and it is not difficult to see that at times disagreements and disputes may arise. John and Mary, the husband and wife, in the first instance have the problem of adjusting to each other, and learning to live with their respective faults and foibles, flowing from their diverse temperaments. Between them and their children there is also need of much patience and understanding. John, wanting his eldest son to grow up in his own image and likeness, may be inclined to force his own tastes upon the boy, and be very disappointed when he does not manifest the same aptitudes. The situation is almost classical in which the father, a successful businessman, vents his frustration because his eldest son wants to do something else with his life besides operating the family dry goods business or wholesale house.

Mary, the mother, naturally feels inclined to be partial to that one of her daughters who is most sympathetic to her own philosophy of life, and if she gives in to her inclination, then there is possibly a fierce jealousy on the part of the other children, who feel themselves neglected.

This then is one of the ultimate and inevitable causes of family disagreement, the temperamental differences among its members. If quarrels are to be avoided, there must be a recognition of this fact, and an unselfishness which makes the members of the family willing to put up with attitudes and opinions with which they do not find themselves in sympathy, and which may even at times serve to arouse feelings of annoyance and impatience.

TOO SHY AND TOO BOLD

Perhaps the incipient trouble can be pinpointed even more clearly by the following reflection. There are two temperamental extremes which can appear in any group of people living together. There are some persons with whom nature has provided such a thin skin (psychologically speaking) that the slightest affronts or injuries cause them untold anguish. One might say of them that they have a very sensitive built-in radar apparatus, with a delicate antenna, which picks up signals from far and near. Nay, at times it is capable of picking up signals from the

thin air, so that they think they have been intentionally affronted when actually no slight has been intended at all.

Only people with this cast of temperament can know the interior pain brought on by these imaginings. Even with a firm resolution to overcome themselves, and a strong willingness to forgive all injuries, a residue of bitterness can still remain for long periods in the emotions and feelings. There is no sin or fault in this fact. But there surely must be a strong resolution to keep their sensitive nature under control, and not to allow themselves to brood and to think dark thoughts over real or imagined injuries received. The hypersensitive person who will not make these efforts can indeed be a source of great distress in his family. In the presence of such a person everyone is bound to be on edge, wondering what chance word or action will cause the smouldering volcano to erupt.

At the other extreme is the complex of temperamental qualities which manifest themselves in a certain habitual thoughtlessness, inconsideration of others, and even outright cruelty. Who has not met this type of individual? He finds much

comic relief in the mistakes, the clumsiness or the ineptitude of others. He does not hesitate to laugh in the face of one who is guilty of some absurd fault or foible, nor does he recognize any deterrent to his rudeness in the embarrassment of the person concerned. Often he is an honest and hard-working sort of person, but without much imagination or very deep feelings, and often in pursuing his goals he is inconsiderate of others without even being aware of it.

When told that he has hurt someone's feelings, he is inclined to be much surprised. He is sorry if he did so, but then on reflection he finds it difficult to feel sympathetic towards the hyper-sensitive person. Such a one, he thinks to himself, has no right to get so worked up over mere trifles. Why can't he forget his foolish sensitiveness and act like other normal people? And once he has tabbed a person as foolishly sensitive, he may even go out of his way to justify his thesis; he may end by being consciously cruel.

Put two people like this in a family circle and you have rich soil in which a mere disagreement can rapidly mature into a full fledged quarrel, with ugly re-

criminations on both sides. To forestall such trouble there is surely one thing which needs badly to be done, and that is for people at these temperamental extremes to recognize their own tendencies, and to strive mightily to keep them in check. They may not always succeed in reaching perfection, but to the extent that they do succeed they will save much grief and anguish to others, and make their family a much happier and more peaceful one than otherwise it would have been.

MONEY

Let us take a look now at several factors outside the merely temperamental which can cause family quarrels and disputes. Surely money would have to be at the head of such a list. In the family, as well as elsewhere, the scripture saying is true: "The love of money is the root of all evil."

Here is a typical case, by no means, alas, uncommon. Mr. and Mrs. Z are a good old couple, who have worked hard during a long lifetime, and have done their best to raise their fine large family

of children as good citizens of both earth and heaven. God has blessed even their material labors to a certain extent, so that when they finally come to die, they leave behind them a house and some \$25,000 in cash and securities. They had sufficient foresight to leave a will (without which parents can cause untold trouble among their surviving children), but even with a will, a family council is held in due time to discuss matters of finance and perhaps make necessary adjustments by mutual agreement.

One of the daughters, let us say, remained unmarried, and through many years took faithful and devoted care of her aged parents. They in turn thought it only right and just that this daughter should be left the home for her own use, since the other children were married and had their own homes. But equitable as this arrangement seems, it does not meet the approval of all the children, nor do they feel that the money was justly divided. They can do nothing of course about breaking the will, but they can and do vent their spleen on the brothers and sisters whom they consider more fortunate than themselves. Ugly recriminations

fly around the table that undue influence was brought to bear, even the sanity of the parents is questioned, the family divides into two camps on the issue, a great and tremendous quarrel ensues, and perhaps opens a chasm which remains for years.

It is indeed not unusual in such cases for brothers and sisters to treat each other literally like pagans, refusing to speak to each other even when they pass each other on the street. And all because money with its evil influence was allowed to come between them. Surely the cause of the quarrel in such a case is selfishness and stubbornness, and the only remedy is that genuine charity which Christ imposed as a duty on all.

There are other cases in which money is at the root of family quarrels because of the jealousy which it breeds. Perhaps the oldest son does not succeed so well in his business ventures, and must go through life in the consciousness of being something of a failure from this point of view. His younger brother, on the other hand, appears to find success wherever he puts his hand. He becomes well-to-do, and is able to move with his family to a much

better part of town and into a nice new home while his brother eats out his heart in a duplex apartment. In such cases a jealous attitude of mind can be handed down quite easily from father to children, and with it an uncharitable and unjust manner of speaking which can readily breed quarrels whenever the right situation is at hand.

FAMILY FRICTION

Even within the family itself, while the children are growing up, money can be the cause of unpleasantness. Perhaps the wife is over-ambitious, pushing and prodding her husband beyond the bounds of reason to make more money. The wife who allows this to be the end-all and be-all of her life, this reaching for a higher and higher material standard of life, can be a canker sore at the very heart of the home.

Or the husband, perhaps, lives and breathes for the making of money in such a way that his home and family become entirely secondary. He signs the checks, but beyond that his entire interest in life is in the office downtown. How many

family quarrels, how many family break-ups, stem from this cause!

And where mother and father are infected with this false philosophy, it is readily handed down to the children as well. Disputes over allowances; jealousy of the material advantages of neighbor children; selfishness in the use of the money which children themselves earn: these are often the bitter fruits harvested by parents who put the love of money above the love of God and family. From such an attitude are bound to stem inter-family dispute and discontent.

What is the remedy? Surely it is obvious, for all concerned to realize that money is secondary in importance to charity, to family unity, and even to individual happiness and peace of mind. Even where a real or imagined injustice has been perpetrated, if this actually has taken place, the person responsible will have to answer to God, of that all may be sure. Why should any member of a family condemn himself by his sin of uncharity just because some other member of the family has chosen to condemn himself by a sin of injustice? Jealous and misplaced ambition have no place in a family.

RELATIVES

It is unfortunate, human affairs being what they are, that even well-meaning people can sometimes cause untold trouble. But such is certainly the case, and it is demonstrable especially within the family relationship.

What we refer to is the eternal "in-law" problem. How many family quarrels are there not which stem from this seemingly innocent cause?

Mrs. Y has an only daughter, whom she dotes on, and whom she would like to keep with her as long as possible. But Belinda meets a personable young man, and before long the young man proposes, and Mrs. Y sees that her fledgling alas! is about to leave the nest. With heroic generosity she adjusts to the situation, not indeed without tears. She is basically a good woman, and she promises herself that she is going to be sensible about this whole matter. She is not going to interfere in the lives of her daughter and son-in-law.

Alas for human resolutions! No sooner are they married than one could say with truth, interference becomes her middle

name. First of all, she insists that they stay with her for a time; after all, she has a big house, and will be lonesome without her Belinda. So the young couple give in. Now comes the crucial period. Mrs. Y has nothing against the man her daughter married; as men go, he seems acceptable enough. But the suspicion makes itself felt now and then as to whether he is really good enough for her beloved daughter; whether, indeed, any mere male is good enough. She does not put her suspicions into words, but the young man is smart enough to sense them.

The plan is for the young couple to live downstairs, while Mrs. Y lives upstairs, but this doesn't work out so well. Mrs. Y is down as much as she is up, and there is no aspect of their life concerning which she does not have suggestions and advice. Belinda's husband soon begins to wonder whether he has married Belinda or her mother or both, and resentment, which has been smouldering within him, breaks out into an occasional little flame. Without thinking, he speaks sharply to Belinda about her mother, and she of course gives him a sharp answer in return. Thus a family quarrel is set in

motion, and who would you say is ultimately at fault?

Even more aggravating is the case in which the husband's mother sets herself up as a daily guide and helper for her daughter-in-law, whether in the kitchen, or caring for the new baby, or the area of social relations. It might well be that her suggestions are as good as gold; they might be necessary to prevent the bride's house from being reduced to a shambles, due to her inexperience. But in such circumstances they quite generally are not wanted, they are resented, they do more harm than good. Let mothers-in-law write that undoubted fact firmly across their consciousness.

Certainly a fruitful source of discord in marriage will be eliminated if all in-laws on both sides follow a sensible and prudent course of non-interference. Let the newly married couple live by themselves (if humanly possible), let them fend for themselves, let them meet their own problems in their own way and overcome them. Such a policy of non-interference can be joined to genuine affection and love, manifested by occasional, but not too frequent visits.

ALCOHOL

Where there is excessive drinking in the family, inevitably there are quarrels. The man who has gotten himself drunk no longer acts reasonably, like a human being. The hilarious stage of inebriation, in which he embarrasses his wife and children before relatives and friends by acting with complete foolishness is bad enough, and productive of enough trouble. Far worse is the stage of ugliness and cantankerousness, in which, although he is otherwise kind and gentle, he swears and curses at his family, and even is capable of physical violence towards them.

The cumulative effect of such conduct is to freeze up affection in the hearts of his wife and children so that they do no more than tolerate his presence, if they do not, in extreme cases, cut him adrift altogether.

The correlative of drinking on the part of a husband is nagging on the part of a wife. Sometimes it has its origin precisely in such nagging, so that a wife is more guilty than she realizes of causing her husband's vice.

In any case, both drinking and nagging, each in its own way, are causes of family discord and quarreling, and often in the measure that the wife overcomes her vice, the husband overcomes his as well. Where there is a deep seated case of alcoholism, of course, stronger therapeutic measures are needed. Surely the husband (or the wife) who in sober moments can recognize the ravages that the occasional bouts of drunkenness visit upon his home and loved ones will want to take every possible step to overcome the affliction. Thus treatment at a special clinic may be called for, or conscientious membership in Alcoholics Anonymous. Besides, such a one badly needs the help which comes from frequent reception of the sacraments.

CLOSE-RANGE REMEDIES

So far we have been concerned chiefly with long-range causes of family disputes and quarrels. Our thought has been that if people will face up to these causes, and be honest enough to admit that they themselves may be under the influence of one or more of them, and if they couple with that knowledge a sincere effort to

deal with the condition properly, greater family concord is bound to result.

What can be done meanwhile in the immediate heat of a family quarrel? With the best intentions and efforts in the world, such disputes do arise. Are there any remedies immediately applicable?

Certainly we have nothing startlingly new to propose. The first and most important immediate remedy for a quarrel is the judicious use of silence. What is meant here is not a sullen silence, a protracted silence, an angry silence. These could well cause quarrels as well as abate them. What is meant is a healthy silence based on the recognition of the fact that when one's anger is thoroughly aroused, it is only too likely that one's speech will be rash, hateful and imprudent, and not in any way calculated to restore peace and quiet to the situation.

This is one time indeed when it is wise to play the part of a coward by retiring from the battlefield for a period of time until the emotions and feelings have somewhat cooled off. Such a thing is not easy; it may indeed be the most difficult thing in the world. But it remains a sure-fire way to put out the fire in many a quar-

rel: button up your lip; be quiet; shut up until you have simmered down.

Lastly, we suggest as a close-range remedy for family quarrels the practice of family prayer. Family prayer of course has a much wider use than merely to quiet heated tempers. In good times and bad, the members of the family should pray together: their prayers at meals, their daily rosary, the angelus, etc. These family prayers said consistently will be in themselves a vital contribution to lasting family peace. Also most valuable as a bond of family peace is the custom of *family* attendance at Mass and *family* Communion.

But prayer at the precise moment of stress and strain has a special value too. Let us suppose that an important matter of business is being discussed in family council, perhaps the disposition of money left by parents. As the discussion goes on, it is apparent that there is a serious difference of opinion. Tempers begin to rise, angry words are exchanged. Before the situation deteriorates any further, causing deep wounds which it might take years to heal, this is the time for someone who commands respect in the assembly to sug-

gest that the rosary be said. We ourselves have seen this procedure followed, and can vouch for the fact that after the interval of prayer the points of dispute were calmly and rationally discussed, and a solution reached which was agreeable to all.

It might indeed be well for every family to meditate upon and to take to heart the beautiful prayer for peace composed by St. Francis of Assisi. Certainly if all the members of the family made a valiant effort to live according to the unselfish ideals of this prayer, the peace and joy of the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, would reign upon the earth:

“Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sickness, joy.

“O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

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