



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

NEEDED: HEROES OF COUNTER-CULTURE

Just as a coin has two sides, the term *culture* has both positive and negative aspects. Culture is the set of accumulated habits, beliefs, values, attitudes, norms, customs, and behaviors of a group of people that are accepted, generally without much thought. Culture is passed along by communication and imitation from generation to generation. Simply stated, culture is the total set of learned activities of a people.

The word *culture* comes from the Latin language. It means “to cultivate, to inhabit, or to honor.” There is much to celebrate about contemporary culture. It is a grace to live in our time and place and space! It is in the NOW that we hear Jesus say to us, “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly!” (Jn. 10: 10). Many aspects of our culture support growth towards wholeness and holiness. For instance, I consider that respect for differences, being proactive, collaboration, and futuristic planning are life-giving features that our culture fosters. What characteristics of contemporary culture can you name that contribute to your growth as a person who is made in the image of God? What attributes do you appreciate in the culture that you want to cultivate, to honor, and to foster within yourself and your children?

I celebrate that our culture respects all fields of learning. Planning ahead and creating exigency plans are “givens.” Individual initiative and industry, team-building, teamwork, collaboration, and consensus continue to be predictors of success. World conditions call us to be global, inclusive, and eclectic. Networking, budgeting, prioritizing, marketing, re-vitalization and vacation are common buzzwords. I view such elements as positive aspects of our culture because they are characteristics that can foster the Kingdom of God and facilitate God’s will on earth.

God’s will is that all people come to know themselves as loved by God. And because of that awareness, freely choose to love God and all others. God wills us to be truly free – free to stand in the truth of who we are; free to act in love; free to be love, to receive love, and to give love; free from compulsions, obsessions, and self-hatred. God calls us to “choose life” by choosing attitudes and behaviors that create, mend, heal, invite, forgive, include others, share, initiate, unite, build up, and contribute to improvement. These are the positive qualities of our culture. Children need parents who will help them to recognize and freely choose life-giving behaviors.

FALSE VALUES

Equally present in our culture, however, are **false values**. Though usually perceived as ways to preserve our lives, false values are life-blocking attitudes and behaviors that bring

sorrow and destruction. False values separate, destroy, wound, deceive, divide, exclude, manipulate, and alienate. False values frustrate, interfere with, and oppose the will of

God. They are qualities of “unlove” that lead to fragmentation, isolation, and despair. Jesus warned us that when we seek to preserve our lives by building walls of protection or comfort, we actually destroy ourselves (Mk. 8:35).

False values surround us. Some of the most obvious to me that affect family life include:

- self-absorption and self-gratification
- the drug culture
- recreational sex
- promiscuity in dress, behavior, and entertainment
- considering people “expendable”
- equating human value with usefulness
- having a quick-fix mentality
- believing that “bigger is better”
- attitudes of entitlement and “me, myself and I”
- instant gratification and self-indulgence

Unfortunately, these examples are not exhaustive. They fail to include other false values that you might name. But know this! Regardless of the specific vocabulary word, the root disease is the same. All are mistaken attempts at self-love. All life-blocking choices are attempts to fill in the void where love is absent. Love and self-worth precede and transcend position, possessions, productiveness, and popularity. Our true worth rests in the reality that we were made by God in God’s own image by God’s free choice. We

Whatever the vocabulary word, if the action focuses on “me, myself, and I” then lust is the root of the problem. The only remedy is love. We are countercultural when we adopt God’s attitude and make choices of selfless love that stand against life-blocking, lustful attitudes. Children need parents to lay the foundation for such countercultural living.

PARENTING AS A VOCATION

Vocation is a call from God towards God and life and love. God initiates the call and sustains us on the journey. God’s love does not call where God’s grace cannot keep. Internet wisdom says it this way: “If God calls you to it, God will see you through it.”

were loved by God before we were capable of accomplishment, acquiring fame and fortune, or being accountable. Apart from the opinion of any other human being, to the One who matters most we are – and we remain – loved and loveable even in our sin. Until we know this from experience, we live in isolation or depression or addiction or despair or defensiveness, or we look for love in all the wrong places. It is an illusion to think that any pursuit other than intimacy with God can fully satisfy all the hungers of the human heart. St. Augustine said it this way: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and so our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Active relationship with God is the antidote for the false values present in our culture.

All of the false values in our culture fall somewhere on a continuum between love and lust. Avoid the temptation of limiting the term “lust” with sexual interests. Lust is a far broader term. Some folks lust for prestige and position. Others lust for attention or possessions. Lust dominates in the absence of love. I think that Sebastian Temple expressed the contrasts well in a poem that he wrote.

Love is a silence; lust is a roar.
Love is satisfied; lust wants more.
Love is a giving; lust only takes.
Love is a mending of hearts lust breaks.

Parenting is a vocation. The home becomes the first school for parents who are the primary educators of their children. It is in the home that children first form attitudes of love or unlove. A Christian home is the school of holiness in which the relationships between spouses and children become the context for learning virtues like: patience, kindness, forgiveness, humility, faith, hope, respect, sharing and service. In a Christian home Gospel values shape the perspective of children. Parents are so decisive in the proper formation of children, said Vatican Council II, that it is almost impossible to compensate for their failure in it (Declaration on Christian Education, #3). What a responsibility and privilege!

Parents teach through words but even more so through actions. As Emerson said, “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.” Example speaks volumes. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2201-2233) explained that by good example parents are in a position to better guide and correct children so that they grow in the preconditions of all true freedom: self-denial, sound judgment, and self-mastery.

Christian parenting is a grace and a source of holiness. Nevertheless, by its very nature it is a sacrifice and a participation in the cross of Christ. It is not easy to take a counter-cultural stand; to swim against the tide of contemporary pressures; to make decisions that are unpopular with children and adult peers as well. It takes forethought to be proactive and to anticipate pitfalls so as to eliminate stress before it takes control of family life. A simple example is being prepared with a position statement before a child requests something like, “Promise me that you won’t tell daddy.” Or, “All my friends are allowed to watch such-and-such a movie.” Or, “The other parents let their kids go to unchaperoned events. You don’t trust me.” Yes, a parent’s day can hold tensions, disappointments, upsets, inadequacies and fears. If parents assume a “job mentality,” they will probably be broken by the stress. If parenting is reduced to a duty or a task, it is too easy to count the cost, to concentrate on the inconveniences and ingratitude, to feel taken for granted, and to resent the imposition on personal time. Instead, when parents embrace the mindset of vocation, they know to place their tensions and stresses in the Tabernacle and to claim the promise of Jesus to remain with them through all the “ins and outs” of family life. When parents connect intentionally with Christ as the source of their call and their strength, they are not broken by pressure. Rather, they experience the grace to stand firm or make appropriate changes and Christ redeems each situation, creating good even with broken pieces.

CHILDREN NEED A MORAL COMPASS

A serious hiker or a navigator views a compass as essential equipment. The ability to find “true north” makes travel safer and more efficient. Throughout their lives children need parents to be a moral compass. Meeting that goal is no easy task. Bygone days provided Christian parents with more spiritual support than does our current culture. In times past, when Christianity was the dominant culture in American society, the rhythm of life seemed Christian. Church attendance on Sunday was common practice, stores were closed and public diversions were limited. As a consequence family activity was more likely. Observance of the sacred seasons like Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter was common practice and those holy times were topics in advertisement, music, and film. In many neighborhoods, non-Christian neighbors knew the Catholic customs like May Processions, Forty Hours Devotion, the Stations of the Cross, the rosary, and Saturday Confessions. Bishop Ken Untener remarked:

“Times have changed. Sunday mornings are filled with entertaining TV shows, swim meets, league games, and travel demands. Holy days have given way to commercialized

holidays. It's not that people have become irreligious. No. The rhythm of life has. The social rhythm of life is no longer tuned in to the practice of Christianity. . . . If I am going to practice the Christian tradition of daily prayer [and other spiritual practices], I'm going to have to be 'counter-cultural' – a bit out of step." (2003, *The Little White Book*. MI: Diocese of Saginaw, Epilogue.)

Rather than paralyze a parent into helplessness, the crisis of culture can evoke parent creativity and empower parents to stand against elements in the culture that block the life that Jesus came to give. We are immersed in our contemporary culture. It becomes our responsibility to be informed – but not defined – by the culture. Instead, to take our definition from the God who made us and calls us to live as God's sons and daughters.

CHILDREN NEED HEROES

The other day I happened upon a CD of singer Renee Bondi. One song in the album, *Strength for the Journey*, captured my heart. The song, "Children Need Heroes," offered sage advice.

**"In this world of uncertainties our children need a sense of guarantee.
There are things to learn before they're grown.
How can we help them if we're not at home?"**

Being at home is, itself, a countercultural choice. The attitude of "Go, go, go" is prevalent but the consequence is that children and adults alike feel scattered, unfinished, and overwhelmed. A few years ago a little second grade child conveyed to her teacher the delight she felt because she was going to be able to stay home for a whole weekend and play with her toys instead of traveling or participating in multiple activities. Children need at-home time. At-home parents who are aware of their child's environment and attentive to teachable moments provide a sense of security. Security is bedrock to a sense of self-esteem. Routine, procedure, system, emotional and physical safety, continuity, predictability and consistency are fundamental elements for positive, soulful growth. But they do not occur in a vacuum. They require parent oversight and consistency from one day to the next and from one incident to another.

**"Our children need a hope for the future, a light in troubled times.
Not searching for heroes in a world of doubt but finding strength at hand..."
Our children need a hope for the future. They need to learn to live free.
Our children need heroes in people like you and me."**

Ours is an age of instant gratification, over-stimulation, and entertainment. We look for quick fixes to whatever may bother us. We seek compensation for any inconvenience. We are easily distracted and jump from one activity to another. And in the age of cell phones, ipods, and portable game devices we are barraged by stimulation. Just yesterday I observed a young teen sitting on a public bus. On her left ear was an ipod-connected earphone. She was playing with a hand-held technology game and, simultaneously she conducted a conversation via a cell phone that was attached to her right ear. I wondered, did she truly experience and enjoy the experience of any one of the three options?

Does she have the ability to be present and remain present to a single focus? Is she comfortable with periods of deep silence? In the current culture silence and solitude are counter-cultural choices.

Socrates who lived 400 years before Christ proclaimed that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” An examined life requires quiet reflection and the ability to sit comfortably with self. Awareness of the true self is the foundational requirement for positive self-esteem, growth in character, and the development of a God-relationship. If we are unable to journey inward we look for heroes to pull us out and make up for our loss or emptiness. The vocation of parent includes teaching children how to find their strength from within and how to take personal responsibility for action and the consequences of behavior. Self-control and self-discipline are the by-products of autonomy. Autonomy, or self-reliance, is the sense of respectful independence, inner authority, and responsibility that permits a child to make appropriate decisions without the need of supervision. Parents encourage growth in healthful self-reliance when they:

- model self-control
- expect accountability for choices and consequences
- encourage, demonstrate, and role-play respectful assertiveness
- provide choices
- allow responsible independence
- provide prudent supervision, but not intrusion except in matters of mortal or moral danger
- emphasize effort more than result
- do nothing for the child that the child can do
- affirm instances when the child shows personal responsibility
- teach that an explanation is not an excuse

**“Our children need to feel our trust in God’s Word.
They need to know His voice has been heard.
They look to us for guidance through life.
We need to do the things we know are right.”**

Children need parents who know their faith, live their faith, and transmit their faith to their family. Who is God? How does your relationship with God color the way that you approach life, people, situations, disappointments, pain, suffering, and stressful situations? What is your favorite Gospel story or scripture quotation? What spiritual practices mark your family life? What values and principles shape the code that you live by? Would your children be able to name them? What part of you do you want your children to integrate into themselves that will inspire, direct, and advise them when they are away from you and after you have died? What effort on your part helps your family members to recognize God in the present moment, to be transformed slowly by these encounters, and to receive others in the manner that they experience being received by God?

Parents can transmit their spiritual heritage to children in several ways:

- **Environment** or physical reminders of the sacred like crucifixes, slogans, or symbols (crèche, nails, crown of thorns, prayer dish, etc.)
- **Family Eucharist and Sacraments** on Sundays and special days in the liturgical year such as Christ the King Sunday or Pentecost.
- **Customs** that sprinkle family life with the sacred like prayer before meals or re-consecrating crucifixes in the house on the feast of the Holy Cross 9/14.
- **Personal Example** like frequently saying “I need to pray about that before I can give you an answer.
- **Rituals** like a morning greeting or bedtime blessing, a parent formula when children leave the house, or a New Year blessing of the home.
- **Breaking Open the Word**, that is, talking together about the Sunday Gospel message. Applying the Gospel to family situations.

Parents are signposts for their children. Strive to make the pattern of your actions consistent with your words. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Speak the truth in love, without stinging. Avoid double standards. Be a model of whatever you expect of a child. Let your life responses and choices proclaim to your children an abiding awareness of the presence of God and the providential love that God has for each person. Parents cannot walk the journey for their children, but parents can point the way – not by what they say but by how they live.

EMBRACE YOUR VOCATION

Parents, you have been called by God to be the most influential person in the soul of your child. You have been entrusted with a divine mission. You may feel overwhelmed and inadequate to meet the challenges. Some days fear may overshadow your confidence. You may think, “But I am not qualified! Someone else would be a better parent.” At such times take courage from knowing that “God does not call the qualified. God qualifies the called!” And no other person can be a better parent for this child than you. God knows what God is about. God does not make mistakes. We make mistakes because we are lacking information. God knows all things. God lacks nothing. God cannot make a mistake. God trusts you with this mission and God promises to be faithful to you. Trust your God and trust yourself. Your soul already knows what is best for your child. Let tensions and setbacks send you to prayer. Recently I saw a church marquee slogan that said, “God answers all knee-mail.” That is solid information. God does answer all prayer. Sometimes the answer is “Yes.” At other times, “No. This is really not in your best interest” or “Not at this time”. Prayer is not a magic wand, nor a vehicle to change God’s mind. Rather, prayer converts my heart to see as God sees, to think as God thinks, and to choose what God chooses. Always God’s will is life-to-the-full.

Embrace your vocation. Be true to your soul. Be counter-cultural when the need exists. Be for your child a moral compass, true north, a reliable sign post. Be the hero that your child needs

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