



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## TRANSMITTING FAMILY SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

If your child were asked to rate how God-centered your family life is, on a scale of one to ten, what would be the rating? If your child were then asked to list evidence to support the rating, what examples would be cited? If a stranger were to spend one week with your family, how would he rate the spiritual climate of your home? Creating spiritual heritage within the family is essential to your role as a Christian parent. By word and example and family environment, you initiate your children into the ways of maturity, salvation, holiness, social contribution, and social justice. You are the primary evangelizer of your children, responsible for introducing them to Jesus and teaching them how to imitate him. Each effort in soulful formation is part of the spiritual inheritance that you are creating for your family.

Each of us composes a will to ensure material inheritance for loved ones: land, property, jewels, savings, family heirlooms, etc. But what about spiritual inheritance? The material support is appreciated and put to use, but it disappears or becomes outdated. It is powerless to heal hurts or inspire lives. You have only to think of your own parents, grandparents, or others who were significant to you and who are no longer present. What is it about them that continues to feed and nourish your spirit? In what ways do they continue to influence your life or your choices? What is it that you want your children to take from you into their souls? Your first response, I trust, is that you want to pass on faith and morals that will build character, integrity, and holiness.

Families are called by God to share in the life and the evangelizing mission of the Church. That mission is to proclaim Jesus as Lord and to spread his Gospel: God is love; God is present among us; and God calls us to relationship, conversion, and transformation. Evangelization begins in the home. In Baptism we begin a relationship with God that must grow continually (1) by imitating the obedient Jesus who was prophet, priest, and king; (2) by living the Commandments/law of love; and (3) by witnessing the compassion of Christ through service to others. Family is the school of holiness; parents are the primary educators; and this is the curriculum!

### IMITATE JESUS: PRIEST, PROPHET, SERVANT-KING

In the role of **prophet** we are to be messengers of God's word; to give prophecy and to be prophecy; and to speak and to live the values of Jesus. We must be who we say we are! Then we will see God in the face of those we love and serve, and we will be the face of God to others. Our being proclaims that God is love. To be messengers of the Word, we must know the Word. Teach children love for the Scripture and help them become familiar with its messages.

The function of a **priest** is to pray, to intercede for others, to communicate with God, and to relay God's

response to others. Parents are the first to teach their children to pray as Jesus prayed. Jesus prayed "on the spot" (spontaneously) in the midst of ordinary circumstances, and he also sought solitude to pray. Prayer-ways grow as we grow, i.e., simple sentences, aspirations, formulas, poems, song, psalms, hymns, heart-room prayer (meditation), guided imagery, rosary, stations of the cross, visits to/conversations with the Blessed Sacrament, participation at Mass, retreats, spiritual direction, contemplation. Prayer is vocal and mental, formal and informal. Parents teach through example that God is present and interested in us, always and everywhere, and that we may lift our hearts to God

at any moment with the ease and familiarity of taking a breath!

Baptism makes us heirs of heaven and gives us a share in the royal mission of Jesus. He came to restore all people to God. He invited all into his kingdom, and he assumed the role of **servant-king**. Jesus told us that he “did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45). He explained to his disciples that the world defines greatness as power and control over others, but that it could not be that way with them if they wanted to be his disciples. Instead, he said, “whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant” (Mt. 20:26). He washed the feet of his apostles and then taught: “If I, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (Jn.13:14-15). As servant-kings we are called to give service to each other with the mindset of Jesus. Teach children how to anticipate the needs of others, to sacrifice personal time and preference for the good of another, to express appreciation and gratitude, to contribute to the organization of the home, to cultivate the joy of giving, and to experience the life of service that is expressed in the Peace Prayer of St. Francis: “let me sow love, pardon, faith, hope, light, joy, understanding, consolation.”

### LIVE THE GREAT COMMANDMENTS

Present the Commandments as guides in loving rather than a list of do’s and don’ts. Speak of them as life-giving practices vs. life-blocking practices. Jesus said, “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). His law of love is a guide to life: “Love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind [Commandments 1-3]. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself [Commandments 4-10]. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments” (Mt. 22:37-40).

**The First Great Commandment:** Value God and your God-relationship more than money, power, prestige, or peer acceptance. Show respect for God, God’s name, and the

things of God. Give courtesy and dignity to all others because they are made in God’s image. Give public acknowledgement of your love for God by participating with reverence, attention, and devotion at the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy. Make holy the Lord’s Day by remembering who you are and whose you are!

**The Second Great Commandment:** Honor parents and lawful authority. Revere human life in all of its forms: physical, social, psychological, and spiritual. Appreciate the gift of sex and avoid persons, places, things, or circumstances that exploit sex or are irreverent about human sexuality. Respect the property of others. Use all things in the manner that they were intended. Be a responsible steward of creation. Safeguard the reputation and privacy of others. Refuse to participate in gossip. Be faithful in friendships and relationships. Support the relationships of others, especially marriage. Appreciate what you have. Work for what you want. Replace envy, jealousy, and greed with affirmation, appreciation, and generosity.

### BE THE COMPASSION OF CHRIST

As we grow to know Jesus we automatically come to love Him, and love always overflows into service. Jesus witnessed to the love of God consistently. He welcomed sinners. He initiated conversation. He cured the sick. He ate with outcasts. He wept for Lazarus. He felt pity for the crowds, and he fed them. He felt a grieving mother’s sorrow, and he raised her son back to life. He called people to conversion through his teaching. He even gave energy to console the weeping women in the midst of extreme pain during his Crucifixion. Through his actions he taught a social gospel. He said, “Whatever you do for the least of my people, you do it to me” (Mt. 25:40). Jesus worked for justice. We are challenged to work for peace, truth, and justice.

Teach children to practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy and to interpret them creatively. For example, “to feed the hungry” goes beyond helping in food collections and soup kitchens. The hungry are also those who are starving for affection, understanding, friendship, forgiveness, etc. Involve the family in pursuit of social justice through joint or individual service projects. Help children to see how the moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude contribute to peace and justice.

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