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YOUR CHILD'S CONSCIENCE



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YOUR CHILD'S CONSCIENCE

By Gerard A. Pottebaum

We hear a lot of talk in modern religious circles about forming the Christian conscience. We discuss whether a child of seven, eight, or even nine can commit serious sin; we talk about being in an era where "ask father" isn't the easy answer to every moral conflict. It used to be that no question arose in the ordinary layman's mind over such matters as birth control, the morality of nuclear weapons, religious liberty, or authority in the Church; now these topics are in debate and the Catholic often finds it necessary to make his own moral decisions, guided by a conscience comfortable in a different era.

The problem we parents face is translating the discussion about forming the Christian conscience today into what we should say to our seven-year-old who takes something that doesn't belong to him, or to our 15-year-old who asks what's

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wrong with necking. And what's more, we wonder what we can do to cultivate our own consciences so that we are sensitive to the sins of our times.

This pamphlet is intended to serve in throwing some light on the darkness we parents grope in.

Our Approach

First we will describe the kind of conscience we want to form. Our guide will be Christ's teaching in the parable of the prodigal son. This teaching will set the stage for considering how the conscience emerges and matures as the child grows. Our source for this discussion will be the writings of psychologists and religious educators. And as part of this discussion of the growing child, we will try to show how we can influence our children's consciences and prepare them to be informed with the Spirit of Christ.

This is too ambitious, of course, for a pamphlet. However, it should serve as a handle to hang on to when you read more complete writings on related subjects.

My only "credential" for writing this pamphlet is that I am a parent. I am not an expert in psychology, theology, sociology, or any of the other "-ologies." Like you, as a parent I've puzzled over what makes our children who they are, why they act the way they do, what I do for

and to them, and especially what goes on inside them, in their hearts.

A Matter of Heart

Their hearts. That's the "-ology" that belongs most properly to parents. As parents we are responsible for the growth and maturing of our children's consciences, their hearts. No one is closer to the hearts of our children than we are.

Our concern of the heart is one of relationship — between us and our children, between persons. It is an *experience* shared by parent and child. It is what we see in our child and what he sees in us when our eyes and his meet, and our hearts speak. This dialogue of the heart is our greatest and deepest joy; to have it silenced, to lose contact, brings nearly unendurable suffering — to parent and child.

Some people do not consider the conscience a matter of heart. Some describe it in terms of a good angel and a bad angel riding on our shoulders whispering good and evil thoughts into our ears. This is most misleading. The conscience is not some little voice directing us to do good and avoid evil. The conscience is the heart of you. It is wrapped up in everything you are.

So when we speak of conscience, we speak of more than moral, legal judg-

ment. We are speaking of the whole person. And when we speak of forming the conscience, we must also consider more than the law of right and wrong. We must see what makes us who we are.

THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

No other story provides a better insight into who we are and what a genuinely Christian conscience is than the familiar parable of the prodigal son.

When Jesus told this story, He was speaking to all men, but particularly to the Pharisees, those who lived by the letter of the law at the expense of its spirit.

In the story, you recall, Jesus spoke of a certain father who had two sons. The older son always seemed to do what was right and proper. Judging from the way he acted, you couldn't criticize him. The younger son, on the other hand, always had to have his way. He was the prodigal son.

One day the prodigal son asked for his share of the family property. And after his father had given him his share, the prodigal son left his father's home to do what pleased himself.

He journeyed to a distant land where people were poor. There he squandered his fortune, was caught up in a famine, and had to beg for help.

A man offered him a job feeding pigs.

But that didn't satisfy his hunger. He would have eaten anything — even the pigs' corn husks — but no one offered him anything. He grew sorry for having left his father's home.

He reminisced about his past. "Even my father's servants have more bread than they need. Perhaps if I return to my father and let him know that I'm sorry, he'll let me be his servant. For I don't deserve to be called his son."

So the prodigal son left the wretched land wracked by famine and journeyed home. When he was still a distance away, his father saw him coming. The story doesn't say that he had been watching for his son to return, but the implication is strong. At least he had hope. Perhaps every day he would wander to the top of the hill to look in anticipation for his son. Perhaps, too, like a lot of fathers, he knew his son better than his son knew himself.

Anyway, when he saw his son, he ran to meet him, and he embraced him.

The prodigal son spoke the lines he had rehearsed: "Father," he said, "I am sorry I did what I wanted. I am ashamed before you for I have turned away from our heavenly Father. I am not worthy to be called your son."

That's as far as he got with his prepared statement. He was going to ask his father to take him back as a servant, not

as a son. But his father broke in by calling to his servants, "Bring the best robe for my son, and a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. Let us celebrate! My son was lost and is found! My son is home!"

He had accepted him as a son, not as a servant. And he welcomed him home with a grand celebration.

Meanwhile, the older son returned, heard the music and dancing, and called out a servant to ask what was going on.

"Your brother has come home," the servant said.

"What has he done to deserve this?" he asked angrily. And he would not enter the house.

So his father came out to invite him to share in the joy of his brother's return. But he wouldn't go in. And when he spoke to his father, he didn't address him as "Father." He simply said, "I have always done what you wanted, and you never gave me a party."

But his father said, "We must welcome your brother with great joy because he was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found."

The story ends there, unresolved. Does the elder brother enter his father's house? The story doesn't say. At any rate, the father has opened his doors to him. His elder son is welcome. And the story ends.

All Are Prodigals

What is the meaning of this story as far as conscience is concerned?

Each of us is a prodigal, continually squandering the merciful love of our heavenly Father. He welcomes us into His family at Baptism. Each time we stray and then return for pardon, He is ready to forgive us. And what's more, He invites us to celebrate—to share once more in His family life at the Eucharistic table. This parable, therefore, reveals to us God's merciful love, that God is our loving Father. At the same time, it reveals to us who we are—His prodigal children.

The prodigal son describes a person who has had a change of heart. He is the person who recognizes in his heart—in his conscience—his wretched condition, and returns, in sorrow, to our heavenly Father. He is a man with a genuinely Christian conscience. This is what we must strive for, and recognize, in our hearts: that God does not cut Himself off from us when we sin. We cut ourselves off from Him. And if we return to Him in sorrow—with a new heart, a “clean” conscience—He un-failingly will welcome us back.

The “Elder Brother” in Us

Now while the story tells us we are prodigal children, it also tells us that there

is some of the elder brother in us too.

He didn't call his father, "Father." Very likely, he does not see God as a merciful, loving Father. Instead he sees his relationship with God purely as a matter of rules. As long as he doesn't break any rules, God owes him a reward. This way of thinking doesn't allow a person to be free. He is a slave to a set of rules. His conscience is not so much heart as it is a cold system of do's and don'ts.

We are like the elder brother when we see the Church as nothing more than an organization, when we see the sacraments, particularly Penance, as a part of the system of salvation. When we think this way, we fail to recognize that this thing we call sanctifying grace is a share in God's life, and that the human manifestation of this life is a Person — Christ.

We must remember that Christ is not a system, but a Person. And when we receive the grace of the sacrament of Penance, we are not sharing in a system, we are meeting Christ and sharing in His personal life.

The elder brother never became a complete person with a mature Christian conscience. He judged himself by what showed on the outside rather than by what lay hidden within his heart. So long as he followed "the system," he felt he didn't need God's forgiveness. And so he

never learned God's love. He did not realize that we all need God's forgiveness, His merciful love.

And the magnificent part of the parable's message is that, even though the elder son lived in this state of heart, God still loved him. Even though his conscience had been ill-formed and he lacked the freedom only God's love can provide, the father did not abandon him. "He came out and began to entreat him. . . . 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is thine; but we are bound to make merry and rejoice, for this your brother was dead, and has come to life; he was lost and is found'" (Luke 15:28-31).

This parable reveals to us the kind of heart we must form within ourselves and within our children, a heart that recognizes its need and utter dependence upon God's merciful love. And from this lesson, we can learn too what sin is.

THE CONSCIENCE AND SIN

We have heard about sin all our lives, and have accused ourselves of committing sins. But do we really know what sin is?

Too quickly we speak of sin as simply the breaking of a Commandment, or, worse, as a spot on the soul. Too often we have twisted the facts in order to fit them into one of the 10 categories of sin as so many

pigeonholes. Soon certain of the pigeonholes become worn so smooth, we just automatically slip into them. And soon our lives are governed by our slippery slot in the law rather than by love. Keeping the law becomes a fearful preoccupation because if we don't obey, God will become angry and punish us. And we begin to think that if we keep the law, God owes us eternal happiness.

God does not owe us anything. We are completely indebted to Him. He gave us the law, and we must keep it. But He gave us so much more than a legal system. He gave us His very personal life, Jesus.

Herein lies our clue to what sin is: man's affront against, or complete severing of, the relationship of love with God. The evil of sin lies not in the broken law but in our having aborted God's personal love for us.

God is not a judge, whose function is to deal out proper portions of punishment. He is a loving Father. And through us He expresses His merciful love in human terms. When we do not love as He would have us love, we cut ourselves from Him. We cease to share in His personal life, in the life of Christ, His Son.

For parents to form a Christian conscience in their child, they must let God's merciful love find its expression in their lives and in the relationship between them-

selves and their child. They are not impersonal judges. Their preoccupation must be with revealing to the child not the letter of the law but the Spirit of Christ. Their primary concern, especially with young children, is not with good or bad conduct, but with the condition of the heart.

A young child, for example, can with the purest heart take his sister's crayons and drop them into mother's new toaster; he can unravel a string of toothpaste from bath to bedroom just after he has been told not to spread bath powder all over — and still not sin.

More important than reprimands and mild punishments, parents must most of all explain that while they understand he didn't mean to, he did take his sister's crayons without asking, that daddy worked hard so that mother could buy the toaster to toast bread, that crayons might make it not work, and that while red and yellow and orange crayons melted on toast look as pretty as jam, it gives everyone a flat taste and indigestion.

It's much easier and relieving just to fly off the handle. Often we tire of explaining and explaining to our child how his actions affect other people — people whom we want to love because God loves them. It's much easier to tell him to stop it "because I said so and if you don't

God will punish you.” But such remarks are most harmful to the formation of a healthy heart, a Christian (Christ-centered) conscience.

THE EMERGING CONSCIENCE

So far we’ve described in the language of the Bible what the Christian conscience is. And we’ve described what sin is. Now how do these fit into the pattern of the child’s growth?

We mentioned earlier that the conscience is the heart of you. It involves everything you are — intellect, will, emotions. The conscience involves the whole complex of this marvelous creature we call the human person.

First Five Years

When a child is born, and for the first few years of his life, he goes through rapid physical and psychological changes.

As an infant, the human person is asleep more than he is awake. He is quite helpless — utterly dependent on his mother and father. However, he is not dormant, physically or mentally. He is very alive.

Within a year, he is sitting up and learning to walk. He is emerging from communicating by crying to using more controlled sounds and gestures. And by the time he is two, he is beginning to form intelligible words.

During these first two to three years, the child is growing from a state of unconsciousness to consciousness. He is growing more and more aware that he is alive — that he is. You might describe this early period as like a Yo-yo: the person passes back and forth from consciousness to unconsciousness. This is not a passive existence. The child reacts to experiences with people and things in his environment just as a Yo-yo reacts to influences on its pattern.

During this period the child is developing his own powers. And soon he is speaking of himself as "I." However, just because the child speaks of himself this way, his consciousness of himself as "I" is still uncertain, extremely fragile.

Sometimes the child will speak of himself in the third person: "He's a good boy," or "Mark wants that," he will say of himself. And sometimes the child will be completely oblivious of himself. This search for himself continues in this vein through the child's fifth year.

Parents must practice extreme restraint in dealing with their child during this period. We must look at our home from the child's point of view. This is a very frightening world for him. We are two and three times as large as he is. How would we feel if we were to meet someone that much larger than we are?

Our good intentions in early discipline, rule keeping, a determination to raise an obedient child with a respect for authority, can, if overdone, severely hinder the emerging personality. And the heart of this emerging personality is the conscience.

Child Identifies With Parents

During the first five years, the child finds security in the big world by identifying himself as the center of his parents' life. This is more than imitation of them. His identification is so profound that he feels the same emotional currents that his mother or father feels. He doesn't recognize any difference between them and himself.

Because of this mysterious union of the insides of parent and child, this union of the heart, it is vital that the parent be an emotionally and psychologically mature person. He cannot fake a parent-child relationship with his child without later having it backfire.

During this time the child is discovering who he is through his relationships with his parents as well as with other family members and close associates. He is discovering his own person.

During the early years of life, the child's preoccupation is with survival. His response is instinctively one of filling needs.

Now since his reactions are emotional and instinctual rather than predominantly intellectual, the young child cannot make generalizations about what he feels. Parents must constantly correct him, watch him, explain, mildly rebuke him over and over again for what we see as the same type of offense.

One moment the child will take his father's cuff links and plant them like flowers in his modeling clay. Mother will explain that "the cuff links belong to daddy, and that while they make beautiful flowers, we should ask for things that belong to others." Assuring his mother that next time he'll ask, the child goes into his sister's room, takes her pretty new doll dress, goes into his room and tries to dress his Teddy bear. The dress is too small, but he is determined to get it on the bear. The tearing seams go unnoticed, until his sister walks in. Her cries—shrieks—bring mother, and mother goes through the "ritual for right and wrong" again.

Since the child cannot generalize about his experiences, parents must treat the "offense" immediately, when the iron is hot. But they must not strike too hard, or the delicate metal will be smashed out of shape. They must also be sure the child knows why they are striking.

Misconduct Versus Sin

We must remember that while the child may be guilty of misconduct, of taking his sister's doll dress and tearing it, he is not responsible. He did take and tear the dress, and his action was wrong. However, since the child has not yet developed an ability to generalize, he may be able to learn that taking cuff links without asking is wrong, but he doesn't see what it has to do with taking a doll dress without asking.

When we speak to the child about what he has done wrong, we must explain that the wrongdoing lies in disrupting the relationship of love between him and his sister. Because, you will recall, sin is an affront against another person.

Now since the child of this age has not developed a social sense, he cannot be responsible for sinning. Indeed there is no sin at all in the very young child's activity. There may be misconduct, but not sin.

We must guard against leading the child to think that his bad conduct as such during these early years is sinful. Never should we tell him that God will punish him for his conduct. We must communicate love and understanding so that when the child does begin to realize what he is doing, he will know, when he fails, that God is always willing to forgive. God's love will never fail him, even if he fails

in sustaining his love. God will always forgive him if he returns with a contrite heart as a prodigal son.

The danger in the early childhood period is for parents to force upon the child a code of conduct, a set of rules, and hold the breaking of them as sinful. If we communicate law at the expense of love, the child's conscience emerges into a state in which he judges himself in terms of kept or broken laws instead of whether or not he has hurt another person. If we preoccupy the child with a legal system, we are forming in the child a conscience that will never fully experience the Spirit of Christ alive within him. We build a shell around his heart.

Forgiveness Is Foundation

We must forgive "seven times 70 times," which is the Bible's way of saying "always." We must forgive because God has forgiven us. Through forgiving our children, through loving them without fail, we lay the foundation for a conscience guided not by a moral code, as was the elder brother, but by a genuine religious conviction, as was the prodigal son, the conviction that God is love. Such a conscience is truly Christian. It is guided by faith in the unfailing love of our heavenly Father. The child learns this love through the experiences he shares within his family.

His relationship with God is built upon these human ties.

The question arises, "Should you make your child tell his sister, or whomever he offends, that he is sorry?"

Some expression of sorrow is necessary. But it is harmful to force a child to say he's sorry. Force only puts the child through the motions of seeking forgiveness. But in his heart, he is unchanged.

Accidental Versus Intentional

The child learns to ask forgiveness by seeing parents ask forgiveness of each other, and when necessary ask forgiveness of their children. If a child *accidentally* drops his jelly bread face down on mother's lap, and mother slaps him as if the deed were intentional, she should tell him she is sorry. In so doing, she is teaching the child how to seek forgiveness. She is righting a mistaken punishment: she should not have punished the child for an accident. She is correcting the possibility of the child confusing accident with the Christian morality of right and wrong. A person who does something accidentally is not committing sin, unless, of course, he was being careless. In this case, if a child is consistently careless, his carelessness should be addressed and not the jelly bread in the lap.

From Ages Five to Eight

When the child reaches the stage in which he begins to develop a social sense, he begins also to recognize sexual differences. He begins to see himself as boy or girl. Slowly he emerges into a new reality.

Up to this point, the boy has been more dependent upon his mother and the girl upon her father. Now the child sees the parent of the opposite sex as a separate person, and he sees that he is not the center of their world, but a product of their relationship. He reacts to this discovery by identifying himself with the parent of the same sex. The boy recognizes that his mother is a more powerful rival for his father's attention than he is. The girl sees her father as a more powerful rival for her mother's attention than she is. So, in ordinary language, they decide that "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em." Thereupon the boy switches identification from mother to father. And the girl switches from father to mother.

Through this experience emerges a person who no longer responds to life instinctively and emotionally, preoccupied with survival; his instincts to fill a self-need, or to seek self-satisfaction, at all costs, are subsiding. Slowly, the child's power of reason evolves. This new power, along with his new social sense, brings him to a

new stage in the growth and formation of conscience.

With the use of his intellect, and with his social sense, he can begin to realize what sin is. However, his sense of other persons, his ability to generalize, to abstract, and his power to reason are still very primitive from ages five to eight. His sense of sin doesn't evolve overnight. So primitive are these powers that it is still most doubtful if a child of this age can sin.

This new period presents a grand opportunity to develop his power to reason clearly, to seek truth. At this time, the child is most ready to learn, to use his new power.

We can, when he is eight and nine years old, speak to him of the Commandments, but not as a system of "do's and don'ts." The Commandments are a guide to living in a personal relationship of love with God, which is the content of the first three Commandments, and with our neighbor, the concern of the last seven Commandments. All of these Commandments are summed up in the two great Commandments: "You shall love God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and all your strength; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

The child now begins to recognize that taking his father's cuff links and taking

his sister's doll dress do fit together. Slowly the child develops an ability to draw separate and distinct expressions of sharing or of stealing under general headings of generosity and selfishness. And slowly his Christian moral values become more his own, more a part of himself. He is able to judge new situations and to see how other new examples of generosity or of selfishness fit within or outside the scope of the Christian personality.

Nine to Twelve

During the middle-childhood years, the law becomes a preoccupation with the child. He is quick to notice when someone breaks the law. And he is often very strict with himself.

This concern offers parents an opportunity to make the law a positive force in his life. They can do this by continuing to explain and emphasize why violations of the law are affronts against another person. The child's maturing sense of other people's feelings enables him to grasp the gravity of sin, not as a violation of a law, but as a break in the relationship of love between himself and another person, between himself and God.

Since the child's sense of other people and his ability to reason are still in their primitive stages of development, we must slowly introduce the child to the law and

to a greater sense of sin. We do not introduce him to such notions as mortal and venial sin until he is able to understand their meaning. If these concepts are presented too soon, or without proper orientation and explanation, the child cannot personalize them. He cannot absorb them into his heart. He cannot digest them in his conscience.

When he sets about examining his conscience, he will preoccupy himself with definition and number rather than with the sin itself — that is, with the relationship of love between persons.

We must, during the ages of nine to 12, introduce the notion of what constitutes a grave sin and one that is not so grave. This explanation must be done in terms of our pursuit of what we understand to be God's will.

Sin: Grave and Not Grave

If a person does something that he knows is a reversal of his pursuit of God's will — that is grave sin. It is so serious an offense that he cuts himself off from God's life. If, on the other hand, he does something that is diverting, but not a completely new direction from the course he is following to be God's will, then he is committing a lesser offense.

The difference between the two might be compared to rubbing your hand on a

board. If you rub your hand in the direction of the grain you can pick up some small splinters without falling off course. However, if you rub your hand against the grain, you will pick up large splinters that completely rupture the course you are attempting.

Freedom to Seek God

Our concern during these middle years is with helping the child discover his freedom, that he can, or can refuse to, seek God's will, that God does not force him to love, that when we sin we cut ourselves off from God because we have not loved, that God does not cut us off because we have broken a law.

During this period, we must keep uppermost in mind the fact that we all need salvation, that it is God who saves us in His Son, the Lord Jesus, that we save ourselves only insofar as we unite ourselves with Christ, not insofar as we follow the law.

This union with the person of Christ is the foundation for the formation of a Christian conscience. It is the prerequisite to sharing in the sacrament of Penance.

Meeting Christ in Penance

It is appropriate that the child share in this sacrament during the years when he is growing in an awareness of other peo-

ple, and awakening to his individuality as a person, his membership in the family as a community of persons. For the sacrament of Penance is a communal rather than private event.

In preparing our children for this sacrament, we must help them to see that the word "penance" describes an attitude of heart. It describes the attitude of the prodigal son. Without this attitude, there can be no inner renewal, no conversion, no meeting with Christ in this sacrament. There can be no sacrament.

There is in children a natural sense of a pure heart, of when "things are right." The young child, for example, prefers not to eat at table with his family when he has done something wrong. Before he will be able to join the family again in peace, the wrong must be righted, some expression of reconciliation made. This expression may take any form. It might be simply going to the refrigerator for the butter — doing anything that expresses a positive relationship again with the family members. Such an expression releases the intensity of the estrangement; it reveals the new heart of the child; it provides him with a chance to demonstrate his desire to begin again to live in peace and love.

Confession is like this. It is the expression of public peacemaking. The way in which we go to confession today, however,

has blinded us from seeing it as a public affair. We see it negatively, as the way we get rid of sins. We see it as a part of "the system of salvation," but it is in reality a meeting with the person of Christ. There the Lord Jesus heals us. There we renew our share in God's personal life. There we renew our union with others who also share in the life of Christ.

There is much discussion on when children should begin to go to confession. In the United States, most children receive the Holy Eucharist toward the end of their second year in school. In more and more parishes, the children receive Communion before going to confession.

In Holland great strides are being taken to initiate the child into the sacrament of Penance at a pace paralleling his emerging and maturing conscience.

During the second year in school, the children do not go to confession. As a group they celebrate, as in a Bible service, God's merciful, forgiving love. In the third year these celebrations continue to be held periodically in order to communicate to the children the public, communal nature of the sacrament. During the third year, the children have an opportunity to confess privately at one of the public celebrations. Then in the fourth year, the public celebration of the sacrament continues to be held periodically, and the

children confess privately. The children also begin during this year to receive the sacrament outside of these public celebrations.

With this extended initiation, the child is almost 10 years old before he is "on his own."

Developing Communal Spirit

Because we in the United States have not yet reached this point in our formal preparation for the sacrament of Penance, it is all the more important for parents to help their children enter into the communal spirit of penance.

How? By re-examining and reflecting in our own spirituality the true spirit of penance. By explaining the reasons for good conduct in terms not only of the law but also and most emphatically in terms of the good of other persons. If you, as a parent, experience Christ as a person, the "how" in forming your child's conscience will spell itself out.

We can communicate the communal spirit of penance by going to confession together as a family. The family might prepare for confession together at home by reading appropriate passages from the Bible—the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), Psalms 1, 31, 138, 142, 18, 37, 50, 129. You might also refer to certain accounts of events in Christ's

life: Luke 5:18-26, John 20:19-23, Luke 7:36-50. In the Old Testament see Exodus 32:30-35 where Moses intercedes for his people, a type of Christ.

Frequently children like to have one of the parents lie in bed and talk before going to sleep. This is an ideal time to examine the relationships you have with each other and with other family members and neighbors.

The family night prayer offers another chance to briefly examine our hearts on how well we have loved our heavenly Father and each other during the day. In ways such as these, the child is better prepared to weather the storm of adolescence when the personality reaches a new plateau, and the conscience emerges into adulthood.

THE CONSCIENCE IN ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence has been described by the word "crisis." It is apt, whether the selection of that word was made in describing the state of the adolescent himself or of his parents.

This period in the child's life begins roughly at age 12 for girls and 14 for boys. And it lasts four or five years.

These critical years might be described as the time when everything we've talked about so far becomes intensified. How, with fully emerging physical powers, the

child (or is he still a child?) gains mature intellectual powers. He is as capable as adults of understanding difficult concepts. He is handicapped only by emotional insecurity and inexperience.

He is torn during these intense years between moving forward into adulthood, or returning to childhood. One moment he seems responsible enough for a car, the next moment he gives the impression he wouldn't be safe with a tricycle. He's trying to find himself.

During the past few years he has become conscious of himself as a person. Now he sees himself as a certain *kind* of person. And he strives to fulfill that image.

Previously, when he was told to do something, he responded readily. Now he wants — insists upon — knowing *why* he must do something. He has to be convinced now that a law is good for himself or for others.

Exposure to Love

As in the previous years, we must continue to explain laws as guides in our relationship of love with God and our neighbor. Now when these explanations are given and accepted by the person, they become assimilated by the person's heart. This is an opportune time to expose the meaning of love because now the person is able to love purely for the sake of the

other. Before this, love was more or less for the person's sake. He loved because it was good for himself. Now, in the adolescent years, the person reaches the greater depths of love.

The new depths of love arrive at the same time the person acquires the ability to reproduce. This brings up the point of distinction between body and soul. You will notice that neither of these words has had our concern so far. We have avoided driving a wedge between the two; our concern has been for the complete person. It is important to bring up the subject now because of the adolescent's hypersensitivity to the body.

Recall when we were talking about the six-year-old, we mentioned children become sensitive to sexual differences. They realize that they are "boy" or "girl."

At that time, they asked questions about where they come from. Those questions needed to be answered frankly, with no more explanation than the child's curiosity requires.

They also needed to be answered so as not to give the impression that the body was somehow evil, and bad for the soul, which was all good.

The body is a grand statement of the presence of something greater. The body is a sign of the soul, the physical expression of a divine reality. And on the last day,

when all signs are fulfilled, we'll see with our own eyes what now lies hidden within our hearts.

We cannot split body from soul any more than we can speak of the conscience as good and bad ear-whispering, shoulder-roosting angels.

"Soul" is a difficult, abstract word. We often use it to describe the difference between man and animal. (The word is used in the Bible to express the idea of the person, the thing that makes you who you are.)

I was once trying to lead a class of first-graders to this distinction when I learned the real difference between man and animals, from a six-year-old girl.

"What do you think makes us different from animals?" I asked.

She replied, "We can love, and animals can't."

We can love. That involves the heart, the conscience. And that's what makes man who he is — his conscience — the seat of his freedom.

This freedom is not a matter of choice between body and soul. It is rather the condition of being able to "love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and all your strength; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

The adolescent faces an intense period in the formation of conscience. If he sees

the body and soul not in conflict but in complement he is saved an even more intense crisis and great suffering. He can more readily rely upon early religious convictions in dealing with his new physical powers. He will not be faced with an irreconcilable conflict in enjoying what he knows inside to be good without cutting himself off from God.

As he passes through these years, the person needs a strong and firm father. For while the adolescent is establishing his independence and more often than not shows no use for parents or family, he wants the footing at home to be firm. It takes time for him to select what he is going to keep from childhood learning and finally internalize it. For he has to weigh these childhood experiences out with his new view of life, a view that provides him with uncanny insights into adulthood. This view too he must internalize.

Written on the Heart

Prayerfully, when he finally looks at himself and examines his heart he will find there the truth of which St. John speaks in his first Epistle, addressed to all men:

“In this we have come to know His love, that He laid down His life for us; and we likewise ought to lay down our life for the brethren. He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and

closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him? My dear children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue, but in deed and in truth.

“In this we know that we are of the truth, and in His sight we set our hearts at rest. Because if our heart blames us, God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God, and whatever we ask, we shall receive from Him, because we keep His Commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

“And this is His Commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, even as He gave us Commandments. And he who keeps His Commandments abides in God, and God in him. And in this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (3:16-24).

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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