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The FAMILY FIRESIDE

by

REV. JOHN A O'BRIEN, Ph.D. LL.D.



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WHERE HAPPINESS IS FOUND

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I

ONE of the historic shrines of France, visited annually by thousands of travelers, is Malmaison, the old home of Napoleon and Josephine. What Stratford-on-Avon is to England, what Mt. Vernon is to America, Malmaison is to France. Situated a few miles outside of Paris, on the road to St. Germain, it was the scene of many of the dramatic incidents in the life of the First Consul. It was here that Napoleon came after his brilliant victories in Europe and in Egypt. In this retreat of sylvan loveliness he passed his happiest days with Josephine. Here too was gathered a court that reflected all the glories of France. No wonder that the French have made the home a national shrine whither they bring their children to feast their eyes upon the memorials of their former greatness as the ruler of all Europe.

Each room is arranged with the furniture in the same manner as when occupied by the great Napoleon. There is the bed in which he slept, the desk at which he wrote. There is the very pen with which he mapped out the campaigns which led to his great victories at Marengo, Austerlitz, Jena and the Pyramids—victories which changed the map of Europe.

As the visitor goes from this room, exuding its martial atmosphere, with its echo of clashing arms and cannonading, into the chamber of Josephine, he is struck by the contrast.

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No martial note here. There are the little incidentals that minister to the needs of womanhood and echo forth the dominant notes in her heart—the notes of love and domesticity. There is the pretty little clock by Chaudet depicting the Three Graces, the rug with the lonely swan in the center, the little sculpture showing Cupid hastening toward Psyche. In the center of the room, dominating everything, is the harp played by Josephine in the days of her happiness.

A Broken Harp

It stands there now, mute and silent. Its strings are broken. To every informed visitor that harp stands not as the symbol of the sweet music of domestic peace and concord. It stands as the jarring reminder of the raucous notes of domestic strife. With a silent eloquence it tells the sad story of a broken home, a family torn asunder, a sacred vow that was trampled upon, a domestic tragedy that will mar forever the escutcheon of the great Bonaparte. While successful in conquering Europe, in building new empires, establishing new dynasties, placing his brothers upon the thrones of Spain, Naples and Holland, Napoleon failed in the building of the most important empire of all—the empire of his own home.

Like Alexander the Great, sitting astride his steed in distant Ecbatana and weeping because there were no more worlds to conquer, only to fall within ten days a victim to his own untamed passions, so Napoleon was able to establish new empires throughout Europe—everywhere, save in the kingdom of his own home. The one place where defeat is disastrous and irreparable. That broken harp in the chamber of Josephine in Malmaison sounds with superlative irony a warning to the world today against the tragedy of a broken home, for which no other victories over men or nations can ever compensate. It reminds mankind that the building of a stable home where peace and love abound, is man's supreme achievement and

the source of his deepest and most abiding happiness. If a man fail in business, politics or other enterprises, but has kept intact the empire of his own home, with the myriad ties of sympathy and understanding unbroken, his failure is overshadowed by a victory which soothes the sting of uncounted defeats and brings the richest returns in love and happiness.

Home—The Foundation

From the watch-tower of the Vatican hill, surveying the struggles of humanity groping wistfully for new trails to happiness, with sentinels bringing their reports from the far corners of the earth, the Great White Shepherd of Christendom sounds a similar warning. In his Encyclical *On Christian Marriage*, Pope Pius XI calls attention to the supreme importance of the unity and indissolubility of Christian wedlock and lays bare the forces undermining the sanctity of the home. The home is the foundation of human society. Undermine the home, the Holy Father points out, and you blast at the solid bed-rock upon which society and stable government alike are builded. No expedient devised by the sociologist or the political scientist constitutes so mighty a bulwark for the protection of human society and orderly government as the teaching of Christ's Church concerning the sanctity of the marriage vow, the indissolubility of its bond, and the permanence of the Christian home.

The mother has been constituted by God as the first and the most effective teacher of her children. Receiving his life and nutriment from his mother the little child drinks in with equal eagerness the lessons he learns at his mother's knee. Like soft wax the mind of a child receives impressions with ease. It is these first impressions which sink the deepest and remain the longest. Indeed, experts in genetic psychology now assure us that impressions received during early childhood and in the preadolescent stage set up mental patterns and codes of con-

duct in the light of which all the experiences of later life are interpreted and evaluated.

They are the ideals embedded in the plastic days of childhood which the later years but deepen and harden—the ideals which consciously or unconsciously the adult carries with him to the grave. While the psychologist has given a description of this phenomenon in new and scientific terms, it is a truth which has long been recognized. Thus the writer in the Book of Proverbs stated it thousands of years ago when he said: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

The Primeval School

Since the mother is the first and the most effective teacher, the home is the primeval and the most important school. Children who are fed by their own mothers are usually more robust and vigorous than those nurtured by others, or raised on the bottle. Likewise children who are instructed in the precepts of morality and the teachings of religion by their own mothers are generally sturdier in their faith than those tutored by strangers. The child loves his mother and trusts in her as in no one else in the world. The lessons he learns from her are received with implicit confidence and unquestioning faith.

That is why no lay teacher, indeed not even a sister or priest, can ever be an adequate substitute for the mother as a teacher. That is why no Sunday school, nor even a parochial school with its week-day instruction by devoted sisters, can ever be a proper substitute for the home as a training school for the young. The most that these persons and agencies can do is to *supplement* the work of the mother in the home. If the training is neglected by the mother, then no human agency is capable of repairing the loss. It is final and irreparable.

As this point is crucial, let us illustrate it by the following analogy. An adult's physical constitution and vigor are largely

determined by the nurture, care and training received during his early childhood and youth. Let us take the case of a little child who was deprived of the nourishment needed for the proper growth of his body. His parents fail to give him the nourishment required for the formation and growth of the bony structure of his body. Suffering from such malnutrition, the bones become soft and ill-shaped, unable to support properly the weight and movement of the different parts of the body.

Take that young man thus deformed to the greatest clinics, supply him with the ablest specialists in the world, back him with the resources of Rockefeller. But you will strive in vain to recover the heritage of his lost youth. There was a time when doctors, care and nutriment could have helped him. That was the crucial period when his bones were forming, when nature was building once and for aye the permanent framework of the human body. That time, however, has passed. The bones are set, unshapely and deformed. No human power can remold them. No resources of men or money can ever recover for him his lost heritage.

A Lost Heritage

So it is with a child's moral and spiritual heritage. If the home fails to provide a child with proper training in these matters, teachers, sisters, priests, the school and the Church will strive in vain to undo the bad example of the home or even to overcome its negligence and thus recover for him his lost heritage. The home is the ideal training school not only because the mother is the ideal teacher but also because example is a more powerful teacher than precept. It is the example of the parents, their actions, words, attitudes, that form the atmosphere of the home which the child drinks in with his every breath. These are the influences which fashion him and make him responsive or unresponsive to the ideals proclaimed by Church and school.

There are probably few sisters or priests who have spent many years in the education of youth who have not had the conviction of the crucial and supreme importance of the training received at home driven deep into them. Thus a priest who has been for many years a chaplain at a sister's academy for girls expressed the results of his long experience. "While attending the academy," he states, "the girls attend Mass not only on Sunday but on every week-day as well. They say night prayers together in the chapel. They receive religious instruction five days a week. They are apparently well indoctrinated in their faith. In addition they have the edifying example of the good sisters.

"In June they return home. A considerable number come from homes where the mother is dead, or divorced, or where the parents are lax in their faith. Upon their return to school in the fall, I inquire of these girls about the practice of their religion while at home. I find that a large proportion of such girls fall back into the carelessness and laxity which characterize the home, and which seems to have become a part of their nature before they entered the convent school. Once they are back in the atmosphere of a careless home, the venter of religious deportment which characterized them while under the sisters' charge seem speedily to be eaten away by the acids of parental indifference and neglect of religious duties. It has been most disheartening and has led me to the conviction that the school can seldom, if ever, undo the result of defective home training."

Home Outweighs School

The experience of my priestly associates and myself in laboring for almost a quarter of a century among the Catholic youth at a State University has deepened in all of us this conviction: The religious training received at home, at the hands of parents, vigorous and fervent in their faith, is the most important and lasting of all. It will outweigh the influence of the

parochial grade school, high school, college or university—and indeed of all of them combined. The faith thoroughly planted in the child by careful home training will withstand a thousand frosts and all the winds that blow. While at times such an individual may not be able to put in words the refutation of sophistries attacking his holy religion, he knows with a deep and ineradicable conviction, with a sort of divine intuition, that they are fallacies. The knowledge of the influence of his holy religion in developing the nobility of character in his father and mother tells him with a cogency and an eloquence that admit of no dispute, that the sophist lies. Example speaks louder than words and remains today, as it always has been, the supreme sculptor of character and lasting convictions. The most deadly, if not almost the only real, danger to the Christian faith is a bad moral life.

My associate, the Very Reverend Dr. William J. Bergin, C.S.V., has spent half a century in the work of Catholic education. As a brother, he taught in the grades; as a priest, he has taught in the high school, college, seminary and university. Thousands of laymen and hundreds of priests, many of whom are now prelates and bishops, have sat at his feet. He expresses the conviction engendered by a long and fruitful ministry when he says: "The note that needs most to be sounded in America today is the one that stresses the supreme and paramount importance of religious training in the home. I do not hesitate to say that the influence of the home in the fashioning of character and in rooting religious faith in the children is more crucial than that of Church or school. Parents must be brought to realize that they are bound by a divine law to teach and train their offspring in their holy religion. Sisters and priests in school and church can only water the seed which they themselves must sow. The work of our schools from kindergarten to the university, the work of our Catholic press, the work of the Church itself will be largely frustrated if Catholic parents

neglect on any pretext whatsoever to train their children in the knowledge and in the practice of the religion of Jesus Christ."

The Home at Nazareth

The home of Jesus, Mary and Joseph at Nazareth is the model for all Christians. Though the Son of God, Jesus did not hesitate as a child to manifest filial obedience and reverence to His Mother and His foster-father, Joseph. The Scriptures reveal this in the one brief sentence: "He was subject to them." Thus did the divine Master set an example for youth everywhere. On their part, Mary and Joseph displayed the deepest love and solicitude for their divine Son.

To all parents there is entrusted a mission not less honorable than that assigned Joseph and Mary. It is the sublime mission of fashioning youthful minds and hearts according to the divine model. Parents become for the moment co-sharers with Almighty God in the sublime work of creation, in bringing into existence a human being. Their offspring have been made unto the image of God. They have been redeemed by the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ and are destined for an eternity of happiness with God in Heaven. Parents have a divinely-appointed task of guiding their groping footsteps safely along the paths of virtue and nobility of life. Whether they will be angels of light and lead their offspring to the life eternal, or be messengers of darkness who lead them away from God, is for parents to decide. Upon their decision hinge consequences that reach into eternity.

History records many instances of the influence of a saintly mother in shaping the character of her children into the image of her own sanctity. When St. Augustine as a youth left his home in Carthage and went to Rome he succumbed to the temptations in which that city then abounded. Losing his purity of conscience, he lost likewise the integrity of his faith, becoming tainted with Manichaeism, a widespread heresy of

that day. His saintly mother, Monica, never despaired. With the constancy of a true mother she stormed Heaven with her prayers for her wayward son.

"The child of so many prayers and tears," prophesied a holy bishop, "will not be lost." In the midst of his profligate life, the memory of his saintly mother came back to him. It called him back from the sin and error of his ways. Before her death St. Monica had the consolation of seeing her son restored to God and His Church. In his matchless book, *Confessions*, St. Augustine attributes his conversion to the influence of his saintly mother's life and to her ceaseless prayers for him, and speaks of her with a wistful tenderness that for fifteen centuries has stirred the hearts of men.

II

ST. LOUIS OF FRANCE

St. Louis, one of the noblest of all the kings of France, is another shining example of the influence of a holy mother. The virtues which made him so beloved by his people, and rendered his reign so illustrious in the annals of France, he attributed, under God, to his saintly mother, Queen Blanche. Typical of the care with which she guided his youthful feet along the paths of virtue and holiness are the memorable words she addressed to him as a child: "I love you tenderly, but sooner would I see you a corpse at my feet, and France bereft of an heir to the throne, than that you should tarnish your soul by a corrupt life."

If Queen Blanche, in spite of the engrossing duties of state, could pay so much attention to the religious training of her son, surely the mothers of today in the private walks of life can do as much. Though their sons may not ascend the thrones of kings, they can ascend the thrones of high citizenship, honest and faithful in the discharge of all its manifold duties.

There is more truth than poetry in the oft-quoted saying: "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."

Frederick Shannon has given us a deeper insight into the far-reaching role which mothers play in the fashioning of human life and character. "No blocks of marble," he writes, "do they round into statues; no canvases do they adorn with glowing colors; no books do they write with scholarly taste; no music do they compose with sweet strains; no platforms do they occupy with persuasive speech. Yet they are all these, and more, because they are God's disciples of the unexplored and the unexpressed. Sculptors, they chisel the veined marble of flesh and blood into living, breathing, human statues; artists, they paint the colors of righteousness on undying souls; authors, they write the literature of godliness on the hearts of their sons; musicians, they sing the white song of chastity into the souls of their daughters; orators, their lives speak so eloquently of the invisible things of God that after quitting the world, they being dead, speak on from the high places of eternity."

It was this same thought which St. John Chrysostom expressed fifteen centuries ago when he said: "What is more noble than to form the minds of youth? He who fashions the morals of children performs a task in my judgment more sublime than that of any painter or sculptor."

A Son's Accusation

While history records many cases of men and women whose nobility of character was traceable to home influence, it is likewise replete with instances of tragic failures traceable to the neglect of parental duty. In an address to college graduates Bishop Sheil of Chicago stressed the importance of the home as a training school for citizenship. As an illustration of the tragic consequences of parental negligence he narrated the following incident:

“When I was a young priest,” Bishop Sheil said, “I ministered to the religious needs of the prisoners at the county jail in Chicago. Early one wintry morning I was called to accompany a young prisoner, twenty-three years of age, on his death march to the gallows. He had committed a large number of robberies that culminated in the murder of a policeman who sought to apprehend him. Just before the noose was to be placed around his neck, he was asked if he had any final word to say. Looking around the death chamber, he spied a little group of people, the members of his family and a few other relatives who had come to witness the execution. Pointing his finger at his father, he cried out: ‘I am about to hang because that man, my own father, failed to do his duty. He allowed me to run with hoodlums and gangsters all hours of the day and night. He never warned me against their ways, never told me where it would lead to. Now I die in disgrace upon these gallows, because my father neglected to do his duty. He, rather than I, should have this noose placed around his neck. For he is the real criminal.’ ”

What a terrible accusation to have leveled against a father by his own son! How it must have stung him like a red hot iron! Would life ever be long enough to wash out the memory of that dying cry? Only death could do that. But could it? Would not that accusing finger be pointed at him again, when he stood before the judgment seat of Almighty God to give an account of his stewardship? Perhaps there are more terrible tragedies that can occur in the lives of parents. But the writer can think of none.

A Responsible Stewardship

When the daughter of Pharaoh found the infant Moses among the bulrushes along the banks of the Nile, she placed the child in the custody of the mother, saying in effect: “Take this child and nurse him for me. But in due time I shall re-

turn for him, not failing." It is substantially these words which Almighty God whispers in the ears of parents when he gives to them a little angel in human flesh. They are not absolute sovereigns, free to do with that child whatsoever they wish. They are but stewards, appointed by God to care for that child, to train it to nobility and holiness of life. A strict account of their stewardship will be demanded from them as they stand before the judgment seat of the Most High.

What will be their consternation if, at that dread moment, they find the accusing fingers of their children pointing to them as the real culprits, responsible because of their parental neglect for the disasters that befell their children? The Apostle Paul warned such parents of the fate in store for them when he said: "If any one have not care of his own, and especially of his own household, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." What will be their joy if, on the contrary, they find the hands of their children stretched down from on high in prayer and thanksgiving for the noble example, the wise counsel, the painstaking care which prompted them to lead just and upright lives and to be numbered now among God's elect? The prophet Daniel foretold their reward when he said: "They that instruct many unto justice shall shine as the stars for all eternity." Theirs shall be the reward that comes to those who have achieved the supreme duty of parents, the building of a noble home, the fashioning of children after the likeness of Christ, the guiding of their groping footsteps along the path that leads unerringly to life everlasting.

If parents are to fulfill their great mission in life, they must build a home where peace and love abide. They must exclude from this sacred domain every semblance of anger, quarrelsomeness and ill-temper. Nothing mars so quickly the beauty of a home as the intrusion of these outcroppings of our lower nature. Home should be a little bit of Heaven upon earth, a refuge from the strife and hardship of the world, where

husband and wife can always find sympathy, encouragement, inspiration. If instead of finding in the home relief from the strife and worry of life's daily grind, they find only an intensification of that spirit, then the home is robbed of its beauty and loveliness. Instead of an earthly paradise, a little bit of Heaven, it becomes a purgatory, if not a hell on earth. Stark tragedy squats brooding at that fireside.

Guarding the Entrance

The spirit of strife usually gains entrance through the hasty ill-tempered word. A young married couple immediately after the marriage ceremony should promise each other that no matter what provocation may arise, they will never speak to one another in a harsh, angry manner. Difficulties may and indeed will arise. But they can always be discussed in a kindly considerate manner. There is neither rhyme nor reason in two people shouting angrily at each other when the matter could be solved by talking it over in a considerate and friendly way.

A pastor who has ministered to young people for many years and who has studied with much care the factors disturbing the stability of the home reports the following conclusion to which his study and observation have led him: Practically every young couple who marry intend to be kind and considerate to one another. When the glamour of their honeymoon yields to life's work-a-day world, however, they begin to be conscious of little mannerisms or actions of the other person which irk them. Almost before they realize it, they have uttered a critical, sharp word which wounds the feelings. A quarrel ensues. The virginal beauty of their relationship is tarnished. The illusions upon which love thrives are dispelled. The idol is found to have feet of clay. They are just two ordinary humans now, instead of that glamorous ideal, that unique something that they were before.

The tendency to quarrel is likely to become chronic if not

nipped in the bud. If it persists, the young couple will have succeeded in destroying the most beautiful and delicate flower in human life—the sweet tender flower of conjugal love. With a view of forewarning young people of this danger, I have made it a practice for more than twenty years, to take the bride and groom aside immediately after the wedding ceremony. I explain to them how much it will mean for their happiness if they keep their love unsullied by harsh, angry, bitter words. I suggest they promise one another with a seriousness second only to that of their conjugal vow, that they will never under any circumstances utter an ill-tempered, cutting word to one another. I have never had a couple refuse to do so. I have had many tell me later on what a valuable safeguard it was for the unbroken peace and happiness of their home. It is a promise which every young couple might well make on their wedding day, and keep with the same fidelity with which they observe their conjugal vow.

Mutual Sacrifice

The necessity of mutual sacrifice for the preservation of conjugal happiness is stated with beauty and impressiveness in the instruction which the Ritual prescribes to be read to the young couple. "It is most fitting," states the Ritual, "that you rest the security of your wedded life upon the great principle of self-sacrifice. And so you begin your married life by the voluntary and complete surrender of your individual lives in the interest of that deeper and wider life which you are to have in common. Henceforth you will belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, and one in affections. And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy; and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. . . ."

“No greater blessing can come to your married life than pure conjugal love, loyal and true to the end. May, then, this love with which you join your hands and hearts today, never fail, but grow deeper and stronger as the years go on. And if true love and the unselfish spirit of perfect sacrifice guide your every action, you can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness that may be allotted to man in this vale of tears. The rest is in the hands of God. Nor will God be wanting to your needs; He will pledge you the life-long support of His graces in the Holy Sacrament which you are now about to receive.”

Robert Montgomery has drawn a beautiful analogy between the brightness of the North Star, which astronomers tell us reflects the brilliance of two stars so close together that their light merges and appears as that from a single star, and the unity and constancy which should characterize a married couple.

The cynosure of northern skies
Appears but one to seamen's eyes,
Yet twain there are,
And each a star
Perhaps a sun.

May you, my friends, reverse the view,
And while on earth you look like two,
From Heaven be seen as one;
Yea, like that polar symbol be
A double star of constancy.

A Mighty Bulwark

When that indomitable soldier, acclaimed by many to be the greatest military genius ever born on this side of the Atlantic, Stonewall Jackson, lay dead on the battle field at Chancellorsville, one of his devoted officers, bending low over

the lifeless corpse, touched the cold hand and said: "If you meet with Caesar tonight, tell him we still make war." We who are members of that goodly company which for nineteen centuries has fought in every land under the banner of the gentle Christ proclaim to the world that we "still make war" against all the forces that would undermine the sanctity of the home and the integrity of the family life. May we not ask our fellow citizens of every faith to join with us in fighting for the permanence of the home, the sacredness of conjugal love, and the sanctity of the family fireside around which are enshrined the noblest traditions of our American life? In thus struggling for the preservation of the institutions of the home and the family in all the beauty of their unity and integrity, we are struggling for the maintenance of the mightiest bulwark for the preservation of the America we love so much.

STUDY CLUB QUESTIONS

1. What does the broken harp in the home of Napoleon and Josephine at Malmaison symbolize?
2. Why is the home the foundation of human society?
3. What did Pope Pius XI emphasize in his Encyclical *On Christian Marriage*?
4. Why is the home the primaeval school?
5. Compare the influence of the home with that of the school. Which do you think is stronger? Why?
6. Describe the home at Nazareth.
7. Tell the story of St. Louis of France.
8. What accusation did a son make against his father?
9. What warning did the Apostle Paul give to parents?
10. How may the spirit of strife be kept from entering the home?
11. Why is there a need of mutual sacrifice in marriage?
12. Why is the Christian home the nation's bulwark?

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