
Parents, Children, and The Rules Of Life

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WASHINGTON, D.C. 1956. This comment came from a girl recently converted to Catholicism. With a mixture of relief and joy she said to me, "The thing is, Father, you just have no idea how tough it is when you don't know the rules of life. Now at last, I know them ..."

Her comment often comes back to me when I look at so many people today, especially so many young people, who really just do not seem to know the rules of life. I suppose that, deep down inside, they must find the going very tough (however much they may try to hide it). Their lives certainly seem to offer little hope of working out well. How could they? Lives lacking in faith, in ideals, in purity, in love, or, above all, the ability to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, are in danger indeed.

Many parents--those at least who really love their children—are frightened at this situation. Their fear is understandable. And it is understandable too that, when they think of their own children (who still may be very young), they ask themselves: How can we avoid this moral ignorance from happening to our children?

How can ignorance be avoided? By forming them! By forming their consciences so that they have standards, so that they know the rules, so that they can distinguish right and wrong. And by forming their will so that they can fight.

Conscience in children

A 4- or 5-year-old child is already able to realize that some things are right or wrong. He easily realizes, for instance, that it is wrong to do something displeasing to people who he knows are good. If his parents are good, he knows he does wrong if he does something they do not like. Here we see how the groundwork is already being laid for his moral life.

The next step is very important and, if the parents are good, is easily taken. It is important, for it relates this incipient moral conscience to the supernatural world. It helps the child see that life implies a

personal relationship with an ever-present God—who wants to be our Friend—and that moral living means keeping friendship with that God.

We are speaking of the case of children whose parents are good (i.e., who want to be good and are fighting to be good, because this “wanting” and “fighting” are the only practical way we have of “being good” in this life). If such parents teach their child that God is good—and if he can see, from his parents' way of acting, that they really believe this—then he will know he does wrong if he does something that the good God does not want. He will realize too that he must struggle—as his parents are struggling—to behave well, to please the good God, precisely because He is good.

You cannot overstress how important it is that the child grasps this initial idea of what constitutes good and evil, right and wrong. He should be taught that something is right because it pleases a good God, and that something is wrong because it displeases this good God. That this is the only foundation for a sound and healthily formed moral conscience surely becomes obvious if you think of that other foundation that is far too often laid: “You have to do what your parents tell you because if you don't they will punish you,” or “We have to do what God tells us because if we don't he will punish us.”

Love at the foundation—or fear?

There is a complete contrast between these two foundations. And there is a complete contrast, too, between the alternative types of conscience and moral outlook built on them. One alternative is a moral life based on love, that is, a truly Christian moral life such as is proposed to us in the Gospel. The other alternative is a moral life based on fear. This latter type of life can never be truly Christian, for it is lacking in that essential trust peculiar to the person who realizes he is a child of God.

If you consider that it is this latter moral attitude, with all its defects, that is more prevalent in many souls, then you should remember how it can so easily originate. Parents should see what a tremendously delicate and responsible mission they have in forming their children's consciences. The outcomes, after all, depend on how good they are or are trying to be, on the trust in God our Father that they live and communicate to their children, on the atmosphere of love (and not of repression or punishment) that predominates in their home.

By this last point I do not mean that children need not or ought not to be punished. There are times when punishment is necessary. But punishment should be a consequence of deliberate reflection, never of temper; it should be proportionate to the fault committed. And if possible (a bit of thought almost always makes it possible), it should be a formative rather than a punitive punishment. In other words, it should be imposed not mainly to hurt the delinquent but to help him understand why what he did was in fact wrong.

Children and sin

When and how should children be formed in awareness of sin? We have already given a partial answer to this. Before going deeper into the matter, a few further preliminary comments may be useful. You cannot help noticing that today, though we hear more and more about conscience, we seem to hear less and less about sin. A greater sensitivity to conscience should logically (you would think) lead to a greater sensitivity to sin: i.e., to the occasions when we disobey conscience. If it is not so in practice, then surely this is a sign of the superficiality with which the whole subject of conscience tends to be treated nowadays.

There is an undeniable tendency today to speak less of personal sin. Moreover, this tendency seems to grow acute when the subject of "children and sin" comes up. "Take care!" You seem to hear a chorus of voices: "Take care not to speak to children about sin. Talk about sin does harm to normal psychological development!"

What can in fact do harm to a child's normal psychological development is ignorance in this matter. Once children are old enough to understand that a particular action offends God, they should not be left in ignorance of the fact that such an action is sinful, for there is real danger that they may develop a habit in that area; and the more time is let pass, the harder it will be to correct that harmful habit.

At times you get the impression that the reason why some people are so reluctant to talk about sin with children is that they themselves were victims of that type of education which treats sin in terms of punishment, and the relation of the soul with God in terms of fear. If this conclusion is so, then it would certainly seem preferable that they not handle the subject with children (let others do it) because in all probability they will deform them, creating in them a conscience whose dominant principle is fear. And a conscience deformed in this way certainly does harm.

But what we saw earlier ought to make it clear that this fear is not how children should be taught to understand sin. They should be taught to understand sin in the first place not as something worthy of punishment (a purely self-concerned view), but as something showing a lack of love (a Christian view). They should be taught that sin is an offense against Someone Who is Good; that it shows ingratitude towards Someone Who loves us infinitely; that this offense against love is the reason why we should be sorry for sin; and that sin is easy to make up for because God's Love is always quick to pardon. Teaching about sin, if done in this way, is always formative. Therefore the sooner it is begun, the better.

Sin and things that are "wrong"

Is everything that is wrong a sin? Not necessarily. There are some (few) things that can be wrong without their "wrongness" involving moral evil, and therefore without their constituting sin. Much of what people classify as bad manners falls into this category. Faults of this type may be socially wrong, but generally speaking they are not morally wrong. (They could of course constitute a moral fault if the failure to observe them involved a lack of charity.) No doubt you should correct these conventional faults since they can make social life more difficult for people who commit them or have to put up

with them. But such faults are usually not sin, and to tell children that they are can create difficulties for the proper formation of their consciences.

To avoid creating such difficulties, parents need to exercise a very strict control over their own reactions. When they feel the impulse to correct or punish something they feel is wrong in their children, it is wise for them to ask themselves: "But is this really wrong before God?"

No doubt they will often conclude that it is, because God does not want children to tell lies, or not to learn to control their bad temper, or to be thoughtless about other people (and this includes their obligation to respect their parents' legitimate—though self-sacrificing—right to rest), etc.

But probably on other occasions, after having thought the situation out well, the parents' conclusion will be No, because they are prepared to admit that God does not want parents to let their nerves get the better of them, or to be too easy on themselves at the same time that they are tyrants over their children. Parents need to be on the lookout for a particular kind of temptation—which is always lurking along the way of parenthood—namely the temptation to classify as faults in their children things that are really no more than children's natural reaction towards faults in their parents. Parents should keep their minds clear on this point: if something is not wrong before God, however "wrongly" it may be suited to the parents' whims or preferences, then it simply is not wrong at all. It should not be met with angry reactions or punishment, and less still should it be labeled as sinful.

Sin as selfishness

There is another idea which children easily understand and which can help them towards a right understanding of sin: the idea that it is bad to be selfish. Even among themselves, children quickly recognize selfishness and realize that there is something poor and despicable about "looking out for yourself." This almost instinctive understanding about the mean quality of selfishness can be very useful in helping children understand the badness of sin. Sin is, first and foremost, an offense against God; this is its theological essence. Any theory or explanation of sin which overlooks this essence and presents sin simply as some sort of failing on a merely human or social level is absolutely deformative. Nevertheless, when teaching children that sin offends God—who is good—you should teach them that it offends him precisely because it is an expression of selfishness; and God does not want us to be selfish because self-seeking renders our salvation difficult and makes real happiness, even in this life, impossible. This, then, is his will and the purpose of his Commandments: to teach us to fight against our self-centered tendencies and help us learn to love.

Children should be taught that there are many ways of offending God by "looking out for yourself." There are many forms of selfishness: the selfishness of pride (which is at the root of all other sins, and present in each one of them), the selfishness of lying, greed, covetousness, anger, envy, laziness, sensuality...; the self-seeking, in a word, of each of the capital sins.

Children and mortal sin

Every selfish action, after all, is a sin, even though it may be just a venial sin. To look out for yourself necessarily means to turn your back on God, however partially. Since experience teaches us that children can be selfish, we should find no difficulty in realizing that they are capable of committing venial sins—which simply means being selfish in little things.

But are children capable of committing mortal sins? Can a ten-year-old child, for instance, commit a mortal sin? I think that he can. In fact I think that this conclusion becomes inescapable if you simply ask yourself whether children, who are certainly capable of being selfish in little things, are capable of being selfish in big ones? I think that they are. I think that a ten-year-old child is capable of selfishness in a big degree, even to a total degree, i.e., that he is capable of an action by which he centers totally on himself and turns his back completely on God and on others. And that constitutes mortal sin.

No doubt more than one reader will be surprised at this and will not want to accept such a conclusion. But if he won't accept that a ten-year-old child can commit a mortal sin, then let him say when a child can commit such a sin. At what age would he place the beginning of the capacity of sinning mortally: at age 14 and not at 13? At 13 and not at 12?

It will probably help if we go into this subject more deeply, and the matter certainly deserves more attention. A mortal sin is any action which, by centering us completely on ourselves, necessarily breaks our friendship with God. To my mind, a child aged ten is capable of such an action. Think, for example, of the case of a child who comes to Confession and accuses himself of one of the following: "I deliberately stole one of my brothers things, just to see him fly into a rage"; "I hate So-and-So; I'm going to get back at him, and I'm not ready to forgive him"; "I did such-and-such on purpose, to make my granddad lose his temper"; "I spent the whole week hoping my mother would have an accident and really hurt herself ..."

I do not say that these are necessarily grave sins. But it doesn't seem impossible to me, or even very difficult, for a sin of this type to cut one's friendship with God, because it can easily imply a gravely self-centered human attitude by which one places oneself at the center of one's own life, looking for self-satisfaction even at the cost of making others suffer. Such an action may therefore easily imply a proud and self-sufficient rejection of loyalty and dependence towards God and other people.

Sin, selfishness and Hell

But—I hear a voice—are you actually suggesting that if a child committed one of these sins and died suddenly, he would go to Hell?

Now this perhaps reveals the real difficulty that we all feel about the idea of mortal sin. If we find it hard to accept the suggestion that a child is capable of sinning mortally, could it be because we find it hard to accept the suggestion that we ourselves are capable of sinning mortally and so meriting Hell?

To clear up this objection, the first thing is to recall that God loves us, that he wants all men to be saved (cf 1 Tim 2:4), that he is determined to get us to Heaven. We should therefore get rid of those

imaginative ideas about the person who spends a lifetime struggling to behave well but finally has one bad slip and, having the hard luck to die before he can get to Confession, goes to Hell. God wants to call all of us at a right moment. But it is here that our free will has its part to play, for good or bad. We are capable of making the right moments fewer and fewer and the wrong moments more and more frequent. . . . and if we do so we are obviously reducing the possibilities of death overtaking us at a right moment.

Going a little deeper, I should say that while mortal sin does in fact merit Hell, what lands people in Hell in practice is unrepented mortal sin.

Even though a person commits many mortal sins, he will be saved if he repents. And (here we link up with our main subject) it should be emphasized that our conscience—if it is well formed and if it is followed—is our closest and most intimate ally to help us repent if we have had the misfortune to commit a mortal sin.

God wants to call us at a right moment. And he has made us so that if we offend him seriously, by yielding to selfishness in a serious matter, it is hard for us not to realize the fact because our conscience protests and, deep down inside, we are lacking in peace and happiness until—like the Prodigal Son—we repent and turn back towards our Father God. Conscience exerts a lot of pressure (it is God's grace pressing us through conscience), and the pressure does not ease up until we react and repent. This, hopefully, is what we normally do, and do quickly, when we sin. But there are many dangers. We may not have a well-formed conscience. We may have become accustomed to not examining it or not obeying it. We may have an insensitive conscience (it is precisely when you do not obey your conscience that there is the greatest danger of its becoming dulled and insensitive). In such cases, even if we commit grave sins, our repentance can become less immediate, our acts of contrition less frequent, our self-centeredness deeper and more continuous, our attitude of coldness towards God's friendship more deep-rooted, our rejection of his pardon more and more radical

This is what can happen when a man's conscience does not work well; when he starts telling himself that there is little to worry about in sins that are, in fact, grave; when he lends a deaf ear to the protests of his conscience; when he does not obey it, when he refuses to repent. It is in this way that a man can fall little by little into total self-centeredness and self-sufficiency: incapable therefore of loving, which means incapable of entering Heaven where only those able to love gain entry.

Continuous rectification

A single act of grave selfishness is not likely to take anyone to Hell. It is the state of grave selfishness — the state of obstinate and complete self-centeredness involving the definitive rejection of God's mercy and friendship—that takes people to Hell. A single act of grave selfishness, a single mortal sin, does indeed break one's friendship with God. But if this happens, there is our conscience reproaching us for our conduct, prodding us with its protests, so that we will rectify.

The person who knows how to rectify immediately shows that he has a sensitive conscience. By sinning he separated himself from God. By rectifying he undoes that separation. His rectification may

even represent such a step forward that he ends up with a greater degree of love than he possessed before.

What, however, of the person who does not rectify immediately and keeps on postponing his repentance? Such delays are an unmistakable sign that he attaches little importance to the life of grace, to friendship with God. Every day of delayed repentance is a step towards a state where he has lapsed into complete coldness, where his conscience has been silenced, and where there is practically nothing left that could effect a conversion and make the rebirth of grace possible.

That is the state that really threatens man. The danger is all the greater in that one comes to such a state little by little and with relative ease (if one ignores one's conscience); and once one falls into it, it is usually extremely hard to get out again.

We should not find it so difficult, therefore, to realize that any one of us could go to Hell. All that is needed is to forget about one's conscience: refusing to examine it or listen to it or to obey it. All that is needed is to develop the facility (which is very easily developed) of finding an excuse for everything one does. All that is needed, in short, is not to face up to the hard and constant work of rectification implied in Christian living.

We must face up to our personal miseries and seek to purify ourselves . . . The power of God is made manifest in our weakness and it spurs us on to fight, to battle against our defects, although we know that we will never achieve total victory during our pilgrimage on earth. The Christian life is a continuous beginning again each day. It renews itself over and over.¹

It seems obvious that the best way to avoid attaching too little importance to big sins is to attach the right importance (which will be neither exaggeratedly great nor exaggeratedly small) to little sins. To say the same thing in clearer words, the best way to ensure that you will repent of your possible mortal sins is to repent of your actual venial ones. I therefore assert, in flat contradiction to ideas that are being pressed into circulation today, that to encourage children from their early years to confess their sins (which will normally be small sins) frequently in Confession, is a marvellously effective means towards the healthy and balanced formation of their moral conscience. Of course, the reasons that make frequent Confession healthy for little children make it, if anything, healthier still for us adults.

The Moral Formation of Young People: Further Guidelines

The formation of conscience, in the case of children and young people, is a long and continuous process. Proper training given at school will help. Nevertheless, the process not only should be initiated in the home but fundamentally must be carried through there. The following points may guide parents in this continuing task.

The sense of moral duty

It is vital to ensure that the child little by little is acquiring a proper sense of moral duty: that he is gradually grasping why we ought to do certain things and avoid others. You must try to get him to understand that we are not animals: we do not grow automatically; we are not yet stamped with our final form; we can work out well or badly; we are on our way; we can arrive or not; we can be saved or we can be condemned. These are reasons why God, out of love, signposts the way for us; we are obliged to follow his indications if we want to get to our goal, which is Heaven. But the obligation we are under is moral not physical. God does not physically oblige us to do what he wants, to follow the way that he has signposted for us. He leaves us with our freedom. And we are left with the options and consequences of our freedom. We are left with the alternatives of either following his indications (because we trust him, because we believe that they are indications given by Truth and Love) or of not following them (because our laziness is reluctant to make the effort they involve, or because our pride is not prepared to accept the Truth or to understand the Love behind them). But we are not left with an option, if we fail to follow his indications, of not suffering the consequences; for this is not just morally but physically impossible.

If we do not follow his indications—apart from offending him (because we reject an expression of his love)—we will not arrive. A traveler who takes to the road, with the idea of getting to New York, is free to follow the road signs or not to follow them; but if he does not follow them, he won't get to New York.

Freedom and responsibility are two basic topics in morality. Moreover they are correlative topics, in such a way that one cannot be considered apart from the other.² Since young people today, at least from the age of 12 or 13 on, are subjected to growing pressures to understand freedom as the right to do anything without having to think about the consequences or having to bear them, we should try to help them understand that freedom so conceived is not freedom. It is irresponsibility. Or, if they prefer, it is irresponsible freedom—but this does not mean that they can avoid answering for it. They need to realize that responsibility always accompanies freedom. We can forget about it, but we cannot get away from it. Sooner or later it catches up with us. We all have to answer for our free actions, and maybe especially for our irresponsible free actions.

The fact is that young people today (and not only young people) find themselves submerged in an immense fog of confusion about this subject of freedom. It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider who or what has caused the fog. But my experience is that people are greatly helped to see through it if they are reminded of an elementary and obvious principle—the principle that if we are free to do this or choose that, we are not free to avoid the consequences of what in fact we do or do not choose I am free to jump out of a twelfth floor window; but if I do, I am not free to avoid bashing my head on the sidewalk. I am free to try drugs; but if I do, I am not free to avoid the consequence of becoming enslaved to them.

Positive reasons

When it comes to specific obligations or prohibitions, parents should always make an effort to explain the positive reasons behind them, the positive objectives they are meant to reach.

"You shouldn't do that because it is wrong." This is not a formative "explanation"; it tends rather to deform. It leaves the child with a restrictive and negative idea of morality—which is just the opposite of the idea of Christian morality he should be getting.

"Why do we have to go to Mass?" Not just to fulfill a Commandment (a Commandment is not an end in itself), but to worship God; to take part together in the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. One should always underline the purpose of the Commandments.

"Why should we pray?" Not just because praying is commanded, nor even "because that is what every good Christian does"; but in order to learn to talk with God, to get on speaking terms with him.

"Why must we not tell lies?" Because lying means misusing the faculty which God has given to us in order to communicate with other people; a lie is a wedge that separates us from God and from others.

Today's unsettled and confused world presents constant opportunities for clarifying moral standards. Parents should not miss these opportunities offered by newspapers, magazines, television shows, etc.; and they should be on the lookout for those that crop up in family conversations.

The moment comes (perhaps soon after the age of ten) when the question "Why can't I see that film or read that book?" is seriously put and has to be seriously answered. "Because it can hurt you," telling him what that hurt is: it can take away your freedom to love, for purity is a condition of love; it can turn you into a slave of your body ...

The task of forming young people's standards in the matter of purity is a particular responsibility of parents. It should be parents who teach their children gradually about the origins of life, in accordance with their mentality and capacity to understand, gently anticipating their natural curiosity.

I consider this very important. There is no reason why children should associate sex with something sinful or find out about something that is in itself noble and holy in a vulgar conversation with a friend. This can also be an important step in strengthening the friendship between parents and children, preventing a separation in the early moments of their moral life (Conversations with Msgr. Escriva, no. 100).

It is a task to be fulfilled by stages. But the starting point, and the basic point to be emphasized at all times, is that the differences between the sexes—as well as sexual attraction and sexual union—are part of God's creation. They are God's way to raise up new lives, within marriage, thereby associating man in his creative task. Sex then has something sacred about it, as being particularly related to God's plans for mankind. And sacred things, things that are specially tied into God's plans, must be treated with reverence. They must also be particularly directed to the purpose that God has assigned to them. Since this is difficult in the case of sex—because our passions, which are good in themselves, are disordered—then we simply have to learn to control our passions and direct sex to its end. Explanations along these lines will teach children to have a high regard for the virtue of chastity and will make it

easier for them, when they begin to run into difficulties, to live this virtue positively and to look for the support of divine grace in order to strengthen their own human endeavors.

It is essential to begin this work of sex education in good time, without losing sight of two fundamental guidelines:

- (a) the idea of reverence has to be communicated when dealing with sex; and*
- (b) the idea of reverence has to be communicated before sex becomes a matter of temptation. Later on may be too late.*

Not every restriction limits our freedom

Nevertheless, you need to remember that the first reaction of a young person (and, more surprisingly, of many who are older) when he comes up against a restriction, is to see in it a limitation on his freedom. You should explain to them, time and again, that this is not necessarily so: not all restrictions necessarily imply a limitation of freedom. It is fairly easy to get them to understand that energy needs to be controlled if it is to serve any useful purpose: the energies of a river need to be dammed; the energy of steam needs to be built up inside a boiler; gasoline needs to be compressed and exploded inside a cylinder. Human energies likewise need to be channeled. And if we are meant to apply certain restrictions to them, this limitation makes it possible for us to use these energies with greater effect and greater freedom.

One of the simplest and clearest examples to illustrate this point is a road. A road is a restriction. It is a restricted area; it has a limited paved width. It has its curves and its hollows . . . And if one wants to keep on the road, one has to accept and follow these restrictions. But they do not limit us: at least not if one understands what a road is for—which is to bring us to a definite destination. And that is what life is for too.

We would be inclined to question the intelligence of a driver who set out with the fixed idea that driving must be absolutely without restriction. "Now look at that curve, for instance, that they have just plunked in front of me. I'm not going to stand for it." If he drove straight on instead of following the curve, this apparent affirmation of his freedom would obviously end up with him at the bottom of a ditch or wrapped around the nearest tree.

An expressway makes the example even clearer. It has limited entrance and exit points. It has maximum speed limits and, at times, even minimum speed limits. Nevertheless, nobody regards the limitations of an expressway as restrictions on his freedom, but rather as factors that favor the effective use of that freedom.

Training one's will

Children need to be helped to understand that if they have no willpower, they will be no good for life. An athlete exercises and trains his muscles so as to be in shape for running. If he didn't train them, his body would let him down. In a similar fashion we have to train our will—exercising the "muscles" of the will by means of little efforts and sacrifices—so as to be in shape for life. Boys and girls who reach maturity—in terms of age—but with practically no willpower are not mature. They are not fit for life. They can be compared to a ship without a rudder or a car without a steering wheel. The practical side of moral formation is simply aimed at making each one master of his or her own life. This is what the moral struggle is about: being in charge—or not—of your life. It is only by dint of victories—despite some defeats—that you become master. And being master means that, with the help of God's grace, a person can take his life where he wants and not be left drifting, under the control of a thousand things—environment, fashions, friends, passions, laziness—that are not his own proper personality, his own essential self.

Defeats

Children need not just to be told insistently that life is a struggle; they also need to be told not to be surprised if the struggle turns out to be a hard one, and not to be dismayed if at times they are beaten in the struggle. They will face up to their defeats if we have told them, just as insistently, that God understands us, that he loves us even with our weaknesses, and that he wants to help us. We should therefore have limitless confidence in him. They should be taught to ask him for pardon many times a day (a practice that, far from being burdensome, is a constant reminder that a life lived in God's presence is a life lived in the presence of Love, and that to ask for forgiveness is the reaction of a person in love. The person who stops asking for forgiveness has stopped loving). They should be taught to make their examination of conscience, very briefly and very simply, each night. And, I repeat, one of the best ways of ensuring that their conscience is being properly formed, without their being saddled with scruples or slipping into laziness, is to encourage them to take up the custom of frequent Confession: from the earliest time (which certainly should be no later than the age of 6 or 7) when they are capable of understanding the meaning of offense and the meaning of forgiveness.

Sensitivity to grace

Children, I have said, need a keen awareness not only of the fact that life is a fight, but also of the fact that we are not alone in that fight. They need to acquire a sensitivity to grace: to sanctifying grace which makes us children of God; and to actual grace—that help from God which gives light to our minds and strength to our wills so that we keep on fighting and learn to win in the fight.

If the father and mother go to Confession and Communion frequently, if they pray, if they visit the Blessed Sacrament, their children will realize that their parents are relying on divine grace to help in their struggle, and they will learn to do likewise.

Children need to see their parents' example.

Parents should give their children clear ideas. But if they want these children not only to have a well-formed conscience but to follow it, then they should not only give them clear ideas, they should also give them clear example. Parents whose children never see them struggling to improve—with ups and downs, but determinedly and with a resilient spirit—will never educate their children well. If the children do not see, for instance, that their father or mother is fighting not to give way to nerves—and that they do not say they are sorry when they fail—then in that case they are failing to receive good example.

An important part of good example lies in the parents' readiness to impose restrictions on themselves. Children should see that their parents are prepared to deny themselves some things, even though their parents find such things attractive: that their parents can say No—also to themselves—even when it is hard. If a mother, for example, wants to form her daughters in a strongly independent attitude towards fashion, she herself must have that same attitude. It is not infrequent to hear mothers complain about how girls today are carried away by fashion or environment. One wonders if those mothers have asked themselves how often they have gone against the mainstream of their environment or have said No to the "imperatives" of fashion.

The same goes for fathers (as if fashion didn't influence them too!). If what moves a man when he buys a bigger and more powerful car is no real family or professional need, but simply the fact that a colleague of his has bought a similar model, are his arguments likely to carry much conviction when he tries to persuade his son that a motorcycle is not a "need" for a sixteen-year-old boy?

Parents who want to have children with sensitive consciences and strong wills, must keep up a constant struggle to acquire these qualities themselves.

Censorship

Here we shall do well to give more consideration to the subject of films, books, etc.

Censorship is a word and an idea that practically everyone dislikes. Nevertheless, if people have the right to expect that the proper authorities will prevent the streets from being littered with trash, they have a similar right—and the public authorities have a corresponding duty—to ensure that moral trash not be spread around in public places.

It is sad that, just as public opinion is waking up to the reality and dangers of atmospheric contamination, it remains asleep to the infinitely more harmful reality of moral contamination in our social atmosphere.

If some individuals want to poison themselves in private, that may be their business. What is not their business or their right is to claim, in the name of freedom, that poison should be freely sold—or, rather, dearly sold—at every street corner, especially when the poison in question has a particular attraction that makes it peculiarly dangerous.

Moral decontamination

In some places public authorities are no longer taking any steps to check the moral pollution of our cities and countryside. At times they try to justify their inactivity by the argument that "after all, we don't have any really scientific proof that these are harmful effects from pornography," etc. To know the harmful effects of pornography, you don't have to wait for scientific findings. You just have to use common sense! This argument leaves us doubting the competence of such authorities to govern, for common sense is surely a first requisite for authority. Of course it may well be that governmental passivity regarding moral contamination results not so much from a lack of common sense as from fear of using it: the fear of bringing on outraged cries of "puritanism," "censorship, etc., which pressure-groups of "liberated" citizens always orchestrate so effectively. If this fear is what is paralyzing public authorities then they are lacking not just common sense, but something much more important: courage—courage to govern—and a genuine concern for the good of the people.

In all fairness to the authorities it must be said that they probably would react if they felt that public opinion were in favor of moral decontamination, in favor of clear conditions of moral hygiene and cleanliness in public life. But public opinion is largely made up of parents. And many parents seem to be asleep. Or maybe, like the authorities we mentioned, they are lacking in common sense and courage.

For those who are not asleep but may be in danger of getting drowsy, here are a few considerations that can help wakefulness.

Self-censorship

Films, television, and reading matter have a tremendous influence nowadays on everybody, especially on young people, although also on the not-so-young. It is sadly undeniable that most modern films and novels influence people negatively—especially if you keep in mind that the damage is caused not just by pornographic scenes or passages but by the whole concept of life underlying these media. Materialism is exalted. Pleasure-seeking is the real life-rule. Violence is a positive value; divorce, a sign of civilized progress. Adultery, free love, homosexuality, bisexuality, are looked on as completely normal and natural things. Film ratings offer very little to go by. An "adult" movie—with its implication that it is suitable for "mature" viewers—is usually not suitable for anyone who is opposed to offending God. A person is mature, in this field, when he is sincere enough to recognize what is degrading and strong enough to avoid it.

Censorship imposed from above may achieve certain results. It may achieve a clean atmosphere in the home or in the street that favors normal development of a person's affections and passions and avoids the pathetic abnormalities produced by obsession.

But this positive effect will be very limited if it is not accompanied by another achievement—getting young people to understand that, in this field, each of us has to be his own censor. Clean, happy, and free (free also to love): that is how we want to see our young people grow up. And they won't ever

grow that way if they don't understand the principle and live the practice of self-censorship—which is the only really effective type of censorship. Self-censorship involves a combination of clear ideas and strong will. It means having a clear realization of the damage you can suffer through the obsessing effect of certain shows or literature, or certain ways of behaving. It also means having enough willpower to say No to easy slaveries and to fight that difficult but happy fight by which a person defends his freedom, his capacity to love, and his soul.

Permissive parents (permissive with their children)

In this matter, just as in all aspects of moral education, it is wise to give positive arguments. Nevertheless, as I said earlier, it is hard to get children to understand that a restriction or prohibition can be positive. Their reaction, if they are told No, is much more likely to be one of protest and resentment. Faced with the pressures created by permissiveness, many parents yield. They yield, thinking perhaps: "If I don't give way, my children won't obey me. So either way they are going to do what they like." Well, I say to parents that they have a serious obligation to give clear and firm guidance to their children in these matters, even though they suspect or are sure that their children won't obey them.

Modern times are hard times for people's souls. Let's take the case of sons or daughters of permissive parents (i.e., of weak parents). The boys or girls read or see whatever they want, go wherever they choose, do whatever they feel like. Their parents are worried, and are right to be worried. They talk things over between themselves. But they don't dare say anything to the boys or girls.

What is the likely result, ten or twenty years later? Ruined lives: lost faith, broken marriage, total loneliness. "But . . . surely my parents must have known that I was heading this way? Then why didn't they try at all costs to stop me?" To the desolation of a ruined life is added the bitterness of feeling oneself betrayed by one's own parents, the victim of their lack of courage and love.

Take the same case, but suppose that the parents do insist on obedience, lovingly but firmly. Maybe the boys or girls don't obey them, and the same results seem predictable but with one difference. In the midst of the same desolation, the thought can come: "My parents realized that this is how I could end up. And they did all they could to stop me. I didn't listen to them, but ... they loved me! My father and my mother loved me!" Such a conviction could be enough to keep a person from final despair. "My parents loved me!" It is great comfort in the midst of a ruined life; it could be sufficient for salvation.

Soft parents (soft with themselves)

In any case many years' experience tells me that if children at times don't obey their parents in these matters, the most frequent reason is that the parents are too soft, not so much with their children as with themselves. They are not prepared to demand of themselves or to deny themselves enough. They are too selfish.

Let us be sincere. The most convincing (and at times the only effective) argument that parents can and should give their children, when telling them that they cannot see a particular film or read a particular book, is that they themselves—the parents—are not going to see or read it either.

If parents are not ready to impose censorship on themselves whenever it is called for, then their efforts to impose it on their children will necessarily prove deformative.

Let me allow for one particular type of case before proceeding. The themes of certain productions may be sufficiently delicate or complex as to call for a greater-than-average degree of experience or of criteria, in order to be able to digest them. In such cases, some parents may reasonably think that their children do not yet possess those criteria or experiences, while they do. (Other parents, however, may think that such works, especially if they are televised, offer a good opportunity to hold a critical viewing session with their children. The effect then may well be that the parents will enjoy the production less, but their children's outlook will have been better formed and matured.)

Such productions offer no special problem, and I am not thinking about them. I am thinking of the thousands of works—on stage, screen and in print—surrounding us today which are becoming filled with blatant pornography. It is in relation to these works that parents have to face up to the need for "self-censorship."

Let's not beat about the bush. Pornography means a degrading representation of the sacred reality of sex. And the person who accepts pornography in his reading or in the shows he sees seriously offends God, degrades himself, and gives a degrading example to others. Such is the case of a person who is not mature enough to apply self-censorship in foreseeable and unforeseen cases. Maturity includes avoiding readings or shows that a person can reasonably foresee will have pornographic content. And when he has not had sufficient foresight, maturity means throwing a book away immediately when he finds pornographic passages in it, or getting up and walking out of a show that defrauds his expectations and turns out to be degrading.

Maturity and corruptibility

This whole subject is one of the fastest growing areas of lying and insincerity in our modern world. Are we adults that different from young people? Are we seriously suggesting that what can corrupt a person aged 16 cannot corrupt an adult aged 26 or 56? As if the 18- or 21-year watershed, which gives a certain presumption of maturity, can warrant a presumption of incorruptibility!

Very few people profess to be unconcerned about the pornography problem. It is too big and obvious for that. Yet, time and again, in one country after another, investigation committees and work parties have come up with proposals which, if we hesitate to brand them insincere, can only be described as incredibly superficial. The proposals, in a nutshell, come down to this: "Censorship for young people? Of course! Censorship for grown-ups? Absolutely not!"

On the one hand, there are pressing appeals for effective measures to permit our young people to live in an atmosphere free from corruption caused by pornography. On the other hand, there are indignant rejections of any measure designed to cleanse the atmosphere in which adults move from the same corruption.

There is agreement, on one hand, that pornography is a threat to the freedom of young people and a danger to their normal psychic and emotional development. There is equal agreement, on the other hand, that censorship is a threat to the freedom of adults and an insult to their maturity.

It seems incredible that anyone can seriously maintain this double posture. We are struck, to begin with, by the practical impossibility of building any useful result on such contradictory foundations. The "freedoms" which grown-ups claim for themselves must necessarily make the controls proposed for young people ineffective. After all, young people and grown-ups do not move in two different worlds nor are their "atmospheres" separable in practice. But what is much harder to understand is the concept of man or society on which the proposals are presumably based.

If they are based on anything, it would seem to be the idea that grown-up people are not corruptible, or (since this is evidently false) on the thesis that it should be no concern of the State's if its adult citizens choose to corrupt themselves. By what logic can anybody urge government authorities to stop the corruption of junior citizens, while at the same time warning them, with equal urgency, not to do anything to restrain those whose trade is the corruption of adult citizens?

Laws of life

Man's life has its own peculiar laws. It is by knowing and observing them that human life develops and reaches fullness. To ignore them or not to observe them leads to failure and frustration. These basic laws of man's life are what we call moral laws, and they are the same for all of us. There are things that affect us all, at least if we are normal people. There are values that we ought to respect, and not to respect them means necessarily to sin against God as well as against our own dignity as rational beings. We are free not to respect these values. But (recalling the principle laid down earlier) we are not free to avoid the consequences of that lack of respect, which is a degraded personal life, a life that is humanly speaking enslaved and supernaturally speaking dead.

As regards public authorities, it is obvious that they can do little to stop an individual from destroying himself if what he is headed for is moral degradation. But the great majority of us do not want to destroy ourselves—though we should be aware that we are capable of doing so. And it obviously will be much harder for us to avoid self-destruction if we live in a society whose moral atmosphere is a constant incitement to corruption. That is why the government of any society has a serious obligation to ensure that the moral atmosphere its citizens live in is not degrading.

Let us leave there the role that public authorities play in this question, and return to the role of parents.

Double moral standards

If parents try to hold onto certain "freedoms" in these matters which they deny to their children, it is only logical that the children lay claim to these "freedoms" and determine to win them for themselves, in open rebellion or simply behind their parents' backs.

The conclusion is inescapable. There is only one way by which young people can grasp the meaning of real freedom, and learn how it must be lived and how it must be defended; and that is by the example they see in older people—above all and before anyone else, in their own parents.

Those parents who are not prepared to live self-censorship in the matter of pornography are guilty of appealing to a two-faced moral code. They have two standards of morality: one for themselves and another for their children. They are thus justifying—in their children's eyes—the accusation of hypocrisy which contemporary young people often throw against their elders. And they are practically guaranteeing that their children will neither respect nor obey them.

Facts are facts, and truths are no less true for being bitter. Parents cannot expect their children to follow the right road if they themselves are determined to travel the wrong one. They cannot expect their children to be honest if they are deep in the practice of deceit, especially of self-deception. They cannot expect their children to be strong if they are weak—especially if their weakness is that special type of weakness that is common in contemporary societies: not just the natural weakness of feeling the attraction of impurity (which is a weakness that all of us can feel although we all have the power to resist it), but the unnatural mental and moral weakness of denying that impurity means degradation and corruption. Let us add, therefore, that modern youth is not at all wrong in its accusations on this point: the attitude of a sizeable sector of our contemporary "adult" world merits no other description besides hypocrisy. Only a hypocrite invokes a double standard of morality: a permissive standard for himself, and a more exacting one for his children. Only a hypocrite presents himself as incorruptible, whereas anybody who denies that he has his own selfish inclinations is putting on this kind of pretense. Only a hypocrite says he loves his children while by his deliberate example he is destroying them.

But our contemporary teenage world itself (with its tendency to speak and act as if young people too were "incorruptible," as if there were no such thing as sin, or personal self-seeking, or a conscience that protests the need to repent and to go to confession) is by no means free from this same hypocrisy. Teenagers have to realize that there is no other name but hypocrisy to be given to such attitudes in their case either; and that there is little excuse for the teenaged hypocrite just because he learned his hypocrisy from his elders.

Sincerity in parents

This has been a long section about censorship. I think that it had to be long, and that its length is justified, if it has emphasized what I said before: only those parents who give their children a real exam-

ple—by fighting seriously and sincerely against their own defects—can reasonably expect their children to grow up with a sensitive conscience and a strong will.

If parents are not sincere, children won't be either. And without sincerity, the whole question of moral struggle is a waste of time. Sincerity is an essential factor in the proper formation of conscience (just as it is a guarantee of its continuing health). Sincerity is important because it implies acknowledging the truth, "walking in the truth"—even if the truth is not as you would have liked. The people who acknowledge that they have not acted as they would have wished may, with God's grace, finally attain their wish. The traveler who recognizes he is on the wrong road has the chance of getting back onto the right one.

There is a seriously bad prospect for parents who do not get their children to be sincere with them, coming clean when they have done something wrong. It is a seriously bad prospect when children lie to their parents. But when such lies are told, what should parents do to remedy the situation? They should be sincere with their children; they should not lie to them!

At times parents have to correct children. But it should be correction without anger. Parents have the obligation (in justice and charity) to correct their children, but without going too far. To get too angry is to be angry unjustly. Now, if a father or mother gets annoyed unfairly and does not acknowledge that fact (by saying they are sorry), they are being not only unfair but also insincere. He or she realizes that they have been wrong but does not want to acknowledge it. And that realization is very much like lying.

Children know their parents well; they know them with both their virtues and their defects. Such a deep knowledge is logical and inevitable, as a simple consequence of having shared the same home for many years. Therefore any attempt on a father's or mother's part to hide their defects from their children is foredoomed to failure. Let us imagine the case of a 5-year-old child with an ill-tempered father who does not control his temper, and is not even sincere enough to acknowledge that he has this defect. Perhaps the child does not know that bad temper is a defect, particularly if (as often happens) no one in that home dares to suggest that it is. All the child knows about temper is that it is one of his father's characteristics whose unpleasant effects at times reach him in the form of yelling and hitting.

Bad temper, however, breeds bad temper. So the most probable outcome is that the child himself will develop an awful temper, without knowing how to control it (or even that it can be controlled) since nobody is teaching him how. When that same child has reached the age of 15 he will almost certainly know that bad temper is a defect although perhaps, following his father's example, he will not want to admit that it is in his case (there are always excuses!). Final result of this situation: the child will not only have acquired the same defect as his father but also, in all probability, he will neither respect his father nor love him.

Parents' defects as a formative factor

In the case just given there is a point that should not be overlooked. The basic reason for the child's deformation (and for his consequent lack of love for his father) was not the father's defect, but rather the father's lack of struggle against that defect and, above all, the father's insincerity about the undeniable fact that there was a defect.

What is a cause of deformation (and therefore of scandal) for a boy or girl is not to have parents with defects (for that is inevitable), but to have insincere and hypocritical parents: parents who have defects but won't admit them; parents who invariably try to justify or camouflage their defects—under a screen of lies, flare-ups of rage, or abuses of authority—because, when all is said and done, they are just not willing to fight against them.

Their parents' defects should not be a motive of scandal for children, nor even a motive to respect or love them less. None of this will happen if they see that their parents are conscious of those defects, that they acknowledge them and are trying to fight against them. Then the parents' sincere fight against their defects will become an example, and an encouragement to the children to want to do likewise in their own lives. Children tend to have much greater understanding towards their parents when they see them fight against their defects; the very parental defects themselves help the children respect and love their father and mother more.

This can be the last conclusion of our study. The way parents look at and tackle their own defects is, humanly speaking, perhaps the factor that most influences their children's moral formation, their growth in sound conscience, and their development of character.

Parents don't need to be geniuses or great psychologists in order to form their children well. They simply need to love them truly, with a love that combines sacrifice, affection, and fortitude. They don't need to be saints either—though they should always keep up the hope that, with God's grace, they may in the end make it yet. What they do need is to struggle sincerely to live a Christian life that can be noted in the little things of each day. In the words of St. Josemaria Escriva:

Parents teach their children mainly through their own conduct. What a son or daughter looks for in a father or mother is not only a certain amount of knowledge, or some more or less effective advice, but primarily something more important: a proof of the value and meaning of life, shown through the life of a specific person, and confirmed in the different situations and circumstances that occur over a period of time.

If I were to give advice to parents, I would tell them, above all, let your children see that you are trying to live in accordance with your faith. Don't let yourselves be deceived: they see everything, from their earliest years, and they judge everything. Let them see that God is not only on your lips, but also in your deeds; that you are trying to be loyal and sincere, and that you love each other and you really love them too.

This is how you will best contribute to making your children become true Christians, men and women of integrity, capable of facing all life's situations with an open spirit.³

¹ J. M. Escriva de Balaguer, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 114.

² Perhaps nobody has ever insisted as much as St. Josemaria Escriva on the inseparable harmony that should exist between "individual freedom and the personal responsibility that must always go with it" (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 184; cf. *Conversations with Msgr. Escriva*, no. 100).

³ J. M. Escriva de Balaguer, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 28.