



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

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

## WEAVING THE FABRIC OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

The character formation of children has been a focus of writings from the ancient philosopher Plato to the Sacred Scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian, to those of contemporary authors. Both secular and religious philosophers echoed the sentiment of Saint John Chrysostom, a fourth century Doctor of the Church who questioned: "What is equal to training the soul, and forming the mind of one that is young?" (Chrysostom, 4th Century, p. 371). Church scholars have maintained that the good of society is related to the development of the person (Leo XIII, 1878; Paul VI, 1967) and McCormack (1995) cited plentiful literature, both ecclesial and contemporary, that acknowledge the holistic nature and demands of the parenting role and name parents as the primary agents of character formation. McNamee (1991) summarized the importance of intentional parenting well:

"A parent influences the physical, psychological and religious development of a child initially and powerfully. A parent is the fundamental model and first teacher whom the child experiences. Simply by living in the family, a child observes and begins to imitate the parent's actions, attitudes, beliefs and values. Children will have many teachers in the course of their lifetime, but the role of the parent is unique." (p.3)

Woven throughout Church history and found in Roman and Episcopal writings is the philosophic need for parents to fulfill their primary responsibility of soul formation. This truly awesome task is identified by various terminology. Human scientists term it moral development; theologians and philosophers refer to conscience; secular educators call for character education. Regardless of label, it is the soul that distinguishes human persons from the rest of God's creation; that creates of us ever clearer reflections of the image of God; and increases our ability to relate with and respond to the presence of God in our lives as we interact with our environment. Soul formation is the primary responsibility of parents. For the purposes of this article and subsequent articles in the Parent Partnership Handbook feature of Today's Catholic Teacher task of soul formation will be titled Christian Character.

### CHRISTIAN CHARACTER FORMATION

**Parents are weavers of soul formation by shaping the structure or giving a framework for the Christian character of their children.** Christian character formation involves intentionally sensitizing children to the importance of each choice they make. Perhaps the best illustration of this concept was captured in this saying:

Plant an act; reap a habit.  
Plant a habit; reap a virtue or vice.  
Plant a virtue or vice; reap a character.  
Plant a character; reap a destiny. (Unknown Author)

For instance, a boy may choose to help another student in some way. Practiced over time, helping others becomes a habit of sharing time and talent. With continued application it becomes the virtue of generosity and others identify that boy as a generous person. It becomes more natural for him to be generous than covetous, greedy or stingy with his gifts. He becomes characterized by openness, approachability, and willingness to be of service. He

becomes a welcome reflection of the love of God to our world and when united with the will and love of God, he is an extension of Jesus and destined for union with God.

**Fabric is cloth made by interlacing threads in a pattern.** In that regard it can be said that weaving is to fabric as parenting is to soul formation. The process of weaving involves (1) setting strips of yarn or thread lengthwise on a loom and then (2) horizontally interlacing each with threads (3) in a pattern. The result is fabric. **The lengthwise threads form the WARP; the horizontal threads form the WEFT [or WOOF].**

These elements of weaving (warp, weft, and patterning) parallel the elements needed in soul formation (affectivity, reasoning, action).

- The **first dimension** of soul formation (**affectivity** or the warp of the fabric) is an inner desire for goodness and truth, a quest for value and ideals, self-awareness, and an internalization of affective skills like empathy and sympathy. Experiences of caring and concern foster affective growth. Helping children to name, claim, and tame emotions like guilt, fear, relief, and jealousy provides the warp of the fabric of Christian conscience. In this first dimension of character formation children make decisions of “good and bad” based on their intentions. There is a subjective quality to these decisions.

- The **second dimension** of soul formation (**reasoning** or the weft of the fabric) requires the development of abstract thought, objectivity, and the ability to reason and to choose rightly. Experiences that teach or improve perception, memory, reasoning, evidence gathering, and problem solving contribute to the development of the cognitive skills of analysis, evaluation, and judgment that are needed for right judgment. In this second dimension of character formation children base decisions of “right and wrong” on the ability to choose rightly in specific cases. Objective criterion in

the basis for decisions made in the second dimension.

- The **third dimension** of soul formation (**action** that results in a pattern in the fabric) is the action response that flows from the judgment made in the second dimension. In this stage the child identifies herself with the judgment or views the judgment as a component of her truest person and places upon herself the obligation to act accordingly. Therefore, the action is a response to do what she perceives to be the loving good to do and to avoid its opposite evil. The Christian soul seeks to align with the will of God in the decision making process. She measures good and bad by God-given standards or norms that she discovers in Jesus of the Gospel, the Ten Commandments, the law of love, and the Beatitudes. In such a person, a pattern results from Christian decision making that is stirred by the Holy Spirit, attractive to others and representative of growth in holiness. Parents are entrusted with the task of teaching these three elements to their children, both through words and example. Subsequent articles in Today's Catholic Teacher will provide support for parents in these areas.

Christian Character, a term inclusive of moral development and Christian conscience formation, is a process that grows over time and needs continual refining:

“The education of the conscience is a lifelong task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1884).

Christian character formation begins at birth with parent-child bonding, both physically and emotionally, and it develops in stages. It requires parents to intentionally and incidentally attend to the emotional growth of their children and to the development of reasoning abilities within their children. In his book Raising Good Children, Dr. Thomas Lickona (1988) provides clear blueprints to help parents to identify and understand each stage of moral development, to know reasonable developmental expectations for a child of normal intelligence growing up in a supportive moral environment, and to understand how to relate to children at each stage of growth in such a way

as to further the development of a Christian character. Parents and teachers would benefit from reading this book. Moral development is foundational to conscience formation.

Himes (1992) described conscience as “the ability we have to make moral choices, to employ reasoning about values and to discern how I ought to live and, . . . what sort of person I ought to become” (p. 143). Affective and cognitive skills are fundamental to conscience formation, as in the case of moral maturity, but the Christian conscience includes a third dimension: intersecting the individual with God’s plan for creation and the call to personal holiness. These three aspects, dimensions, or levels of conscience are much like the elements of fabric-making: warp, weft, and patterning. A person whose decisions are based on clarified convictions that are informed by intelligent reasoning and wisdom sources will develop a soul characterized by care, compassion, and a willingness to accept the consequences of his choices and conscience.

### **PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK**

What does a parent-weaver need for the work of Christian character formation? The parent-weaver needs

- to understand the process of moral development;
- to know how to related to a child at each stage of development;
- to know parent skills related to forming all three dimensions of conscience;
- and to teach through word and example a process for moral decision making.

To support parents in their efforts to weave the fabric of Christian character in their children, [Today’s Catholic Teacher](#) offers the Parent Partnership Handbook. The focus this year will be **the Christian Character Formation of Elementary School Aged Children**. Six topics will be discussed: (1) profiling the stages of moral development and moral reasoning; (2) relating to children at each stage of development; (3) parent skills related to developing affective skills in children; (4) parent skills related to developing critical thinking skills in children; (5) sources that form and inform the Christian conscience; and (6) a process for moral decision making. Each issue will offer parent-friendly explanations and concrete parent practices.

### **RELY ON THE MASTER WEAVER**

The Fathers of Vatican Council II (1965) recognized the importance of the vocation of parent in society and called parents to form in their children reverence for God and all other persons:

“Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educated their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. For it devolves on parents to create a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God and men that a well-rounded personal and social development will be fostered among the children. Hence, family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs. . . . Let parents then, clearly recognize how vital a truly Christian family is for the life and development of God’s own people. “ (#3)

Lickona (1988) suggested that parents can create the kind of family atmosphere that develops Christian character by practicing the following principles: show respect to children and require respect in return; teach by example and by directly telling children the values and beliefs behind the example demonstrated; teach children to stop and think about the viewpoint of others and to discuss moral issues; give children responsibilities and opportunities to care for others and to contribute to the welfare of the common good; balance independence and control; give children the kind of love that helps them develop a positive self-concept rooted in security, autonomy, initiative and industry; and spend time together in meals, work, and recreation.

In the process of weaving Christian character in children, parents would be well advised to remember that “God who began the good work will carry it through to completion” (Phillippians 1:6). Parents who are intentional about depending on the grace of God will find the comfort, support and direction needed to be faithful to weaving the fabric of Christian character. And all the while, parents will deepen their own awareness that the Master Weaver is at work in their own lives interlacing the threads of their daily living into a fabric of beauty. A popularized bookmarker expresses the reality that parents of faith come to learn: Nothing need be wasted in the journey of a soul. God can transform all the pieces of personal history into a masterpiece.

My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me.  
I cannot choose the colors; He works steadily.  
Often He weaves sorrow and I in foolish pride,  
Forget that he sees the upper, and I the lower side.  
Not till the loom is silent and the bobbins cease to fly,  
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why  
The dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hand  
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.

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