



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

CATHOLIC FAMILY CHARACTER – GUIDED BY PRINCIPLES

Rules as reaction to ever-changing situations become cumbersome and ineffective. A rule mindset becomes a policing mindset. It prevents the development of personal responsibility. Principles rather than rules foster moral maturity and positive relational living. **Principles are broad values that include a variety of specific behaviors.** For instance, if “respect” is mutually defined and embraced as a family principle or value, it automatically includes specifics like conversational tone, clearing toys from the family room floor, the volume of the stereo, and use of common equipment. Respect automatically excludes name-calling, irresponsibility in matters that concern the common good, or invading privacy.

When family is shaped intentionally by Gospel values and Christian principles, a graced character can be seen. Character is *the distinguishing feature of personality and behavior that persists, regardless of outside pressure or personal temptation.* Catholic family character is based on truth, guided by principles, nourished by spirituality, rooted in faith, shaped by trust, defined by love, and supported by grace. PRINCIPLE is the focus of this newsletter.

Ancient Roots of Contemporary Christian Family Life

Joshua challenged the people of Israel: “If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide today whom you will serve, ... As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord ” (Joshua: 24:15). Today Joshua might ask if we plan to serve the gods of materialism, violence, consumerism, passion, hedonism, and selfish individualism **or** the God of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Choosing God’s way of interacting is a PRIMARY OPTION or PRINCIPLE that automatically determines what specifics become included in or excluded from family values. In God-centered homes, parents and children view Christian principles as expressions of a loving relationship rather than sets of rules. Consider the following guideposts of Catholic Christian living to be manifestations of love, not limitations on freedom.

The Ten Commandments

In an effort to trip up Jesus, Pharisees asked him to identify the greatest commandment. He answered in one word—LOVE. “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Fostering loving relationship is the principle; the Ten Commandments are particular examples of love.

Jesus of the Gospel and the Gospel of Jesus

Jesus explained that his guiding principle was to do the will of his Father. That will was to be love in the world. Love showed itself in teaching, healing, feeding, forgiving, praying, availability to need, compassion, tenderness, being invitational, exercising initiative, mercy, . . .

Moral Virtues

The moral virtues, *the cardinal [hinge] virtues*, are “stable dispositions of the intellect and the will that govern our acts, order our passions, and

guide our conduct in accordance with reason and faith” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1834).

Through education, deliberate acts and perseverance we can cultivate:

- (1) **PRUDENCE**, the ability to recognize what is truly good and to choose the right means for achieving it.
- (2) **JUSTICE**, the firm and constant will to give God and neighbor what is due them.
- (3) **FORTITUDE**, firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of good.
- (4) **TEMPERANCE**, moderation and balance in the use of created goods.

Beatitudes

The beatitudes illustrate the principle that true happiness evolves when we choose to love God above all things (CCC #1716-1724). Eternal life is the result of cultivating attitudes that include simplicity, loving so deeply that one mourns loss, meekness, passion for righteousness/social justice, extending mercy, cultivating single-hearted focus and purity of intention, reconciliation/peacemaker efforts, and willingness to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.

Family Principles

What principles determine your family character and set direction for members? Give family time to determine your principles, for example: hospitality, integrity, striving for personal best, respect for human dignity, or responsibility for the common good. Define the principle in age-appropriate ways for all members of the family. Perhaps create a paper drawing of an open umbrella with the spokes showing. Label the umbrella handle with the title of your priority. Then on each rib write a specific example. This helps children to make a concrete application from the general to the particular and vice-versa.

We are challenged to “put on the mind of Christ” (Philippians 2:5) who looks to effort more than to result. Often we cannot control results and so, if we depend on results to determine our worthiness, we set ourselves up for failure. But we have the freedom and authority to determine our effort, and so we need to put energy into attitude rather than aptitude or ability. Aptitude is God’s gift to us. Attitude is our response to God.

Children are encouraged when parents celebrate effort; they become discouraged when parents focus only on results. Mother Theresa of Calcutta reminded us that we are called to be faithful, not necessarily successful. Parents can take comfort in these truths and create a God-centered home by applying them. “Personal best effort” is a principle that is within the power of a child to determine.

**GOOD, BETTER, BEST
I WILL NEVER REST
UNTIL MY GOOD IS BETTER
AND MY BETTER IS MY BEST.**

Works of Mercy

“The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity; it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.” (CCC #2447)

Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

“The Church’s social teaching proposes principles for reflection; it provides criteria for judgment; it gives guidelines for action.” (CCC #2423). Seven principles or key themes of social justice include sacredness of life and dignity of the human person, call to community and responsibility to the common good, rights and duties of human persons, option for the poor and vulnerable, dignity of work and rights of workers, solidarity of the human family, and care for creation.