Principles of Family Life: A Grandparent Speaks

This past weekend, my oldest son, Christopher, arrived with his wife, Ellen, and their two-year-old son, Jeffrey Mirus, who (as you might wildly guess) is named after yours truly. They also have a new baby on the way. It’s their first visit here since Jeffrey was born, up from Irving, Texas, where Chris teaches philosophy at the University of Dallas. Most of my kids and their families live near us in northern Virginia, so the visit provided an opportunity for a family gathering, from my wife’s 89-year-old mother right down to the one in the womb. Our oldest daughter and her family drove over from Indiana, and my youngest son bused down from New York City, to make the gathering complete. Soon Sunday, we were all gathered together—our four sons, two daughters, all their wonderful spouses, and a total of ten visible grandchildren. What a blessing!

An even greater blessing is that all of us are deeply committed to the same Catholic faith. This is not a bragging point. There are plenty of equally-committed parents who have seen children go astray. But I am convinced that faithful and constant parental prayer is the key to the ultimate positive resolution of any such problems. St. Monica must be our poster child. And this brings us to the first of my five principles for family life.

1. Prayer

We are fools if we do not take advantage of four kinds of prayer in raising our families. The first kind is the sacramental life of the Church. A good sacramental example begins with the parents and trickles down to the children through the importance the parents place on the reception of the sacraments as evidenced by their own sacramental habits. The second kind is prayer with each child before bed when they are little, followed by blessings and cheerful reminders as they grow old enough to take on the responsibility of prayer for themselves. The third kind is family prayer, if possible the daily Rosary. And the fourth is private parental prayer, including prayer for our children, not only at set times, but in an ever-growing habit of practicing the presence of God. One could add many other things, such as grace at meals, including special graces for special occasions; celebration of name days as well as birthdays; joyful observance of Holy Days of Obligation and other major feasts; reminders to children to pray about their choices and decisions; and constant prayer for the resolution of personal and family problems, which will not always yield to other forms of treatment or discipline.

Finally, let us remember that we are never done praying for our children. Once they are on their own, it will often be the only thing we can do for them. It is essential. And when nothing else is possible, it is enough.

2. Openness to Life

One of the most important forms of witness parents can give is clear evidence that the life and mutual love of the family is more important to them than pursuing a
satisfying career or making more money, or any other opportunity. This essential orientation to the family includes openness to more children. New brothers and sisters are a greater gift to existing children than bigger toys or participation in special activities or attendance at the “best” schools. More life lessons are taught by joyful and generous family life than by anything else this side of Heaven.

There are, of course, side benefits. When you open a box of doughnuts, your kids will learn math skills very quickly, and will also learn not to let a job go unfinished lest someone else be tempted to take charge. The rare package of M&Ms will propel them into even higher computations. In any case, hard as it can be sometimes to meet all the demands of life, there is no substitute for availability to one’s children—actual time spent with them as well as responsiveness when need arises.

If this responsiveness is simply not possible at times, so be it. But if lack of availability is an obvious choice, it will never be forgotten, and its effects will not easily be undone. There is a lot of rationalization about this matter. The best gift we have to give our children (and our spouses) is ourselves.

3. Christian Education

I continue to be amazed at how many Catholic families play games with their children’s education, choosing to send them to schools which present the greatest secular “opportunities” instead of ensuring that they receive a truly Christian education. Yet the obligation of the parent to provide a Christian education to one’s children is one of the two fundamental duties of marriage and family life. It has the same level of importance as material sustenance.

Parents who enroll their children in schools that are inferior spiritually so that they can more easily pursue a particular interest or talent (such as sports, or music, or drama) are playing Russian Roulette with their own kids. Even at the college level, this is enormously risky, yet it is often done on the assumption that one is giving a child a leg up the economic ladder. Apart from extreme circumstances, this is a fairly barren motive. When it comes to school choices, the child’s readiness to swim upstream in a hostile moral and spiritual environment must be assessed. But even if he or she is ready, how much money will be wasted on an education which is essentially vapid and divorced from the Truth?

Even Catholic parents too often throw good money after bad to give spiritually-bankrupt universities every opportunity to indoctrinate their children with relativism even while they positively foster the characteristic temptations of young adults. This is done at the very moment in students’ lives when they are likely to assume they are finally getting a wider and deeper perspective than they could ever have received at home. No one solution fits all, but it is wise to raise children from an early age to understand that they do not have carte blanche to choose any college they wish. It is necessary for both parents and children to assess their motives. We must proceed with extreme caution, making these decisions with faithful attention to Principle 1.

4. Staying on the Same Page

Throughout the undoubtedly long and tiring years of raising children from before birth to adulthood, husband and wife must be careful to stay on the same page. No good can come of giving children the opportunity to play one parent off against the other. At the first sign of this (and it will happen), the parents need to discuss the problem as quickly as possible to determine what their joint approach will be, and to decide whether one parent will have the final say (and the final responsibility) in particular areas. Note that consistency in the context of love is more important than any one disciplinary style, which can vary from family to family.

Being on the same page includes nourishing the life of the couple. There are a hundred things in family life which can cause “couple time” to be lost. It is important to make room for joint prayer, regular communication to share tensions and concerns, and opportunities for occasional “dates” during which joy, friendship and romance can be refreshed and renewed. Couples who are on the same page will also share responsibility for tending to the daily needs of home and family. The division of labor will vary, but the principle is clear: Both mother and father must be involved. Both mother and father must demonstrate that, under God, family is Priority One.
The loss of a spouse and a parent through death is an enormous hardship; loss through divorce is even worse, and is also a form of child abuse. But for the sincere parent doing all he or she can to keep the family together, God can supply for anything that is missing, even should the marriage collapse. Refer again to Principle 1.

5. Restraining Personal Priorities

If a hundred things can come up to disrupt the lives of married couples, a thousand can arise to disrupt the lives of children as they grow older. They will be faced with all kinds of choices, from befriending or shunning others to being befriended or shunned themselves, from opportunities to cheat to opportunities to be honest and forthright, from responding to suffering to handling good fortune, from dealing with their own limitations to accepting the strengths and weaknesses of others—not to mention decisions about what to do in each new situation, and when to do it, and with whom.

In assessing all these things, children either look directly to their parents or at least absorb values from them that color their decisions. My fixed rule has always been to communicate that the most important thing in each new situation is to please God. Good parents do not express disapproval just because a child does not choose something the parent would choose or something the parent wants. For example, why rag (tear down) the child over a lack of a sports interest if he or she is attracted to study or music or some other good instead? Parental disappointment should be felt only when the child makes a choice that is objectively displeasing to God.

This comes to the fore as children grow older, especially when they need support in their future paths of life. I shudder when I see parents intent on living their own dreams through their children. Just as bad is too much stress on the “necessity” of “making a good living”, or perhaps an insistence on coming into the family firm. Rather, each child should be encouraged to discern his or her own vocation through prayer. This is the parent’s dream: That the child will follow God’s call. Parental wisdom can aid the discernment process, but parental preferences have nothing to do with it. A wise parent communicates that God’s call is the first priority for the child’s life.

Looking Forward

During the past few days with my family, we’ve spent time picnicking along the Potomac River. As some readers know, I’m a small-boat sailor; it is my favorite recreation. This influence of the nautical, which is still deeply felt in many of our daily expressions, brings to mind other principles I could stress. Sadly, after a couple of days surrounded by the whole “crew”, I have just enough energy to hoist the first five.

Still, I suspect rule six might be anger control. On a boat, the novice captain tends to yell at everyone else, demoralizing the crew out of sheer nervousness about getting everything done right. The result is that nobody wants to go sailing again. So too in family life, control of anger is right up there for those who tend to yell first and explain themselves later. Remember Belloc’s famous line that “the grace of God is in courtesy.” As both courtesy and good sense require, the prudent mariner remains calm.

I suppose, too, that I could derive one more rule just from my experiences on the water this past weekend. Yes, you can tell whether a child is growing up when he or she takes a turn at the tiller on a small sailboat. Up to a certain age, the child grabs the tiller and stares aft at the water rushing around the rudder. But when maturity strikes, the child’s perspective changes. In this case, only my oldest granddaughter instinctively passed the test. She looked forward, over the bow, to make sure the boat was on a safe course.

So let’s add a seventh and final principle. The Bible prefers seven to five or six, mirroring both creation and the cycle of the week, not to mention the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and making something of a perfect number. Let number seven be this: **Teach your children not to worry about what is past, but to focus on what they can do better in the future.** Look forward, over the bow. That’s the course they can do something about. In each and every case, that is the course they need to plot, set and keep. — Dr. Jeffrey A. Mirus, President of Trinity Communications, a leader in Catholic education and the dissemination of Catholic information for over 30 years. He has co-founded a Catholic college, authored and published numerous scholarly books, pioneered Catholic Internet services, founded a non-profit corporation to advance the Catholic faith through education and the media, and established a for-profit communications consulting enterprise. Dr. Mirus is the father of six children. He and his wife Barbara currently reside in Northern Virginia.
**SHARING FAMILY EXPENSES**

Parents should find out how the children spend their allowance so that they may guide them in budgeting it. Above all, they should find out whether the child has the makings of a big spender or a miser. In addition, parents should go a step further: the child, depending on his capacity, should know the financial situation of his own home. He should know the budget, how much money is allotted for food, clothing, recreation, and schooling. In this way, he will learn to be responsible for his expenses because he will understand that his parents are working for his studies and his personal needs. Thus, he has the responsibility of making that investment yield. This will help the children to be more demanding with themselves and to understand that their parents don’t deny them things out of spite. Moreover, with their savings, the children should contribute to some family purchases. When a difficult situation arises, it is very moving to see a boy break his piggy bank and give his P150 savings. It shows that he feels responsible for what will happen to the family. Besides, it will teach the children to be generous in this selfish world. It is definitely a matter of creating and fostering in them a sense of dominion, seriousness and responsibility in the use of things and money.

* (Taken from the pamphlet “The True Meaning of A Home: About Family Life & Parenting” by Mrs. Florinda Salinas. Mrs. Salinas is married and has three children. She was born in Seville (Spain) where she spent her childhood and high school years. Later on, she moved to Pamplona to study journalism in the College of Information Sciences of the University of Navarre. She works as a feature writer for the women’s magazine Telva.)

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**FORMATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR FATHERS AT SOUTHRIDGE SCHOOL**

- **HOLY MASS**
  - Daily 12 noon Mass at the Chapel of the Holy Family.

- **RECOLLECTIONS**
  - 1" and 4" Sunday Recollection for Fathers (Holy Mass for the Families at 11 am)
  - 3" Thursday Recollection (with Benediction) at Molave Study Center

- **BASIC CATHOLIC DOCTRINE CLASSES**
  - Every Saturday, 10:15 – 11:00 am at the Academic Office Conference Room, 2nd floor Main Building (for fathers)
  - Every 4th Sunday, 8:30—9:10 am (for Afternoon School fathers)
  - Every 4th Sunday, 9:15 - 10:45 am (for Afternoon School mothers)

- **SPIRITUAL DIRECTION WITH SCHOOL CHAPLAIN**
  - By appointment

**RETREAT SCHEDULES FOR FATHERS**

- Oct. 16-19 (Thurs-Sun) Makiling (Main)
- Oct. 16-19 (Thurs-Sun) Makiling (West Wing)
- Nov. 6-9 (Thurs-Sun) Latag
- Nov. 13-16 (Thurs-Sun) Latag (Young Professionals)

**FORMATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR MOTHERS AT WOODROSE SCHOOL**

- **THEOLOGY CLASS** - every 1st and 2nd Thurs, 9 to 10 am, Function Room
- **RECOLLECTION** - every 3rd Thursday, 9:15 - 11:00 a.m. & every 4th Thursday, 4:30 - 6:30 p.m.
- **CONFESSION** - Monday to Friday except Wednesday, 9 am - 12 noon

*For inquiries, you can contact PAREF Woodrose School at 850-6380 to 83; 809-5508 or 807-6735 (local 123 for the Chaplain’s Office or 118 for the Family Orientation Office or locals 120,151,152 for the Central Communications Office)*

- The Parents Formation Office welcomes personal write-ups about parenting principles and experiences. Please email them to mrinawat@southridge.ph

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**RETREAT SCHEDULES FOR FATHERS**

- Nov. 27-30 (Thurs-Sun) Tagaytay Conference Center
- Nov. 28-30 (Fri-Sun) Sangandaan (Open)
- Dec. 1-3 (Mon-Wed) Makiling (West Wing)
- Dec. 4-7 (Thurs-Sun) Makiling (West Wing)
- Dec. 11-14 (Thurs-Sun) Makiling (Main)
- Dec. 11-14 (Thurs-Sun) Makiling (West Wing)

For reservations and inquiries, please contact Ms. Leila Lerios of the Philippine Foundation at 817-2318 local 201 or 0928-5063688 or email philfoundation@pldtdsl.net.