

The Family as the School of Love

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In the ethics courses taught at the University of Dallas, one of the chief philosophers we study is Aristotle. It surprises many of my students that Aristotle's focus for ethics is happiness – he strives to figure out what makes people happy and says that right action is action that leads to happiness and that wrong action is action that destroys happiness. As a beginning exercise for the class, I have my students draw up a list of what they think human beings need to be happy. Year after year, those lists are nearly identical. They say that human beings need family and friends. They need health and education and economic means to support themselves and their families. They need art and sports and meaningful activity. They need to have an opportunity to think about God and worship Him if they believe in him. That list is a pretty sensible list, though perhaps not comprehensive and certainly very general; but it does surprise my students that they can make such a list; that happiness isn't "something different" for everyone. Indeed, they readily allow that it is probable that all human beings everywhere at all times need these things.

Today we are going to focus on one of those items, the family, which is arguably the most important item on the list. The claim that the family is crucial to the well-being of individuals and to society is a claim that has been under attack for some time by philosophies and political movements originating with the Enlightenment that stress radical individualism; philosophers such as Rousseau found the family to be a kind of unfortunate necessity for the care of the young, from which eventually individuals should strive to make themselves free. Aristotle did not hold that view; he believed that the family was a natural institution; in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he states, "The friendship between husband and wife is thought to exist by nature; for men by nature tend to form couples more than to be political, and they do this to the extent that a household is prior and more necessary than a state ..." (1162a17)[1] Aristotle recognized that the relationship between family members was one of love and friendship: "parents love their children as they love themselves... and children love their parents as being born of

them... brothers love each other by having been born of the same parents..." (1161b28)

While here I am interested in the Christian view of the human person, marriage and the family, I use Aristotle to show that the claim that the family is key to human well-being, although challenged by some so-called modern wisdom, is not a distinctively Christian or Catholic claim. It is an ancient and universal insight into human nature and one that we have neglected to our great peril; we have allowed philosophies with false views of human nature to shape our own thinking and public policy. While much public policy and many social movements (such as the clamoring for the recognition of homosexual marriages) continue to treat marriage and the family as artificial units amenable to radical transformations, studies of modern social and psychological sciences increasingly verify the importance of stable marriages and family to human well-being. Study after study show that those who grow up in single parent households, those whose parents have been divorced, and those who get divorced register lower on all scales of human happiness and well-being.

One of the features that my students quite spontaneously hate about modern culture is the prevalence of divorce; either they have grown up in households impacted by divorce and/or their friends have, and they have a keen sense of the trauma and suffering that inevitably accompanies divorce; they have a distinctive sense that something has gone terribly wrong when a marriage fails. They themselves fervently want love relationships that last a lifetime and are afraid that they are just not possible. And the fact is that one of the ravages of divorce is that children of divorce have a harder time sustaining lasting relationships. In a moment I will tell you what I offer to them as a formula for good marriages, marriages that last. But let me say a few more things about the importance of family, first.

Aristotle spoke of the importance of the family for fostering love; the love between the parents, the love of the parents for their children, the love of children for their parents, and the love of the children for their brothers and sisters. John Paul II in his Letter to Families, a document that deserves many meditative readings and rereadings, says this about the importance of the family:

God the Creator calls [the human person] into existence "for himself"; and in coming into the world he begins, in the family, his "great adventure", the adventure of human life. "This man" has, in every instance, *the right to fulfil himself on the basis of his human dignity*. It is precisely this dignity which

establishes a person's place among others, and above all, in the family. The family is indeed—more than any other human reality—the place where an individual can exist “for himself” through the sincere gift of self. This is why it remains a social institution which neither can nor should be replaced: it is the “sanctuary of life”.

What the family does for the human person is to receive him as a gift, and to receive someone as a gift is to love him.

It is not a sentimental statement to say that love is essential for human beings. John Paul II in his wonderful book, *Love and Responsibility*, states that the “human person is made to love and be loved.”

He tells us that “the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love.”^[2]

Wojtyla speaks of this norm as a requirement of justice; love is what we owe other persons. As

Familiaris Consortio states, “Love is...the fundamental and innate vocation of every human

being.” (11) Later in *Familiaris Consortio* he cites a passage from *Redemptor hominis*:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. (18)

Let us talk for a moment about what love is. There is much in the modern world that suggests that we recognize only romantic love as love. This is the feeling that occasionally spontaneously springs up between individuals and is strongly linked with a sexual attraction. Romantic love is exhilarating because it seems to promise that one has met some one who will meet all one's needs for companionship, for sexual pleasure, for union; we say to this person “you are everything to me,” “you are my world”; as Romeo and Juliet we might prefer to die with our lover than to live. In fact, it is not uncommon in a sense to deify the object of one's romantic interest – we view our beloved as almost divine, a god or a goddess. Romantic love can be a precursor to a more lasting love, but it can also be pure fantasy – we can experience romantic love for someone we have never met – a movie star, for instance. Romantic love generally involves endowing the object of one's love with all the perfections one would like one's beloved to have. Since romantic love has such a large element of fantasy it is generally fleeting; it can't sustain the disappointments of reality. Love that is not realistic will not last; true lovers know that romantic feelings will wax and wane but that it is just a facet of one mode of falling in love; it is not of the essence of love. It is a love that easily dissolves because it is based on our expecting something and that something often is perfection from others. Our culture tends to portray those who are without this love as greatly deprived, as not living life to its fullest, whereas in truth, many have discovered that this love is a kind of madness of which one should be very wary – it is deceptive and damaging. (In fact, this is a view that was very much the view of the ancient Greeks – their literature generally portrayed romantic love as madness.)

Some may be surprised that I speak of this kind of love as predominant rather than the kind of “love” portrayed so often in the media – “love” that is based on pure sexual attraction. We regularly see on TV and in the movies, individuals who upon just having met each other quickly begin having sexual relations before they know much about each other at all. There is little evidence that they even experience “romantic love”. This is really sad, for I think they are seeking romantic love in sexual passion, which is a facsimile for romantic love, which itself is a facsimile for real love.

It is not this love, it is not romantic love or sexual “love”, of which John Paul II speaks when he says that all human beings are made to love and be loved. The love of which he speaks is the love that on the side of the lover is a self-giving love; that says to the person being loved, that “you are extremely important to me; I want to work for your happiness; I want to help you obtain what is truly good in this world.” The best of this love is an unconditional love, it says “I will always be here for you; I will always forgive you; you can count on me; I am committed to you. I love you even if you reject my love, even if you act in ways not worthy of my love. I love you because you exist as a human person, as one who possesses a dignity that commands my love. You are a creature destined for eternal union with God and I love you as that kind of creature.” This, of course, is a love that is not easy to give if only because we are imperfect, we are selfish, we tend to want something in return. But this is the kind of love that God has for us and that we, who are made in His image, are to extend to others. On the side of the one receiving the love, it is experienced as a great confirmation of one’s worth; “I am worthy of something great; I am not just a tool, just a thing, just something to be used in this world. I have something to contribute just by being here. I, too, can extend a self-giving love to others.”

Now this love is very different, obviously, from romantic love; it is what is known as agapic love, named from the Greek word used for the love of God for His creatures. This love, the love of total self-giving, agapic love is not based on impressions or feelings or what one receives. It is based on giving to another what another deserves simply by being a human being, a person loved into existence by God. The human love that most easily resembles agapic love is the love of parent for child; we should try to have it for others – our spouses, our friends, strangers and enemies, too. The family is crucial to teaching human beings how to extend that love and to being a place where one should be able to reliably experience that love. Families are formed by a man and a woman falling in love and making a life-time commitment, thereby forming a communion of persons. Through having children they extend their love to their children and expand the communion of persons.

In his *Letter to Families*, John Paul II speaks the emergence of the communion of persons from the family:

When a man and woman in marriage mutually give and receive each other in the unity of “one flesh”, the logic of the sincere gift of self becomes a part of their life. Without this, marriage would be empty; whereas a communion of persons, built on this logic, becomes a communion of persons. When they transmit *life to the child, a new human “thou” becomes a part of the horizon of the “we” of the spouses*, a person whom they will call by a new name: “our son...; our daughter...”. “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord” (*Gen 4:1*), says Eve, the first woman of history: a human being, first expected for nine months and then “revealed” to parents, brothers and sisters. The process from conception and growth in the mother’s womb to birth makes it possible to create a space within which the new creature can be revealed as a “gift”: indeed this is what it is from the very beginning. Could this frail and helpless being, totally dependent upon its parents and completely entrusted to them, be seen in any other way? The newborn child gives itself to its parents by the very fact of its coming into existence. *Its existence is already a gift, the first gift of the Creator to the creature.*

In the newborn child is realized the common good of the family. Just as the common good of spouses is fulfilled in conjugal love, ever ready to give and receive new life, so too the common good of the family is fulfilled through that same spousal love, as embodied in the newborn child.

This is God's design: he wanted each person born into the world to be the product of love and the object of love. All of us are to be parts of families, even the single, even those who have lost their families. We the human family must provide for those who don't have families to provide the loving support we all need.

Love is the driving force behind everything. God, of course, created the whole universe out of love; God is love and wants to share that love with others, truly with creatures who are capable of receiving and giving love. That God wants us to love one another and that he finds marital and familial love the first school of love, is clear from scripture. From his reading of *Genesis*, John Paul II has developed what he calls a "theology of the body." One of his most striking phrases and terms is his reference to what he calls the "nuptial meaning of the body." By this he means that the very make-up of the human body, the very fact that we are all creatures of one sex or the other, indicates that we are "made for union with another." This is so both physically and spiritually. John Paul II has spoken movingly of the human person's "existential loneliness" that is eased by the relationship of marriage. He observes the deep joy and satisfied longing that is expressed in Adam's utterance upon seeing Eve: "Here at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." We are made to give ourselves to another and to receive another; our very physiological make-up demonstrates that. And this mutual giving and receiving is to issue forth in new life. Thus we are all, in the depths of our being, beings that require a spouse and children for the fulfillment of our being, whether that spouse be a flesh and blood spouse and the children be biological children, or whether the spouse be the Church, the bride of Christ, and one's parenthood be a spiritual parenthood.

The human being then finds his or her fulfillment only through the love that is best illustrated through familial relationships. John Paul II tells us that for this reason Christ came through means of a family – to show us that this is where love starts. Again, he teaches that marriage and family create a "communion of persons", a community of individuals who are interconnected by mutual love. That love that is to begin in the family is then to extend to all. So the task of each of us should be first and

foremost to strengthen the family, our own, and those of others and to be family for those who don't have families.

Now I return to my formula for having a loving, lasting marriage. In the past I have spoken of 4 points, here I will extend my formula to five points.

1. The first step to establishing a loving, stable family, is to choose one's spouse well. When looking for a spouse, look not for the most dazzling member of the opposite sex, but look for the person who you think has the character and values to be a good parent for that person will also be a good spouse. Being a good parent is something that everyone wants to be; no one wants to be a bad parent. The best gift one can give one's children is a good mother or father. I am not, of course, counseling that one choose as a spouse someone whom one finds unattractive. I am at the age where I find nearly all young people dazzling in their beauty and think that no one has to sacrifice physical attractiveness for spiritual beauty in the choice of a spouse. But don't let physical beauty deceive you; unless it is accompanied by spiritual beauty ultimately it will not satisfy. A test for discerning that spiritual beauty is the generosity of the individual, his or her responsibility, his or her unselfishness. I recommend that you draw up a list of qualities you would like your spouse and the parent of your children to have – then after you have acquired these qualities yourself, start looking for that person.

2. Second point: One way to guard against succumbing to the deceptions attendant upon romantic feelings and sexual attractions is to abstain from sexual intercourse before marriage. Studies overwhelmingly show that those who cohabit before marriage have a much higher divorce rate and divorce earlier in the relationship than those who don't live together before marriage. In the US an overwhelming majority of those getting married have already initiated their sexual relationship and I believe that is a major contributing factor to the outrageously high divorce rate. A chaste courtship period before marriage is incredibly important for learning how to get along, to maintaining enough distance for being able to discern each other's true character and true compatibility. Those who remain chaste before marriage have much stronger and better marriages because they let their love and respect grow before marriage with the conviction that they will have a lifetime together to enjoy the sexual

elements of the relationship. Those who abstain before marriage do so out of respect and love for each other, out of responsibility for their future children and because of their love for God. These qualities are wonderful qualities to have and can only help a marriage. Young people who have initiated their sexual relations before marriage should stop and try to acquire the virtue of sexual self-control before marriage; I promise, they won't regret it.

3. The third requirement is not to use contraception. I have recorded a tape entitled, "Contraception: Why Not." There are copies available here today in both Spanish and English and I hope you pick one up. On that tape I explain how contraception has contributed to the huge numbers of unwed pregnancies, abortions, and broken marriages. I explain why contraception is bad for women's health, for the relationship between husband and wife, the relationship between the human being and his God. Soon Mercedes Wilson will give some data that supports these claims and will explain the effectiveness of NFP for controlling fertility and building relationships.

4. The fourth requirement is to tithe or give 10 percent of your income and time to charity, certainly more if you can afford it. If you start early on in your life giving 10 per cent of everything to God you will find yourself forming a generous and grateful heart that simply makes you eager to do more.

5. Fifth, finally, and most important. When you get married, get married in a church, go to church, practice your religion and pray together. This one requirement in itself is a very powerful aid to having a long lasting marriage, a happy marriage, a happy family and a happy life. Studies show that those who share a religion and practice it, and it matters little which religion it is, have the most successful marriages. God very much wants marriages to succeed for they are the basis of the family and the family is the school of love. So He gives His help abundantly to those who call upon Him for help.

Spouses that pray and worship in together will certainly teach their children to pray and worship and will make their marriage and family the path to Christ that it is meant to be.

Our modern culture has become so materialistic and so enamored of convenience that it has in fact become a culture of death that through abortion and euthanasia simply kills human beings thought to be inconvenient. Such a culture needs very unselfish, indeed needs holy individuals to create the civilization of love that Christ came to establish. The family is the first school of love and those who are called to the vocation of marriage cannot underestimate the extent of their responsibilities, the extent to which we all rely upon families to raise up the saints that we need.

[1] *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* trans. by Hippocrates G. Apostle (Peripatetic Press, 1984)

[2] *Ibid*, p. 41.