

The powerful influence a mother has over her child

—by St. Nektarios—

The upbringing of children must begin during infancy. This is necessary in order to direct the child's powers of the soul—as soon as they begin to emerge—toward good, virtue, and truth, while simultaneously distancing them from evil, indecency, and falsehood. This age is the secure foundation upon which a child's moral and intellectual understanding will be erected. Thus, Fokilidis says: "It is necessary to teach someone to do good work while he is still a child," because man sets out from childhood, as from a starting block, to run the race of life. St. Basil the Great affirms: "It is necessary for the soul to be guided right from the very beginning toward every virtuous exercise, while it is still soft and moldable as wax; so that, as a child begins to speak and to acquire discernment, there exists a road comprised of the elemental concepts and devout etiquette that were initially imparted, giving him the ability to speak good and useful things and inspiring him to acquire a proper moral conduct." Truly! Who will not agree that the first impressions during childhood remain permanently ingrained and unforgettable? Who doubts that various influences during early youth become so deeply imprinted upon a child's tender soul, that they continue to exist vividly throughout the duration of his life?

Nature has appointed parents, but especially mothers, to be instructors during this early stage of life. Hence, it is necessary for us to suitably teach and diligently raise virtuous women, on account of their supreme calling to become teachers; for they will serve as the images and examples that their own children will follow. A child mimics either the virtues or bad habits of his mother—even her voice and manners, even her ethos and conduct—to such an extent, that one can very appropriately liken children to phonographic records that initially register sound, and then play it back as it was originally voiced, in the identical pitch, the same quality, and with the same accent and emphasis. Each glance, every word, every gesture, and every action of a mother becomes the glance, word, expression, gesture, and action of her child. Hence, Asterios notes: "one child speaks exactly like his mother, another bears a striking resemblance to her personality, while yet another takes on his birth giver's manner and conduct." By being in the constant presence of her child and through her repeated counsels, a mother profoundly affects the soul and character of her child, and she first provides him with the initial impetus toward virtue.

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(Part 2)

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A mother can, with a single glance, with one kiss, with her sweet voice and tender caress, at once evoke the desire and inclination for virtue within the heart of her child. Similarly, the same mother, with one glance of disapproval, with one tear rolling down her cheek, through a single expression that reveals the pain in her heart, is capable of distancing her child from a destructive evil endangering his heart. As a child is raised in the motherly bosom and warmed in the maternal embrace, he begins to love even before he learns the meaning of love, and he begins to submit his will to the ethical law even before he comprehends the ethical law. A mother alone is the most suitable person to foster the initial understanding concerning God within an infant's heart.

On account of this, St. Basil the Great says: "the understanding of God that I received as an infant from my blessed mother has flourished within me. I have not changed anything when I reached maturity, but I perfected the principles that were entrusted to me by her." While Pestalozzi, foremost amongst contemporary educators, attributes the entire religious education of a child to his mother and proclaims: "I believed my mother. Her heart showed God to me. My God is the God of my mother. The God of my heart is the God of her heart. O mother, dear mother! You revealed God to me through your instruction, and I found Him through my obedience. O mother, dear mother! If I forget God, I will forget you yourself."

However, just as a mother's every virtuous deed, every good word, and each righteous disposition constitute the cornerstone for the child's ensuing virtuous works, words, and inclinations, similarly, a mother's every evil deed, word, and disposition contains destructive seeds for the child's ensuing evil actions, words, and inclinations. Thus, a child eventually becomes similar to what his mother is like. If a mother's soul is hideous, malicious, dark, corrupt, insensitive, and coarse, if her inclinations are evil, her manners scandalous, immodest, and indecent, if she is prone to impiety, anger, hatred, and other irrational passions, then it will not be long before these evil stalks spring up from the child as well. Conversely, if a mother's soul is divine, pure, joyous, innocent, and full of the fear of Lord, if her inclinations are noble and holy, if her dispositions are serene, God-loving, and compassionate, then a child's soul, reflecting itself in front of such a mirror and imperceptibly mimicking her, becomes similar to his mother, and, with time, he propagates seeds of virtue. Hence, when the great Napoleon asked a certain renowned educator of that time (by the name of Madame Campan) what France was in need of in order to acquire good and virtuous men, "mothers," responded this prudent lady to the monarch. "Then," instructed the prominent emperor, "produce such women who will be capable of fulfilling this immense national goal."

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(Part 3)

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Due to the influence that each mother exercises upon her own child, mothers are capable of molding children after their own character, just as a potter molds clay in the manner he wishes.

Diogenis would say the following concerning the easily pliable years of childhood: “The education of children can be likened to potters’ vessels. Just as they shape and form clay as they wish while it is still soft, but are unable to shape it once it is fired, similarly children who are not painstakingly disciplined cannot be changed once they grow up.”

Plutarch further asserts: “youth is easily pliable and workable, and while such souls are still tender, teachings are embedded deep within the soul.”

Hence, during the tender childhood years, mothers are capable of effectively and profoundly impacting a child’s soul, mindset, feelings, nous, imagination, and ethos. After this age, the youthful heart begins to harden, and instruction becomes—if not impossible—very difficult, as the divine Chrysostom correctly attests: “it was necessary right from the beginning when you noticed these evils developing, while your child was still young and obedient, to restrain him rigorously, to make him grow accustomed to the essentials, to regulate and chastise the ailments of his soul. You should have removed the thorns when it was easy to do so; when it was easy to uproot them on account of the tender age. Now it has become difficult to do so because, due to negligence, the passions have multiplied and increased. For this reason, it is written: ‘bend his neck while he is still young,’ when discipline is easier to implement.”

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(Part 4)

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The mothers of all great and virtuous men serve as brilliant examples for us. Such shining models are the mothers of the three great hierarchs, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. John Chrysostom.

Desiring to give their children the best possible education and to refine their mind through Hellenistic wisdom and science, they did not hesitate to hand over their sons to idolater instructors, in order for them to suitably develop and grow intellectually. They were not afraid of the professors' heterodoxy because they had self-assurance: they were certain that (through their personal example) their own love for true education and their own fervent zeal for the Christian faith had entirely been channeled into and completely inundated the hearts of their children. They knew that nothing would be capable of shaking the principles and convictions their sons had concerning the Christian faith because they had been diligently established and built upon a rock!

Consequently, Nona and Amelia, the good and virtuous mothers of St. Basil and St. Gregory, sent their sons to Athens: to the center not only of education and enlightenment but also of idolatry—where the religion of the Gentiles with all its accompanying grandeur was firmly rooted. And indeed, their convictions were not proven wrong. Both young students had within the depth of their hearts the flame of faith in Christ, and they remained uninfluenced throughout the entire duration of their studies. They were neither shaken by the teachings of the sophists who systematically battled Christianity nor allured by the magnificent ceremonies of Gentile worship. On the contrary, they remained firm and strong in their religious beliefs and returned home to their mothers, offering themselves as a reward to them for their didactic efforts, their maternal care, and their virtue.

Similarly, the good and virtuous mother of St. John Chrysostom, named Anthousa, who became widowed at the age of twenty, completely devoted herself to raising her one and only son; for she considered this to be of greater importance than a second marriage. Like the other two mothers, she was not afraid to hand her beloved and cherished only child (when he came of age and needed higher education) into the hands of an idolater instructor. Her assuredness in her own faith was assuredness in her child because she was convinced that she had deposited all of her faith into the soul of her beloved son. She too was not proven wrong. A short while after completing his studies and practicing law, John gave himself to serving the Church. Livanios, St. John's professor, filled with disappointment after failing to proselytize John to his own religion, sorrowfully exclaimed: "Woe! What type of women does Christianity produce!" This is how he pointed to the reason for his failure.

Truly, how beautiful! What brilliant examples these pious mothers are for us! What magnificent images! What wondrous role models! Who can deny that

mothers give rise to great and virtuous men! Thus, Jacques Rousseau makes the following observation in his work *Emile*: “Men will always be whatever women want them to be. If you desire to have great and virtuous men, teach women the meaning of righteousness and virtue.”

Therefore, we must educate and instruct our daughters (who will later become mothers) according to the examples set forth above, attending to this assiduously from their early childhood years, so that we can be assured of fruitful and beneficial results to come.

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(Part 5)

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On account of their supreme calling, it is necessary for future mothers to receive the appropriate upbringing from the onset of their infant years. A suitable upbringing for them consists of instruction that targets the mind and heart. Both these parts together comprise the two centers around which man's intellectual and ethical education revolve. If either one of them is neglected, education becomes imperfect and impaired. Even though the mind and the heart are members of the same soul, nevertheless, they are in need of different means of education. The heart, on account of its sensitivity belongs to the metaphysical realm; the mind, on account of its intellectual capacity belongs to the physical world. Consequently, each one of them requires to be taught its individual and particular truths.

The truth specific to the mind is education, while that of the heart is religion. Therefore, it is necessary for us to provide education and religion to our daughters, so that they will be capable of transmitting these to their own children later. Education and religion are two brilliant lighthouses that guide man as he travels in the ocean of this present stormy life, guard him from shipwreck, and distance him from every dangerous reef. They are the two eyes of the soul, which she uses to examine the things that surround her, and which enable her to walk without stumbling toward blessedness and salvation. They are the two spiritual organs that perfect man and render him worthy of his sublime descent and his supreme position in creation. Only mothers educated in this manner are capable of producing good children, useful citizens, and courageous men.

Hence, we must provide our daughters with both religious and intellectual instruction, in order to render them worthy of their calling. It is necessary for godly education and cultivated religion to coexist because these two components constitute the only secure provisions in life that can help man in a variety of ways.

A one-sided upbringing, being deficient, leads to one of the following two improper sequela: superstition or indifference for God's law. Each one is a natural outcome and a direct result of the type of upbringing.

Intellectual and religious instruction are two different trees planted in the same field, which require equal care and attention in order for them to grow equally. Unequal cultivation will result in disproportionate development and, consequently, one tree will thrive and flourish, while the other one will wither and atrophy. If we concern ourselves with the mind alone, man's religious feelings will inevitably become impoverished. If we give all our attention solely to an uncultivated form of religion, man's intellectual powers will shrivel and be arrested. Ill consequences of the former are irreligiousness and atheism, which are followed by countless evils; of the latter, superstition. These are the results when our daughters receive one-sided, partial education and incomplete upbringing.