

## CHAPTER 1

### The Role of the Family

The family is the most important unit of society. Because it plays a providential role, it should be guarded scrupulously. With single-minded devotion the leaders of the world should bend their best efforts toward preserving this small private world, this little group of human beings held together by a joint destiny based on something so seemingly fugitive, yet so lastingly influential, as blood ties.

Antigone, the tragic heroine of ancient Greece, pleaded an eloquent case for the family unit when she defied the state by insisting on an honorable burial for her brother Polynices, whom King Creon had decreed to lie rotting above the ground, a prey to wild beasts and vulturous birds. Antigone stole out alone into the shadows of the night and buried her brother because she believed that it was more honorable for her to be punished by death, as Creon had decreed, than to sully the memory of her brother. Antigone went to her death convinced that “the wise will know my choice was right.” That Greek tragedy was important because it indicated clearly that even ages ago there were those who believed that what was best for the family was best for the state.

The family is not an artificial creation of man’s devising, something he may change or suppress at whim. Man has no right to say, “Today it pleases me to acknowledge the family; tomorrow I shall cast family obligations aside and proclaim myself the nucleus as well as the cementing force of all my actions.” Nothing about the family is whimsical or capricious. Every man is divinely bound to be a lasting, inextricable part of the family into which he was born. When used as an agent for good, nothing has been more sublime than the family. When used as an agent for evil, nothing has been more shameful.

Family forms and rules have changed according to the times, the degree of civilization, and prevailing customs. Sociologists are able to make fine subdivisions within such general categories as the horde, the patriarchy, or the matriarchy. They expound on the consanguineal system, where everyone related by blood flocked together to form one big neighborhood, and they distinguish this from the conjugal system, where husband, wife, and children form their individual circle. In recent times they have added “personal isolation” as a classification, to

indicate how modern man often exiles himself from the group to pursue individual happiness to the neglect of the common good.

Although patterns of family life are extremely variable, depending on the cultural sophistication and political goals existing, it has been the perennial concern of society to keep its families from the constant threat of dissolution. Vigilance is needed, for the malice of men has had some frighteningly weakening effects on the family. Infanticide, infidelity, illegitimacy, incest, and neglect have left ravishing scars. Yet, through all the changes and distortions, it is easy to trace the features of the family's basic organization and to see that the family unit itself is the best foundation on which any society can be constructed. Wherever other systems have been tried, they have failed. One finds support for this conviction in the Biblical interpretation that God Himself created the family and intended it to fulfill His divine purposes on earth.

Moreover, stable nations are usually those where the family flourishes. To this the long duration of China may be attributed. Some Westerners look at China with disdain, pointing to that country's several social peculiarities; yet China has endured for millenniums on end, defying the ravages of time, and in our day is stronger than ever before. Meanwhile, many peoples have arisen on the world scene, shown great vitality, and run a brilliant race, only to disappear leaving nothing but ruin. Nowhere has the family more powerfully influenced national life than in China, and in no other place have family ties so securely held members of society together. It may even appear to us that some structural features of the family there were carried to extremes; we cannot deny, however, that the stability of that great nation through the centuries rested on a well-defined family unit.

As the family was instituted by God, the husband and wife were to rely on each other completely. Their love, like the love of their Creator, was to be a priceless possession. Thus the family was the special place of origin and the living center of all individual existence. It offers the most favorable environment for human development. It is the fundamental unit of society, the principal factor of wealth, the surest guarantee of prosperity, order, and peace.

Is it not in the family where all institutions sink their roots? From the dawning of time, it provided religion a center and a sanctuary, with the father as priest. Likewise the state and the government derived their origins from the family. Within it we find the sources of pure democracy with all its necessary branches. Schools also, from the first grade to the last, have had their birth in the family. The modest family

library, with its chosen volumes carefully preserved and ardently read, was the beginning of the great libraries. The first hospitals were organized in the home. One must look there also for the origins of arts and crafts. In certain humble dwellings burns the sacred fire of painting, sculpture, and embroidery.

As already mentioned, the family provides the most favorable atmosphere for the birth and development of the human being. Man comes into the world as one of the weakest of living beings. From his beginning he needs painstaking, affectionate care and constant watchfulness. As the child grows, he needs frequent help, which also needs adaptation as the child grows. In order that parents might meet this need, God puts into their hearts deep and sublime instincts. After He unites them body and soul to create the new child, He causes them to unite their energies to protect the child from danger and surround him with never-failing love.

If death should snatch away a child's own parents, other persons can provide for his needs. But what special graces these persons require to assume such a responsibility! Unless they are rare, exceptional people, they will lack, in spite of their best efforts, that spontaneous something, that joyful, irresistible, heroic madness that distinguishes the tenderness and devotion of the real parents.

In the family that carries out its true mission, the child learns the meaning of duty and develops self-discipline. He learns to obey, while surrounded with love. Fear of disapproval in his mother's look, fear of his father's censure, will many times be restraint enough to hold him in the right path. The confidence, love, and respect that grow in the warmth of the home, unite to help the child acquire, from his earliest moments, habits of docility and rectitude.

The family helps translate the abstract formula of duty into living, concrete acts. It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of example as an instrument of education. The child, not having much to look at in himself, looks around him. The pictures his sharp eyes see are engraved in his mind; the words his ears hear, he uses at the first opportunity. Unfortunately, as he lacks judgment always to choose between good and bad, he accepts one as well as the other, and imitates most that which he sees most often.

Are not the parents those who live most constantly in the child's presence? How important, then, that they set examples in careful fulfillment of duty, courage in daily work, honesty in all relationships, self-forgetfulness, simple modesty, at times heroism, and other virtues.

## WE AND OUR CHILDREN

Each day, as these examples unfold before the eyes of the child, he spontaneously practices the same attitudes and becomes accustomed to them.

True, many parents are unfaithful to this ideal. In too many families children receive only demoralizing lessons and see only sordid examples of unfaithfulness and bad behavior. Does not this regrettable fact explain the great number of lives that are failures? If the child from such a family never becomes the man he ought to be, if he is disorderly, if he is a problem to society, is this not because the family failed to carry out its mission?

“As you see,” writes Dr. A. Ferriere, “the problem of education in the family is simply this: it is necessary for the parents to be rich in good feelings, rich in willpower, and rich in good judgment, so that these qualities, radiating out from them, may give light and warmth to their children. The children must receive this warmth, as the plant receives the sun. Then, spontaneously, their sentiments will be refined, their will confirmed, and their judgments will grow more clear and more just.

“This is simple, very simple, apparently. Yet it is difficult, at times almost impossible in practice, because it demands nothing less than the transformation of the character of the parents. Before dreaming of educating our children, each one of us should educate himself as far as possible. On this success all other successes depend.”<sup>1</sup>

Alluding to the efforts He made to prepare His disciples for their mission, the Master of Galilee exclaimed, “I sanctify Myself, that they also might be sanctified.”<sup>2</sup> This principle of divine pedagogy is correct. We must apply it well in the home so that the family may play the role it is designed to play in human life.

### REFERENCES

1. Dr. A. Ferriere, *L'Education dans la Famille*, page 10.
2. John 17:19.