

SEVEN

A Spirituality of Parenting



As we saw in the example of Carlo Carretto's realization about the depth of his mother's spirituality (see chapter 1), Christian theology has generally been weak in its treatise on everyday faithful domestic living. Somehow the earthiness of the incarnation, so evident elsewhere, has been slow to spill over into our thinking about marriage, sex, and family.

There are reasons for this, of course, among them the fact that often those writing the books on marriage are themselves not married, but celibate monks and nuns. There are other issues, as well. In the early church, the influence of Manichaeism (a dualistic view of the world that pitted "light" against "darkness" and presumed whatever was of this earth and life to be evil or bad) made the church somewhat reticent to genuinely celebrate the goodness of sex and marriage; and, later on, the monastic ideal (of celibate life outside marriage) came to be so identified with holiness that marriage, sex, and parenting were not seen as having within them the same inherent, privileged path to sanctity as celibacy and the monastic life.

Monastic life was seen as a "higher state," an elite path to holiness not available to anyone married. Granted, there was always a theology that taught that one's duties of state, such as the demands inherent in parenting, were a certain compulsory path to holiness, but, in the end, this didn't add up to a full, wholesome theology of marriage, sex, and parenting.

More than twenty years ago now, at a conference in Collegeville, Minnesota, I heard a talk given by Dr. Wendy Wright, a mother and theologian.¹ She spoke wonderfully of a spirituality of parenting. In essence, she suggested that raising children, being a mom or a dad, is a privileged means to holiness and—this is my addition—a more natural path to maturity than is to be found in monasticism. Simply put, very few other experiences, perhaps none, are as naturally geared to break the casings of our inherent selfishness as is the experience of child-raising. (This brings us back to Carretto's experience.)

¹She's written many important books. I refer you to these two, for instance: *Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home*, and *Sacred Dwelling: Discovering and Living Your Family Spirituality*.



Lucy

To be a mother
or a father
is to let your dreams
and agenda
be forever altered.





A flexible heart
is a discerning heart;
it picks up each moment
and discerns the true
and the false voices within it.
It asks, in each moment,
"Where does love lie
for my child in all this?"

To see your own child is to feel what God must feel when God looks at us. Parenting, in the end, is the most natural path to holiness and maturity, what often feels like a compulsory commitment, and takes us where we would often rather not go. Becoming a parent, submits Dr. Wright, reshapes the heart in a unique way, molding it more and more to be compassionate as God is compassionate. Here are some of her thoughts:

Being a mother or a father stretches the heart, just as the womb is stretched in pregnancy. This is because, among all loves, parental love is perhaps the one that most pulls your heart out of its self-love. Parenting reshapes the core of your being to help you to love more like God loves.

Seeing your own child's fragility and morality works to create in you feelings of inexpressible tenderness that help you feel what God must feel when God looks at us. To be a parent is to be formed in a school of love.

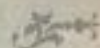
The Trappist monk and spiritual writer Michael Casey, OCSO, once wrote—using this traditional phrase for monastic life—"the monastery is a school of love because it teaches us to forget ambition, convenience and self-gratification in order to open our hearts to love." Is there an aspect of our lives where this could be truer to reality

than in the everyday, domestic lives of parents with small children?

One of the first lessons this school of love teaches you is welcome: To be a parent is to have to permanently open your heart, life, and plans so as to create a unique space in them for someone else, your child. To be a mother or a father is to let your dreams and agenda be forever altered.

The next lesson this school of love teaches is flexibility: To be a parent is to nurture a child as he or she passes through very different stages of growth: infancy, toddlerhood, kindergarten, elementary school, a teen with raging hormones and a raging attitude, a young adult, an adult with his or her own responsibilities and unique sorrows. Moreover, if you have more than one child, each has a unique personality that you must adapt your love toward. All of this demands that you constantly grow, re-adjust, adapt, let go, learn to love in a new way.

A flexible heart is a discerning heart; it picks up each moment and discerns the true and the false voices within it. It asks, in each moment, "Where does love lie for my child in all this?" This is a demanding task for a parent, one within which, as Wright so well puts it, "looking good is not the point!"



A parent must ever say
in word and attitude,
"Return as far as you can
and I will come
the rest of the way."

Finally, being a parent should naturally lead you to shape your heart for reconciliation. Love is all about forgiving, again and again and again. Families survive only if this is happening. A parent is meant to be the compassion of God, the father and mother of the prodigal son and the bitter brother, who embraces the child not because the child is worthy, but in spite of all unworthiness. A parent must ever say in word and attitude, "Return as far as you can and I will come the rest of the way."

All these things can, of course, be done by anyone, not just biological parents. However, for a mom or a dad, there is a certain naturalness in it, a conscriptive rhythm written by nature itself. To be a parent is to find oneself enrolled in an elite school of love, a true monastery that is every bit as ascetical and grace-producing as any monastery ever praised by the great spiritual writers.

