

Raising children in the world, not of the world

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Q: As a parent of young children, I want to raise my kids in the faith and help them navigate the world to make good decisions while they are still vulnerable/moldable so that when they grow up and are free to make their own decisions, they still continue to choose Christ. Obviously I cannot shelter them from everything or they will grow up being naïve but I cannot just let them be completely influenced by the world either. Any thoughts on how to let kids be a part of the world but not of the world?

A: Let me begin by thanking you for writing and for this question. It is incredibly important, and yet so many parents find themselves trying walk the line between protecting their children and “over protecting” them to the point where they are naïve. In fact, the desire to prevent children from being “too naïve” has lead many parents to abandon their God-given role as guardian of their children’s souls.

There is a line in the Rite of Baptism. Immediately preceding the moment of Baptism, the priest addresses the parents and godparents with these words: "...you must make it your constant care to bring him up in the practice of the faith. See that the divine life which God gives him is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in his heart". This is the very role that God is calling parents to fulfill: the constant care to keep their child safe from the poison of sin!

I know parents who are so afraid that their child will grow up to be naive, that they are willing to abdicate this duty and place their children's eternity in jeopardy. I have heard parents justify this by saying things like, "They'll have to encounter it sooner or later...". What a load of baloney. Study after study (and better yet: personal experience and common sense) reveal that children benefit from being protected from evil in the world. Their mental capacity to make sense of evil or violence and brutality is not developed; they don't have the ability to discern the subtleties. In addition, exposing children to evil can severely handicap them for the rest of their lives.

Saint Thomas Aquinas was called the "angelic doctor". To those around him, he seemed to be free from a lot of the passions that commonly trip people up. He didn't seem to have to carry around the baggage that most of us carry with us; he seemed unburdened by things like anger, greed, or lust. Because of this, he was free to choose virtue. And because of this, he was able to see the reality of this world more clearly than anyone around him. He was teased by his fellow monks for being naive, but rather than being a liability, his innocence was an incredible asset.

Consider this: what is one wound that you might be struggling with? What is one piece of baggage that you have to deal with on a regular basis? Chances are, you first picked this up early on in life. I know people who cannot seem to stop cursing; they were exposed to that kind of language at a young age. I deal with people on a regular basis who are wrestling mightily with sexual issues; many were exposed to pornography at a young age. Many individuals with issues related to gluttony or anger are related to being vulnerable to those things as a child.

Many of us simply have to play with the cards that we are dealt; and God can still give life, growth, and healing to those of us who carry these burdens. In a similar way, a person could tie the trunk of a young sapling in a knot. The sapling could still grow tall and strong with some help, but why would anyone intentionally make it more difficult?

"But I don't want my children to be too naive." I understand that. But at the same time, I have yet to meet someone who was "too naive".

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There are three potential consequences that might come from being “too naive”, and none of them are necessary. First, we might fear that our child will be so naive that they will be taken advantage of. They won’t know “how the world works” and will innocently trust someone that they ought not to have trusted. Just remember: “innocent” doesn’t mean “ignorant”. I’ve known people who were “simple” in this sense. Those folks weren’t innocent, they just weren’t wise enough to learn. But that is another issue for another day.

The second fear is that the child might be perceived as being self-righteous. They may see themselves as being better than others. That is a danger. But I have met more people who thought that they were better than others because they knew more sin than the other kids.

Have you ever met someone like that? Their version of being self-righteous came from the fact that they had been more exposed than anyone else to evil in the world; it can cut both ways. Nonetheless, a person who is more innocent than anyone else does not have to believe they are better than anyone else.

Lastly, the fear parents have about their children being too naive is that they will be perceived as weird or “different” from the other kids. Question: knowing what you know about the majority of youth and their behaviors, do you want your kids to fit in easily? Of course, you want them to be well-adjusted and able to get along with others, but that is something else. Do you really want children whose behavior is indistinguishable from other youth their age? I work with youth on a daily basis, and these kids come from a wide variety of backgrounds and beliefs. But I do not want them to be indistinguishable from their peers. I want them to stand out.

Of course, this comes at a price.

I was out to eat with some friends a couple of years ago. One of the people at our table was a young woman whom everyone would describe as “sweet and innocent”. The waiter picked up on her innocence and, for some strange reason, spoke to her in an incredibly condescending manner. She didn’t react at all, but seemed to be so naive, that she kept on being her innocent and sweet self. When he walked away, I asked her, “Can I ask you a question? Did you notice, um, how the waiter...”. I hadn’t even finished when she answered, “How he was treating me like I was a brainless fool?” “Yes! It seemed like you didn’t let it bother you at all!” She told me that she had decided back in high school that she was just going to be herself, regardless of how people treated her. She wasn’t foolish, but she was innocent in the best possible way. (Note: over the course of the dinner, the waiter’s rude comments softened incredibly and by the end of the night she had won over his affection and he was nicer to her than anyone else at the table.)

I believe that all of this highlights the incredible role of the family (not the school, parish, or government) to raise children. An intact family is where a child learns how the real world works. They learn that people are good, but not always trustworthy. They learn that self-sacrifice is not always rewarded, but is often its own reward. They learn that people are

different (praise God for siblings!). They learn right and wrong, and that this can often be difficult to discern. They learn what real relationships are, and that real relationships are difficult and worthwhile.

I will offer some more practical advice in next month's column. For now, trust in the fact that you love God, your spouse, and your children. Let your family be their "safe haven in a heartless world".

In last month's column, we looked at one source of temptation many people encounter: the world. We read that "the world" can often be a source of some real temptation. This is one of those things that is obvious to anyone who is paying attention. We also read that there are, historically, two other sources of temptation: the fallen self and the devil.

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Before we look at these sources of temptation, it is worth remembering that encountering a temptation is not at all the same thing as giving into a temptation. A person can experience temptation all day and not choose to sin. Please let me reiterate: temptation is not sin...it is just a temptation. In addition, feelings or thoughts that we experience are not, in and of themselves, sins. It is only when we freely choose to embrace or encourage certain feelings or thoughts that they can become sins.

As we move forward, there is at least one very important skill that we need to develop.

When we encounter unwanted thoughts or feelings, we need to learn how to identify the "voice" that is speaking. As Christians, we need to learn to identify the voice of the Good Shepherd (John 10:27). We do this by spending time listening to the Voice of God. Take time to reflect on Scripture or enter into the Mass and learn what Jesus' voice sounds like.

Learning Christ's Voice is the best way to be able to quickly and surely identify the voice of the Enemy (the devil). He can often sound convincing, but he always twists the truth of God into a way that condemns a person and strips them of hope.

A good rule of thumb for discerning the Voice of God from the voice of the devil is this: The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin while Satan merely accuses us. The distinction is that, when the Holy Spirit convicts us, He always leads us to repentance and hope. Satan accuses us and leads us to mere sadness and discouragement. The Holy Spirit's Voice leads us to action, while Satan's voice leads us to paralysis.

Something similar is true about the fallen self. I often meet with people who struggle to believe the truth about themselves. They will listen to a "voice" that accuses them and condemns them. I will often ask them whose voice they hear when they hear those words.

Many times, they are able to say, "That sounds like my dad when he got drunk" or "It sounds like my mom when she was miserable and took it out on us". This is not to say that a person

has to have parents who abused them in order to have self-accusing thoughts, but it is to say that the “voice” can often be identified as false or accusing by paying attention to “who” it sounds like.

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One helpful strategy for dealing with these thoughts is called “wise mind”. The idea is that I need to acknowledge how I am thinking or feeling...as well as remind myself of the truth that comes from God. For example, if a person was facing a self-destructive temptation, they would acknowledge that they did indeed feel this way, as well as the fact that they are made for more. It doesn't help a person to deny that they are struggling...or to try and tell themselves that they “shouldn't be” feeling a certain way. It helps them to stay in their “wise mind” and accept their current situation with wisdom. This might look like, “I feel disgusting and worthless...AND I know that God knows me and loves me.” Or it could look like, “I have been hurt and devastated by another's actions towards me...AND I am called to love them in this.”

There is a man from the early church named Origen. He once wrote, “There is a certain usefulness to temptation”. When we face (or flee) temptation, we are strengthened in ways we would not be without it. Temptations, resisted or run from, develop a depth of character. The fact of the matter is, even if temptation defeats a person, if it is identified and handed over to Christ, it can refine them. Think of the individual who acknowledges their woundedness and need for grace. They grow in humility. They have hopefully grown in wisdom and courage. They have hopefully been made aware of their selfishness and brokenness. This is essential. Too often, we are content to try and survive on our own strength; we don't learn to lean on God.

Dr. Scott Hahn once pointed out that all of God's “favorites” had to endure temptation or trials. Even Jesus Himself endured temptation.

In the midst of temptation, it is a great time to remind yourself of what you truly want. To remind yourself of what you are truly made for. Remember who you are; you are a son or daughter of God and you are made for truth, and true love, and joy...not the false imitations that we often trade in for the real thing.