

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

November 1960 Editorial

I am appalled by failures in the bringing up of children in so many Christian homes: the tragedies, the catastrophes that I witness or that are confided to me. Far be it from me to say that parents are to be blamed for these failures in every case. I feel deep compassion for those who, though they have not failed in their formative role, are cruelly hurt in their children.

But in many cases I find that it is all too easy and unfair to put all the blame on “modern times”. The aggressive tone of bitterness in which so many parents accuse their children seems to me to reveal a need to silence in themselves an inner voice that threatens their self-confidence.

I beg of you, young couples reading these lines, do not think too readily: “there’s no danger... that our little boy will one day send us a telegram from the Winter Sports announcing his engagement to a young girl we do not know, as did the X’s son; brought up to be upright and honest, there is no danger that he will get involved with thieving school mates or make a fifteen-year-old girl pregnant and elope with her to a foreign land to avoid the consequences...; or “that, unbeknown to us, our daughter will let herself be led away by some gang and avoid, by the skin of her teeth, getting caught up in the net of some agents; or that our son will be led astray by some half-wit whom we have allowed into our home with insufficient discernment; or that our student-daughter will join the Communist Party, motivated much more by revolt against her family than by any convictions...”

All these cases that I have come across in recent months affect families like yours: I mean believing, practising couples, concerned about spiritual progress and the apostolate. And yet, I can’t help wondering whether these parents had understood that they were married IN THE FIRST PLACE to have children and to make them sons and daughters of God, that their children were their FIRST neighbours, that bringing them up was their FIRST responsibility, that bringing up a child is first and foremost a matter of love.

And if they did understand that they must love their children, did they not stall in the face of the demands of love? did they try to discover and understand the unique personality of each of their children – not just once and for all – but every day, for every living person is new each day? and, to help this personality to develop, did they know how to combine the courage to command, to forbid, to punish, with the difficult art of kindling freedom in them and encouraging its development? were they present to their children: I mean a spiritual presence that offers security by protecting them from harrowing loneliness? have they sought to maintain dialogue – not just verbal dialogue – but that of minds and hearts? were they at hand when a drowning youngster was looking for a branch to cling to? All this requires time, imagination, intelligence, strength of character, sensitivity, a spirit of humility and of self-denial. It calls for love, true love, when in fact the love of parents for their children is often - whatever they may think – mostly a gut feeling of affection, sentimental, all mixed up with self-love. It is not enough for this affection to be coupled with devotion, to be ready for sacrifices and to turn to prayer for it to become the person-to-person intimacy, in mutual openness and reciprocal trust, of which true love consists.

Young couples, be vigilant, track down the alibis; do not yield to the temptation of attributing to noble sentiments your negligence and abdication in matters of your children’s upbringing. Your work and social responsibilities – however important they may be – and the demands of the apostolate can NEVER justify the abdication of your responsibilities as fathers and mothers.

That it is difficult to love truly, that your parental role is difficult, I fully agree; that the evil one prowls around your children “*seeking whom he may devour*” (1 Pt 5: 8), I know it all too well; but then, why not hasten to God and persevere? Christ has told us that there are graces that can only be obtained, demons that can only be driven away, by prayer and penance. There can be no redemption without shedding of blood, said Saint Paul (Eph 1: 7).

May mutual help, the fundamental law of your team, come fully into play in this sphere of bringing up children. Although it is true that you do not have to reveal, without due consideration, the problems of your grown-up children, there is nevertheless considerable scope for mutual help.

Henri Caffarel