

Keeping the Promises Made in Baptism

Rev. James P. Cooper

The sphere of the love of infants is a sphere of protection and support of those who cannot protect and support themselves. This sphere of innocence flows into infants, and through them into their parents and affects them (Conjugal Love 385).

A baptism is a wonderful thing, whether you are taking part, or just observing. We have all experienced the beautiful sphere that little children have around them, and that sphere seems to be multiplied and expanded when a young family comes before the Lord in the presence of their friends and family to take upon themselves the responsibility for their part in the spiritual growth and welfare of their child. That sphere is given by the Lord through the celestial angels who have been present with the child since conception. It is particularly received by the mother, who then (unconsciously) passes it on to her husband as part of her sphere of conjugal love. The result is that through the Lord's auspices, the young parents are inspired to love and protect and nurture their little child in spite of the fact that from themselves they may find the whole business time consuming, inconvenient, and messy.

We are told that "from the Lord proceed two universal spheres for the preservation of the universe in the state created, of which the one is the sphere of procreating, and the other the sphere of protecting the things procreated. These two universal spheres make one with the sphere of conjugal love and the sphere of the love of infants" (*Conjugal Love* 385). God created the universe for the sole purpose that there should be a heaven from the human race. In order for that to happen and for it to continue to grow to eternity, there must be marriages on earth which produce children who are then taught by their parents and teachers how to grow up and marry and produce their own children who in turn can be taught the way to heaven. This is the purpose of human existence in the world of nature, and the Lord especially watches over and guides this part of our lives because it is so dear to Him.

It is of the Lord's Divine Providence that each child is born into the world. From the moment of conception, the Lord watches over that new life, and from the moment of birth He is constantly guiding and gently leading that new human being to eternal life in heaven. And when, in his freedom, that new person makes a choice to turn away from what is good and true, still the Lord does all He can to lead to milder evils, and only permits those which can, at some time for somebody, be turned to good.

But even though everyone's life is under the care and guidance of the Lord, especially little children, yet He has organized the world so that His government and leading of children is by means of their parents. The reason for this is that by cooperating with each other and the Lord in the uses of producing and preparing children to become useful adults in their own right, a husband and wife advance their own states of regeneration, and thus their states of conjugal love. It's a common saying that you never really understand something until you try to teach it to someone else. That's especially true when that someone else is a child you are trying to prepare

for life in a dangerous and complicated world. We also find that the need to be a good example for the children helps us get rid of some of our bad habits and more external disorders.

The Heavenly Doctrine, when speaking about the various offices that men and women are each particularly suited for, teaches that “the main office which confederates and consociates the souls and lives of two partners, and gathers them into a one, is their common concern in the education of their children” (*Conjugal Love* 176).

From a purely natural point of view, it is obvious that mothers and fathers have different roles to play in the upbringing of their children. Generally, the majority of the care of little children falls to the mother, but as they grow older they require an ever widening variety of experiences and guidance, the father has more and more to contribute. While it may seem that the parents have widely different roles, yet their parts are brought together and made as one as they look to the Lord and consult with each other as to what is the wisest course to follow with a particular child, and through the mutual support that they provide for each other.

We know that it is a spiritual law that in heaven those who have similar loves live together in societies, because people are drawn to other people who love the same things. We see this illustrated in the natural world by the many kinds of clubs that are formed to provide for people who have similar loves to come together and enjoy what they share in common. Does it not follow then, that because a mother and father share a common love of their offspring, that that love, and the expression of it in the offices and duties of child rearing, should draw them ever closer together in their marriage? As it says in *Conjugal Love*, “It is also well known that these offices, regarded in their separation and in their conjunction, make one home” (*Conjugal Love* 176).

While it is relatively easy to make promises to care for and guide a little child, we must remember that the later states are not always so sweet. Fortunately, the Lord has provided that we would have many pleasant memories of the child’s infancy to draw on when things become more complicated and difficult later on. What we need to remember in preparation for these states is that the promises made at baptism are principles for life, Divinely provided to guide and help throughout the time your children are with you.

The first of the five spiritual obligations that we incur by producing a child and having it baptized is that we must first and foremost seek enlightenment from the Word so we can be guided by the Lord in our part of the work. This has benefit for the child, the individual parent, and the marriage, for, as said before, you never really learn something until you try to teach it to someone else. Going to the Word to seek out the answers to your child’s questions forces you to do that which you knew you should do, but never found the time to do for yourself.

Every parent faces difficult questions about how best to handle different situations in their child’s life, and it is valuable to speak with other parents, and read articles that relate to the subject. However, we soon find that the more people we speak to, and the more articles we read, the more different answers we get to the same question. How do we determine what is right? How do we find our way through all these conflicting opinions? By looking to what the Lord has taught in the Word about the various states of life and the principles that apply. If we hold the Word as the standard, we will then be able to judge the value of the other sources of help that we have, and will be able to choose a wise course.

There is not time to do more than suggest the bare outline of the doctrine in the Word that serves to help parents understand and meet the spiritual and natural needs of their children, for there are series within series so that the more one studies the Word for guidance, the more one will find.

In the Old Testament, the early states of infancy and childhood, as the child moves from the pure innocence of the newborn into states where he is capable of willful disobedience, are represented by the stories of the Ancient Word, the stories of Creation, the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark, and the Tower of Babel.

As the child moves into the states where he is capable of wide movement and exploration, the early states of learning, his spiritual states and needs are described by the stories of Genesis and Exodus, particularly the giving of the Ten Commandments which must be obeyed without question or they will suffer dire consequences.

As they begin to go to school and become more and more self-confident and independent, they experience states which are described by the children of Israel establishing themselves in the land of Israel, and how they repeatedly cycle through states of disobedience, despair and punishment, and finally rescue when they turn back to the Lord who sends a Judge to guide them. The wise parent sees in these stories that it is impossible for a child to be happy all the time, that in fact the changes of state from happiness to despair are an important stage in the development of the independent and capable adult.

Eventually the child becomes a youth, and is no longer satisfied to accept orders from others, but feels the need to understand and perceive the justice and morality behind various decisions that affect his life. These are the states that are particularly addressed by the New Testament, especially in the parables which teach about heaven and the moral life which leads to it.

Finally, as the rational begins to awaken, and the young adult needs to see the spiritual truth behind the strict rules of the Old Testament and the spirit of morality in the New Testament, he can turn to the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church. The doctrines of the Church have sufficient depth that they will become a source of information and comfort throughout adult life.

The second obligation of parents is to do whatever they can to lead their children to the Lord, and by that is meant to teach children that the Lord is their Heavenly Father, and that He came to earth as Jesus Christ. It is extremely important that they learn many truths about the Lord, for we cannot love that which we do not know or understand.

The third obligation is to teach the Lord's Prayer, for by so doing, the child is introduced into the basics of worship to the Lord: through prayer they are taught that to humble self before God, through the words of the Lord's prayer they are taught that there is a God, that He is One, that He alone is to be worshipped, that He is the source of all life, and that He punishes the guilty and rewards the good with eternal life. Through daily repetition of the Lord's Prayer with his parents, the child is brought into the sphere of worship and an acceptance of God which will serve to support him in times of physical and spiritual crisis throughout his life in this world.

The fourth obligation is to teach the Ten Commandments, that is, to give the child a reasonable structure of rules against which he may test himself and so learn right from wrong, and thus prepare himself to live and work in the community of men. As the child learns to keep the commandments for himself through self-discipline, he is learning to shun evils as sins, and thus

is putting himself on the road to repentance, reformation, and regeneration. Also, by a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Ten Commandments, the child is given a standard by which he may judge his own and other's behavior throughout his life. If he knows the Ten Laws thoroughly, all he need do is ask himself, "Would the Lord want me to be doing this?" and his conscience will speak truly to him, leading him away from the paths of evil.

The fifth and final obligation is teach the child from the Word, by instruction and example. We must always remember the trust that parents are given when they receive children from the Lord. Children look to their parents as the final authority on all subjects. We read from *Conjugal Love*, "Everything which they receive they ascribe to their parents. They love their parents, their nurses, and their infant companions with whom they play in innocence. They suffer themselves to be led. They listen and obey" (*Conjugal Love* 395)—unless the parents abuse their responsibility and fail to teach their children about the Lord, thinking that somehow they are "leaving them free to make their own choice."

To this we can only answer that the only *free* choice is a *rational* choice, and a rational choice can only be made when there are many truths to select from. The less truth a person has, the less free he is. And so, it is our moral and spiritual obligation to teach our children as much about the Lord and the Church as we can, and when we do not know the answer, teach our children that we are willing to go to the Word to search for it there. By so doing, we will be protecting their freedom of choice in spiritual things, and at the same time bringing ourselves closer to God.

Children are only loaned to us. From the moment they are born they begin learning things about the world around them, and the more they learn for themselves, the less they depend on their parents. This is in order, for in this way from being sensual, they become natural, then rational, and eventually spiritual and are prepared for a life in the Lord's spiritual kingdom. So parents must understand from the very first that it is their job to prepare their children to leave the home and begin a new home on their own. However, the Lord has also provided that as children recede from their initial states of innocence, so does the parent's love of the children.

It is nevertheless useful for us to remember that by meeting the five obligations of baptism: to seek enlightenment, to lead to the Lord, to teach the Lord's Prayer, to teach the Ten Commandments, and to teach from the Word.

By doing this, we will promote the child's happiness and eternal welfare both in this world, and in the world to come. And, at the same time, by working together and looking to the Lord for help we will be working through our own states of regeneration and developing our states of conjugal love.

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is His reward. Like arrows from the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them (Psalm 127:3-5).