



Unconditional Parental Love

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Once I met a woman who had worked for years in fashion and modeling. Unsurprisingly, she was strikingly attractive. She was accompanied by her teenage daughter who, by contrast, was rather unremarkable to look at, maybe even a plain Jane. After spending time with them, I began to sense that the mother, whose life had largely revolved around her appearance, seemed to look down on her daughter, perhaps unconsciously, because of her average appearance. Her daughter seemed aware of this lack of maternal acceptance, and seemed troubled and uncomfortable as she tried to compensate and please her mom in other ways.

The girl's situation was a strong reminder to me of how important it is for every child to experience unconditional acceptance from their parents if they are to grow and mature in a healthy way. Unconditional love profoundly and beautifully molds us as human beings.

A growing number of parents in our society, however, no longer seem to hold to this key notion of unconditionally accepting their own children. If parents are told by doctors that their children might be born with physical or mental disabilities, many parents today will reject them and even yield to the

temptation to end their lives through direct abortion.

I was recently discussing the Special Olympics with the father of a boy who has Down syndrome, and he remarked that when he takes his son to the local chapter, there seem to be reduced numbers of new children participating each year. He wondered if this could be due to the expanded targeting of Down syndrome children through prenatal testing and abortion.

Most unborn children diagnosed with Down syndrome, in fact, are never allowed to be born. Data from the United Kingdom indicate that between 1989 and 2006 approximately 92% of women chose to terminate a pregnancy with a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome, while in the U.S., several published studies suggest the figure may be somewhere between 87% and 98%. A great many Down syndrome children, indeed, never see the light of day.

In the face of these harsh data, the importance of explicitly repudiating the eugenic mindset that has taken hold in our society cannot be overstated. No child is perfect, but every child is precious. We need to act as a people "set apart" in our attitude to the

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begetting of children who may be disabled. Historically, Catholics have always stood apart in this way.

Practically, this means overturning our culturally conditioned attitudes towards “imperfect” children, and accepting every child without preconditions. We must push back against the almost ubiquitous pressure that counsels us to ensure that our children are born without defects.

Bioethicist Luke Gormally argues it this way: “In part these pressures are the natural temptation to avoid the burdens of care for the handicapped... In part, however, they are the pressures of cultural attitudes, assimilated by many Christians, towards the child.” He continues:

“For many it has become merely quaint to think of each child as a unique gift of God; children are more like planned acquisitions in our culture, acquisitions which should fit into our expectations about how our lives should go, about the ease and enjoyments that should characterize our lifestyle. A child who might threaten our ease may, if he or she is viewed as an acquisition, be thought of as a replaceable

acquisition. And indeed genetic counselors will tell parents: you can terminate this pregnancy and try again for a ‘normal child.’”

A husband and wife are called to give themselves to each other completely and unreservedly, and to accept each other unconditionally in the marital embrace. Every child of theirs, whether entering the world with a handicap or not, is an expression and fruit of themselves and their acceptance of each other. To reject their own progeny because of a disability is to reject each other on some level. To deny life to their own flesh and blood is also to reject an infinite gift from the Giver of gifts, and to arrogate to themselves a ruthless power over life.

Meanwhile, the unconditional acceptance of a child as a gift of God flows from the true and unconditional acceptance of each other as husband and wife, even with all their spousal faults and defects. As Gormally concludes,

“Truly unreserved self-giving carries with it a commitment to unreserved acceptance of the fruit of that self-giving. The dig-

nity of the child is only adequately recognized in the acceptance and cherishing of him just as he is.”

We do well continually to realign our thinking, so we can come to see how our children, whether “perfect” or not, are treasures and never possessions; they are gifts, and never acquisitions. They are blessings to be safeguarded and nurtured in the embrace of unconditional parental acceptance.

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