

Pastor's Pen: Love and the Family

In the homily last weekend, I asked you to take the following passage from I Corinthians 13: 4-7 and asked you to put your name in place of the word 'love' or 'it.' Hence, it should read like this:

"Your name is patient. _____ is kind. _____ is not jealous, _____ does not put airs, _____ is not snobbish. _____ is never rude, _____ is not self-seeking, _____ is not prone to anger, neither does _____ brood over injuries. _____ does not rejoice in what is wrong, but _____ rejoices with the truth. There is no limit to _____'s forbearance, to _____'s trust, _____'s hope, _____'s power to endure."

In presenting this spiritual reflection and exercise to you, I was hoping to set up a type of examination of conscience and a criterion for action. I stated in the homily that were we to grasp this simple concept, we would see a major transformation in the world around us. All charity, as it is said, begins at home. So let us reflect on these qualities and their ability to transform families.

Underscoring all this is one simple truth: God is love. To live a life of love is to live as a child of God. As love is a theological virtue, this means that it needs the grace of God to grow and is a habit formed positive choice by positive choice.

I am Patient, I am Kind...

In our families, we are imperfect people married to and related to imperfect people. As spouses, we never stop growing in our knowledge of each other. Some of what we find we love, some of what we find annoys us. While we challenge each other to positive growth, we must exercise patience as a matter of allowing knowledge to expand. This is true of children as well. Most of the time, while they are living in our homes, they are expanding in ability and knowledge. Given that the prefrontal cortex of the brain (the part responsible for judgement) develops between the ages of 18-24 while the amygdala (responsible for emotions) develops much earlier, child-raising can require great deals of patience and kindness in proper instruction and formation. Children need to be aware to be patient with their parents and their siblings; they are all going into the uncharted waters together.

I am not Jealous

Within a family, we learn to rejoice in the success and gifts of others. Too often, though, success and gifts can be met with envy and jealousy. Jealousy and envy are signs of self-centeredness. If I cannot be happy for something a loved one has or has received, then it expresses a discontent with myself. Cultivating a sense of thanksgiving for all that one is and all that one has will do much to stymie jealousy and envy within our homes. The thankful person is not threatened by the blessings another person is afforded.

I am not snobbish, rude, put on airs, or self-seeking.

The family is the first place where we learn that the goal in life is to be the best version of me that I can be with God's grace. Too often, though, it can be perverted into an "I have to be better than you" motif where everything is a contest for domination. Snobbishness and rudeness are defense mechanisms we put up to make ourselves feel superior to others. For a Christian, being superior/inferior is not why we live. Love forces us to get the focus off of ourselves and onto the good of others. Love leads us to be humble and honest about ourselves and those around us. Love and humility go hand in hand. Within the family, we need to teach this humility so that we are grounded in truth and not worried about how we are thought of; we learn to let our gift and not our pretension speak for who we are.

I am not prone to anger, do not brood over injury, do not rejoice in wrong, but rejoice in the truth

Love changes our focus in life. It looks for the good. It doesn't overlook the bad, but seeks to define people by their goodness. Our families live in a society where we are forcibly taught to look for, exploit, and define a person by their worst actions and traits. We are taught to allow the acne to define the face. Our Catholic homes should teach by example the importance of such focus and the ability to forgive injury. We teach mercy and forgiveness within our families as an act of love. We learn to forgive the past mistakes and sins with hope of reconciliation and conversion. One of the dumbest lines ever to appear in a movie was, "Love means never having to say you're sorry." No, love means saying you're sorry and forgiving when another tells you they are sorry. Too many families remain fractured because we brood over injury. No one needs to approve of or enable wrongdoing, but the home is where we learn to forgive.

There is no limit to my forbearance, trust, hope, and ability to endure.

Within the family, we must recognize that these abilities to love will be tested daily. Even those who love us most will hurt us. The necessity to be patient, forgiving, merciful, humble, deferential, and magnanimous will occur every day. Since love is a virtue, it is built up or torn down choice by choice. This love, though, will build up and strengthen marriages and families. I think we know this on some level, which might be a sub-conscious reason this reading shows up in most weddings. It is the gold standard for marriage and family life. It is the gold standard for the domestic Church.