

Parents, will your children be happy?

*A reflection on the
formation of conscience*

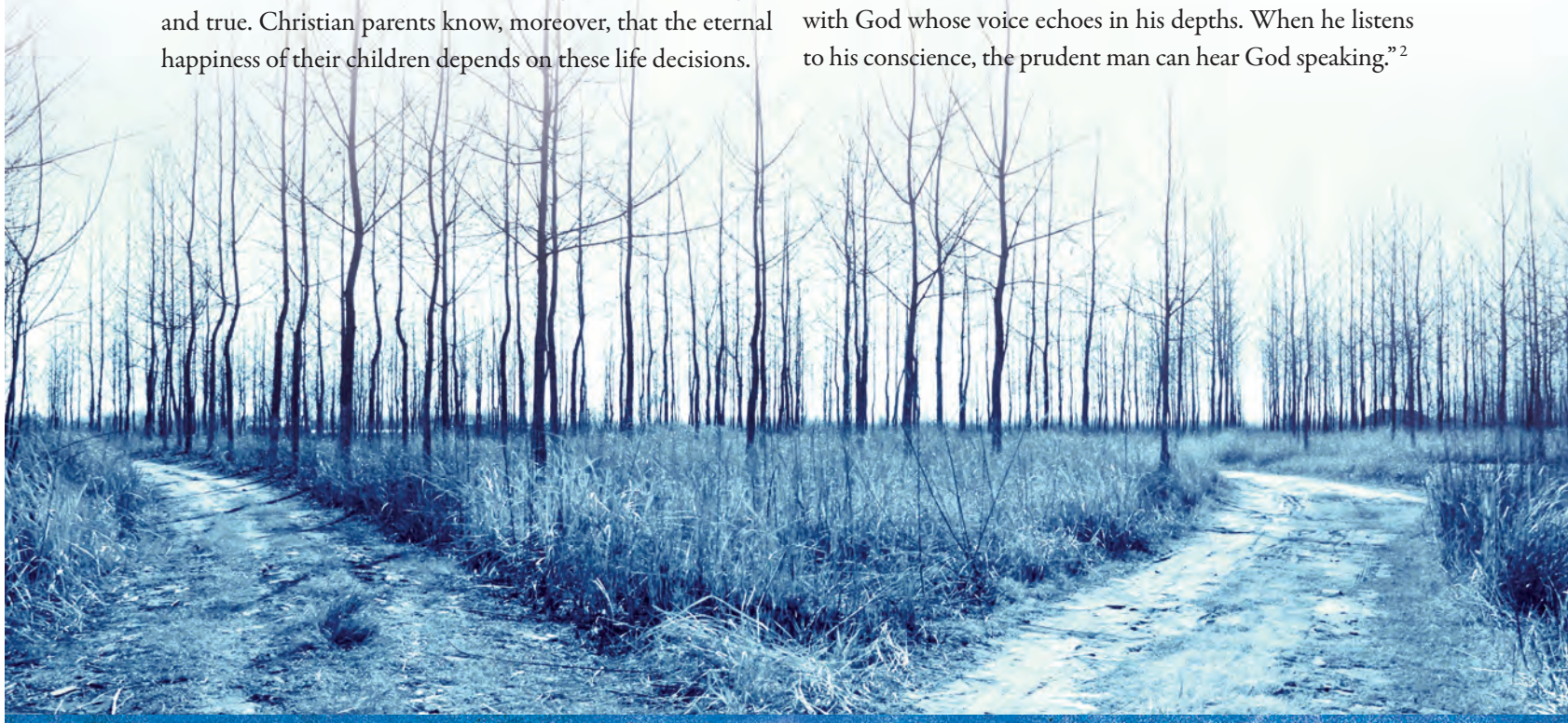


How can it be that a human being is capable of the best and of the worst? A quick review of history reveals an undeniable fact: day after day, year after year, century after century, a great battle is raging between Good and Evil; not only globally, but in every human heart.

In this present day and age, Christian parents who dedicate themselves to the education of their children, and hope that they become responsible, generous adults, cannot afford to ignore this reality. It is primarily the parents' task to train the men and women of tomorrow, so that they are able to choose that which — from the multitude of propositions offered by our society and our culture — is good, beautiful, right, and true. Christian parents know, moreover, that the eternal happiness of their children depends on these life decisions.

But who defines good and evil?

And how is one to choose? And for that matter, choose what exactly? By creating us free, in His image and likeness, God also imprinted deep in our heart a law - Natural Law - which, if we respect it, leads us to live and love as God does and, as a result, to be happy.¹ The Catholic Church speaks of it in this way: "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment [...]. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking."²



Since the world's creation, humans have wanted to follow their own mind and ignore God's voice speaking to their conscience. Our first parents let themselves be seduced by Satan, the father of lies, and decided out of pride to disobey God by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree (Genesis 3: 1-6). They used their freedom to go against the will of God and thought they could thus determine for themselves what was right and wrong. This was the first sin - the first lack of confidence in and love for God. That day, evil entered the world, with all the sad consequences that are so visible in our personal lives, our families, our cities and our world.

"The Catholic Church teaches that *"the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God alone.* The man is certainly free, inasmuch as he can understand and accept God's commands. And he possesses an extremely far-reaching freedom (...) But his freedom is not unlimited (...) for it is called to accept the moral law given by God. (...) God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love proposes this good to man in the commandments."³

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction (...). Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him."

(Deuteronomy 30, 15 and 19-20)

My truth, your truth...

Today, in our individualistic culture, many people claim to determine what is good and evil and go so far as to define their own truth and their own moral law based on their feelings or preferences. To each his own truth! ... "That's what you believe? Well, you're entitled to your opinion, but I disagree. This is what I believe..." It sounds like Pilate asking Jesus: "What is truth?" (Jn 18: 38). Everything becomes subjective. Everything is seen as relative ... it all depends on *my* perspective, *my* experience, *my* preferences.

For today's disciples of Christ, it is quite obvious that a false conception of freedom prevails all around us: "I can do what I want, when I want, where I want and with whom I want, because I want it! I am free when I do as I please." As God became man to set us free from evil by shedding his blood for every human soul, He taught us something quite different: I am truly free when I do His will. To be free is to obey God who speaks to us deep in our conscience.

Jesus Christ, God made man, could not be more clear: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8: 32) ... And he adds: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14: 6) ... To know Jesus is, therefore, to know truth - the truth about God and the truth about humanity. Saying "yes" to Jesus is choosing to align my will with His. True freedom is not separated from the truth. To act freely is to seek always to be more and more like Jesus.

A threatened freedom

We are currently immersed in a “dictatorship of relativism . . . that recognizes nothing as absolute and which only leaves the “I” and its whims as the ultimate measure.⁴ Having the audacity to suggest that there is an objective truth, is often to expose one’s self to ridicule. Daring to propose Jesus Christ as The Truth to the people around you is tantamount to voluntarily excluding oneself from social life; aggressive secularism is indeed seeking to confine believers to their homes and their churches. Only atheists and agnostics seem to benefit from free speech in the public square; freedom of conscience is *de facto* denied when, for example, physicians are forced—where legal—to refer patients to a colleague who will perform an abortion or euthanasia when they cannot in conscience perform such procedures themselves.

“For individuals who wish to follow and act in accordance with the dictates of their conscience, it is sometimes necessary to resist, even in a heroic manner, the directives of the state, a court, or an organization that tries to force them to go against their convictions in matters of faith and morals. In these instances, freedom of conscience means that the person has the right to follow, according to the awareness of his or her duty, the will of God and his law. (...) Those who refuse to cooperate with an unjust law or practice that would oblige them to act against their conscience – and are not given the right to conscientious objection or accorded respectful accommodation – must be prepared to suffer the consequences that result from fidelity to Christ. They deserve the effective solidarity and prayerful support of their religious communities.”⁵

“Pope Benedict helps us to understand where and how conscience is grounded: “God is not solitude, but perfect communion. For this reason the human person, the image of God, realizes himself in love, which is a sincere gift of self”. To heed one’s conscience is to heed the call to love, to make a sincere gift of oneself to the other”

. (John M. Haas, The Nature of Conscience, in A Matter of Conscience, Justin Press, 2009, p. 13)

The voice of conscience

When indifference, religious ignorance, moral relativism, doctrinal errors and confusion prevail, consciences are stifled, misguided, and as a result become lukewarm or die. It is no surprise then that the Church, through the voice of successive popes over the last 40 years, is calling all the baptized to take up the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel in today’s world thanks to a profound missionary conversion.

This is a renewed, heartfelt effort, to bring our families, our friends and coworkers to an encounter with Christ and to the discovery of His revolutionary lifestyle: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13: 34-35) ... “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5: 44) ... “What you did for the least of these my brethren, you did for me” (Mt 25, 44) ... “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15: 13) ...

In the humdrum of everyday life, it is impossible to hear God’s calls and the cry of our brothers and sisters without paying attention to the voice of our conscience. Since our baptism, the life of God Himself dwells in us. Upon receiving the gift of faith, we have been invited to become saints and missionaries bearing the Good News of God’s love for each and every one of us. We are called to announce this Good News through our actions, of course, but also by our words. And we must do it fearlessly.

“Mom and Dad, I need you!”

Little three year-old Charlotte is on her merry way to the kitchen cupboard, shaking her head all the while, as if saying to herself, “No, no, no.” That’s where her favorite cookies – delight of delights! – are safely stored away. From the corner of her eye, she watches her mom ... She knows perfectly well that it is forbidden to take a cookie. Already, her conscience is reminding her.

The education of the conscience begins from the first years of life. In recent decades however—as psychoanalyst Msgr. Tony Anatrella (cited in this text) laments – many parents are impeded in their work of education by their fear of saying “no” and their “anti-authority and anti-morality complex”. Parents rely on the emotional bond they share with their children to lead them in the right direction; but this is not enough.⁶

In order to successfully carry out the moral education of their children – an education that will allow them to identify what is good and what is evil, and to obey their conscience – parents will need more than a good relationship with their kids. Parents must set limits and moral requirements if they want to succeed in positively influencing their children, and, when necessary, going against their will in order to teach them self-control.

“Adults and society must therefore be assertive in defining the rules that will allow for individual and social life to develop. (...) When adults (...) understand the meaning of education, they exercise their responsibility by defining the limits and rules that make life possible. Accordingly, young people must know that all transgressions will be sanctioned, so that each one truly understands the values and rules they must internalize. (...) It should be noted, however, that failing to penalize an offence might marginalize the individual and lessen his/her moral sense.”

Some might argue that they do not want to limit the freedom of children so as to allow them to flourish ... They forget that personal development “cannot be an end in itself, but should rather be considered the consequence of the development of intelligence, moral sense, and social relationships.”



Responsibility

Since they will have to relate to others throughout their lives, our children must develop a good sense of responsibility and an accurate conception of freedom.

“In the training towards responsibility, it is important to convey moral values that not only indicate the path of what is good, but also enlighten the conscience regarding choices

in human behavior. (...) Words like liberty, conscience, autonomy and responsibility are not always understood the same way. In the context of the prevailing individualism, these notions are understood as constituting a right to decide one’s fate in all areas of life. (...) It is true that everyone is free to make his/her own choices and accept the

consequences, but not in such a narcissistic way, which is the opposite of being responsible.

“Exercising authentic responsibility involves using reason and obeying the judgment of one’s conscience in favour of the good, while respecting the moral law and willfully accepting the consequences of one’s choices. One’s responsibility should always be assessed in light of the moral law (of what is right, what is good, what is true), and not only in terms of individual interests.”

*“I am the light of the world.
Whoever follows me will never
walk in darkness, but will
have the light of life.”*

(Jn 8: 12)

Freedom

Moral education also clarifies the true meaning of freedom. Helping a child to navigate the path to a just freedom may require that parents say “no” when the child is faced with danger, or when restrictions need to be imposed: “The child is comforted by knowing that certain limits must not be crossed; he can then perceive the moral boundaries within which he can function; he is able to build his moral life according to a few basic restrictions, and thus better discover the freedom to which he is entitled.”

Children will gradually integrate the moral standards taught them by their parents (their first and principal teachers) and other adults. One day, these children will become able to take ownership of their own free choices, knowing full well “they are responsible (...) for the consequences of their actions and behaviors”.

All in all, the educational role and the testimony of parents “are important in order to guide children through life, and to provide them with role models” –hence the importance of giving our children the example of a coherent life, so that they will see that our actions actually correspond to what we say.

Clearly, “it is thanks to the love of their parents and to the knowledge they have had transferred to them, to their introduction to morally good behavior, to the transmission of the tools of learning, to the transmission of the Christian

“There is one quotation from the works of Saint Thomas that captures the Catholic approach to morality in the most lapidary way imaginable : “God is offended by us only when we act against our own good” (Summa contra Gentiles).

The moral law and the guidance of conscience are there only for our own good; they are not imposed on us to diminish our freedom and happiness but to make them possible.”

(John M. Haas, The Nature of Conscience, in A Matter of Conscience, Justin Press, p. 19)

faith and moral values of life, that children will be able to flourish and develop. “

Inasmuch as the formation of conscience is the business of a lifetime, one must never despair. Our conscience can always be re-awakened, healed and strengthened. All that is required from us is to acknowledge our mistakes, and to ask for forgiveness with humility, relying on the infinite mercy of God. It is never too late.

“The Church puts herself always and only at the service of conscience, helping it to avoid being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine proposed by human deceit (cf. Eph 4:14), and helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man, but rather, especially in more difficult questions, to attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it.”

(Saint John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor, 64)



Tools Essential for Dealing with Life: the “Virtues”

For engaged parents, preparing their children to face life, another element is essential: formation in the virtues – which will ensure that their emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual growth will never cease. If we continually try to correct and improve ourselves, each of us will learn to harness the forces of our will and reason in order to resist our disordered passions and gradually become the person God had in mind when he called us into being. Once an adult, each and every one will be prepared, thanks to these acquired virtues, to face the personal, family, social and professional challenges which will most certainly come.

But what exactly is a virtue? Nothing other than a good habit – the habit of choosing the good, of doing good deeds and of employing all one’s strength to give the best of oneself. Saint Gregory of Nyssa said that “the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God”.

Raising children well involves working seriously to inculcate human virtues, virtues which will make them men and women of character – children of God whose minds, wills

and hearts have been forged by the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) which will enable them to act freely as God’s children “meriting eternal life”.⁷

The Catechism of the Catholic Church enumerates four virtues which play a key role; these are the “cardinal” virtues and all others cluster around them (No. 1805). The Catechism describes them in this way:

“Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (No. 1806).

“Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor” (No. 1807).

“Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good” (No. 1808).

“Temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods” (No. 1809).

*“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”*

(Hebrews 3:15)

These four great virtues, like all others, are acquired through the repetition of the acts which they inspire, through the example of those who surround us, and thanks to explanations that parents, for example, provide in order to help children grasp their necessity.

If one were to summarize in a few words the essence of the work of Christian parents – which is also the core message which Christ came to deliver, one which is realized little by little through the acquisition of the virtues—we would say that it is to bring their children to love and serve God by loving and serving others. In short, it is to *give* love and to *give oneself* by means of love. If our children achieve this greatness of soul, they will surpass themselves and overcome many obstacles to build happiness for others, for themselves and for God. They will be happy!

“The good is belonging to God, obeying him, walking humbly with him in doing justice and in loving kindness.”

(Saint John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 11)

“The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.”

(Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 2)



A Story of Love

Upon reflection, there is nothing more important than to lead our children to heaven. Therefore, nothing is more essential to their happiness than their encounter with Christ. Why? Because only He can provide the answers that will satisfy the human heart; especially the hearts of young people, thirsting for a higher purpose in life. Too often, they are left by themselves to face the reality of suffering, while unconsciously searching for the meaning of their life.

While Christ's enemies are hard at work dragging young people away from God in order to sabotage His plan for humanity, we as parents and grandparents have a grave responsibility to shape the consciences of our children and grandchildren. If not, who will tell them that God loves them intensely, and that He is their Father who created them and who wants to share His eternal happiness with them? Who will tell them that Jesus, Love incarnate, wants to give them a

*"He who created us without our help
will not save us without our consent."*

(Saint Augustine, sermon 169,13)



specific mission to help build His kingdom, here and now, and hopes for their collaboration? Who will tell them they have an immortal soul, and that sometimes they need to be silent and to look deeply inside themselves in order to encounter God who speaks to their heart?

In the mind of the Church, “the education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings”.⁸ In fact, this education is much more: “This is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus, partaking of his life and his destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father.”⁹

Only then will they be able to build, with God’s grace, a world where “Love and truth meet, justice and peace kiss” (Ps. 84).

“What I ask of you above anything else, is to take a moment every day – half of a quarter of an hour, morning and night, to be in a state of intimate friendship with God. You may ask: How will I do this prayer? My answer is that you will do it excellently, if it is your heart that prays. How do we converse with the ones we love? (...) Tell Him everything; listen to Him, often go within your innermost to find Him.”

(Fenelon—Excerpt from *Letters on Religion*)
(COLF translation)



An Ally: the Holy Spirit

One only has to see the smiling faces of young converts to understand that they have finally met the only One able to satisfy their thirst for love and their thirst for ideals. They are not afraid to live consciously in the presence of Jesus, to consult Him and say “yes” to Him! They know that “Jesus’ way of acting and his words, his deeds and his precepts constitute the moral rule of Christian life. Indeed, his actions, and in particular his Passion and Death on the Cross, are the living revelation of his love for the Father and for others. This is exactly the love that Jesus wishes to have imitated by all who follow Him: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35). (...)”

“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).”¹⁰

Like the adults who have had a personal encounter with Christ, these teens and young adults are under no illusion. They know that they will never manage to persevere in their decision to love as Jesus loves - giving their lives in the small and the great challenges of every day - if they are alone; for “to imitate and live out the love of Christ is not possible for man by his own strength alone. He becomes capable of this love only by virtue of a gift received from God. As the Lord Jesus receives the love of his Father, so He in turn freely communicates that love to His disciples: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love” (Jn 15:9). Christ’s gift is His Spirit, whose first “fruit” (cf. Gal 5:22) is charity: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).”¹¹

The Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Jesus – is their great Ally as they discover the joy of serving God’s plan by serving those around them. He offers them his gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Day after day, the Church keeps intact the message entrusted to it by Christ and continues to faithfully offer Christ’s forgiveness through the liberating Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the very body of Christ in the Eucharist as real food for humanity. On the sometimes chaotic road of our lives, the Word of God (the Bible), encountered in personal and communal prayer, is always alive and effective.



“We will be judged on love”

When a conscience starts to listen to the Holy Spirit, the fact that God’s project is a project of love becomes increasingly clear. “Love is the reason for God’s entering into a relationship with man. And it is love which he awaits as man’s response. (...) Love must thus enliven every sector of human life and extend to the international order. Only a humanity in which there reigns the ‘civilization of love’ will be able to enjoy authentic and lasting peace.”¹²

That is why the Church never ceases to encourage solidarity against the globalization of indifference. The Church invites us to see Christ, and to love Christ in our suffering brothers and sisters, never forgetting that “personal behaviour is fully human when it is born of love, manifests love and is ordered to love”.¹³

Quoting St. John of the Cross, the Holy Father challenges our consciences: “In the twilight of life we will be judged on our love for, closeness to and tenderness towards our brothers and sisters. Upon this will depend our entry into, or exclusion from, the kingdom of God: our belonging to the

“No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew.”

(Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 3)

one side or the other. Through his victory, Jesus has opened to us his kingdom. But it is for us to enter into it, beginning with our life now – his kingdom begins now – by being close in concrete ways to our brothers and sisters who ask for bread, clothing, acceptance, solidarity, catechesis. If we truly love them, we will be willing to share with them what is most precious to us, Jesus himself and his Gospel.”¹⁴

1. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 1954: “The natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie.” No 1955: “The natural law is nothing other than the light of understanding placed in us by God; through it we know what we must do and what we must avoid. God has given this light or law at the creation (St Thomas Aquinas, dec. praec. 1) “
2. Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1776-1777.
3. Saint John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, no 35.
4. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Homily at the 2005 Conclave
5. Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion*, 2012.
6. This text is inspired (and quotes freely) from an article written by Msgr. Tony Anatrella, psychoanalyst, “La morale et les jeunes”, published in the *Lexique des termes ambigus et controversés sur la famille, la vie et les questions éthiques* (p.799), Pontifical Council for the Family, Pierre Téqui Éditeur, 2005. (COLF translation).
7. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 1813.
8. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no 1783.
9. Saint John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, no.19
10. Idem.
11. Idem.
12. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 582.
13. Idem. no 580.
14. Pope Francis, 23 November 2014, Rome, homily on the occasion of the canonization of six new saints.

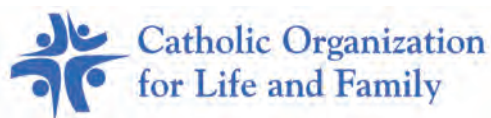
The great challenge for each of us: choosing between a “full life” and an “empty existence”

1. Who is God for me? Do I know Christ and the essence of his message? Is Christ the Way, the Truth and the Life for me? For my children? Does He make a difference in our lives?
2. What is my primary objective in educating my children?
3. How do we go about introducing our children to the good, the truth and the beautiful? What must we avoid?
4. Have I ever thought about the need to form the conscience of my children? How am I to do that? Have I told them that they have a soul? Have I spoken of God's plan and of life's purpose? What is life's purpose in my opinion?
5. What are the major challenges currently confronting parents who are intent on forming the conscience of their children?
6. Do I see symptoms of moral relativism around me or in me?
7. How are we to lead our children to an authentic encounter with Christ? How do we encourage them to develop a personal relationship with Him?
8. In the turmoil of contemporary existence, how can we create a climate of attentiveness to the voice of God so that we can recognize what He is asking of us?
9. The virtues of prudence, justice, strength and temperance play a major role in the lives of Christians. How do we define these virtues? How can we help our children to acquire them?
10. Do I consult the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Jesus – before making a choice or an important decision?
11. How can a daily examination of conscience and frequenting the Sacrament of Reconciliation help me and my children to grow in self-knowledge and to correct ourselves so that we can become more like Jesus by tasting His mercy?
12. How can we help our children to become obedient and responsible individuals? How can we strengthen them as Christians?
13. When can one say of a Christian that he (or she) is consistent?
14. How am I to deal with someone who wants to silence me because I propose a Christian view of things?
15. What can I do to protect the freedom of conscience and religion in our country?
16. Am I convinced that my happiness is to be found in conformity with God's will? Why?
17. Where can I access formation in order to deepen my faith? Do I know the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, the numerous encyclicals and apostolic letters of recent popes? Am I familiar with the various Catholic movements and associations which support the laity in their faith?

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“If to live as a follower of the Lord becomes the highest value, then all other values are given their rightful rank and importance. Whoever depends solely on worldly goods will end up losing, even though there might seem to be an appearance of success. Death will find that person with an abundance of possessions but having lived a wasted life (cf. Lk 12:13-21). Therefore, the choice is between being and having, between a full life and an empty existence, between truth and falsehood.”

(Saint John Paul II, World Youth Day 2001)



Aussi disponible en français

This leaflet has been prepared by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF). Copies are available from the COLF offices at 2500 Don Reid Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1H 2J2. Tel: (613) 241-9461, ext. 161. Fax: (613) 241-9048. Email: colf@colf.ca. Website: www.colf.ca—COLF is co-sponsored by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) and the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus. It promotes respect for human life and dignity and the essential role of the family.

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