

## **Parenthood: On the Job Training**

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It is sometimes said that “hurt people often hurt people.” We all have wounds, and anyone who has ever really loved probably knows what it’s like to be wounded by another. Our tendency then is to close our hearts, become cynical, and often hurt others before it happens to us again. When someone has lost a child for instance, they never really “get over it,” though they sometimes learn to cohabitate with pain. Some of the greatest wounds we can often have come from experiences with our parents or, as parents, from our children. Though we don’t choose our families, we do choose how we react to our families, and “honoring” our father and mother can be extraordinarily difficult when we have been wounded by them at some point in our lives.

I sometimes think that a human being is like the side of the Grand Canyon, layer after layer of experiences. It’s the lasagna-effect of life. Our lives sometimes seem to consist of an endless series of joys, pains, hopes, and worries, layered on top of each other as the years go by. Often, however, the wounds we may have experienced by our parents are in some ways deep underneath the layers and yet ready to surface on a moment’s notice when triggered by a memory, a name, or even a funeral.

As a priest, there are some things we simply have to learn ‘on the job,’ so to speak; such as what to say at the funeral of a newborn. Every priest I know would agree: It’s all grace. We trust in the grace of God at the moment. Parenthood, similarly, is very beautiful and very difficult. Lord knows that as priests and parents we make frequent mistakes and fall short of the examples that we are called to give to our parishioners, families, and children. Most parents I know, married and single, would agree: It’s all grace. For instance, what do we do when our teenager comes home drunk one night? What do we do when we try to protect them from a hostile culture without “sheltering” them completely? What do we do when the time comes to discuss the beauty of human sexuality? How do we rest on prom night or the first time they take the car? We live in a scary world and bad things do happen and could happen, and yet at some point we have to allow our children to grow and make mistakes and, yes, fall down. Yet at the moment, for most parents, it can be pretty darn scary, especially when we think about some of the mistakes we ourselves have made. One of the best ways to ‘honor’ our father and mother is simply to realize that they were probably making it up as they went along, just like us. No one is perfect, including our parents. While our parents may have done or said things that hurt us, we ‘honor’ them by realizing as well that they too are human and have their share of wounds.

According to Catholic tradition, memory is one of the three powers of the soul, along with intellect and will. God has given us the capacity of memory as a gift, even though our memories sometimes evoke powerful emotions (e.g. soldier recalling battle). Though memories are sometimes painful, especially ones that involve wounds inflicted by our parents, we need to recall that God can heal any wound even though the memory itself may always be there. Sometimes this includes sustained counseling, confession with a priest, actively choosing to forgive, or a combination therein. Grace is far more powerful than any wound, but it will never kick in the door of our hearts, we have to do our part to correspond with it. For instance, I can pray for years to learn French but if I don’t study the language I will never learn it. If I study and then pray for God’s help, then maybe (and that’s a *big* maybe) I could learn it. Healing grace

works the same way. The last thing we say before we receive the Eucharist at mass is, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed!” This healing of the soul often means gradually forgiving those who may have wounded us, including our parents. Simply put, we do them ‘honor’ in realizing that they too may be wounded and that kids just don’t come with instructions.