

By Father Charles Bowes

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14
Colossians 3:12-21
Luke 2:22-40

No matter how great the struggle, families do more good than they know.

Everyone can think of parents who should be canonized (especially after raising us!).

The blunt fact is that our Catholic Church, at least, has canonized very few parents (Elizabeth of Hungary, and Margaret of Scotland, yes). Candidates like the heroic parents of Teresa Martin (the Little Flower) get talked about but don't make it. We have to face the uncomfortable fact that Christian spirituality in the past, and before Marriage Encounter, often looked on marriage as a second-class and second-rate activity, the body as a deadweight for the spirit, sex as sin and women as temptresses. All this is over, or should be; while virginity has its own loveliness and ritual of dedication, it is no longer ranked "higher" than marriage by anyone who understands life and the gospel – at least in Church pronouncements.

The past record is not all blank. When we begin the almost desperate search for official saints who were not virgins and martyrs, one is easily remembered: Louis of France, the medieval king whose pleasing personality has come down to us through the pages of DeJoinville's Journal, written at the very time Louis was reigning. Louis was king, believer, crusader and – most unusual – husband and father. He had three loves: God,

France and Marguerite, and those were the three words he had engraved inside the wedding ring he wore on his finger.

We've all heard the near-desperate remark, "Do as I say, not as I do!" Far from being hypocritical, it is sometimes uttered by parents who have wrestled, unsuccessfully, with alcoholism or addictions, or who regret passing up formal education. Many children do seem to be motivated by the mistakes of parents – perhaps because they are honestly admitted, not blustered over. But the opposite method, of following good example, not reversing the bad, was expressed neatly by Anglican Archbishop William Temple, who said that a child's earliest knowledge of prayer should be the discovery of a person praying; a child's earliest knowledge of worship should be beholding a person worshipping. Parents who keep the family rituals, who take time for meditation or scripture reading, or who make retreats, who walk to pray or retire to pray, whose Sunday would be incomplete without joining the worshipping community – these are teaching more than they know.

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