

THE INVALUABLE ROLE OF THE MOTHER

—By Saint Nektarios—

The upbringing of children must begin during infancy. This is necessary in order to direct the child's powers of the soul—as soon as they begin to emerge—toward good, virtue, and truth, while simultaneously distancing them from evil, indecency, and falsehood. This age is the secure foundation upon which a child's moral and intellectual knowledge will be erected. Thus, Fokilidis says: *“It is necessary to teach someone to do good work while he is still a child,”* because man sets out from childhood, as from a starting block, to run the race of life. St. Basil the Great affirms: *“It is necessary for the soul to be guided right from the beginning toward every virtuous exercise, while it is still soft and moldable as wax; so that as [a child] begins to speak and to acquire discernment there exists a road comprised of the elemental concepts and devout etiquette that were initially imparted, giving him the ability to speak good and useful things and inspiring him to acquire a proper moral conduct.”* Truly! Who will not agree that the first impressions during childhood remain permanently ingrained and unforgettable? Who doubts that various influences during early youth become so deeply imprinted upon a child's tender soul, that they continue to exist vividly throughout the duration of his life?

Nature has appointed parents, but especially mothers, to be instructors during this early stage of life. Hence, it is necessary for us to suitably teach and diligently raise [virtuous women], on account of their supreme calling to become teachers; for they will serve as the images and examples that their own children will follow. A child mimics either the virtues or bad habits of his mother—even her voice and manners, even her ethos and conduct—to such an extent, that one can very appropriately liken children to phonographic records that initially register sound, and then play it back as it was originally voiced, in the identical pitch, the same quality, and with the same accent and emphasis. Each glance, every word, every gesture, and every action of a mother becomes the glance, word, expression, gesture, and action of her child. Hence, Asterios notes: *“one child speaks exactly like his mother, another bears a striking resemblance*

to her personality, while yet another takes on his birth giver's manner and conduct. By being in the constant presence of her child and through her repeated counsels, a mother profoundly affects the soul and character of her child, and she first provides him with the initial impetus toward virtue."

A mother can, with a single glance, with one kiss, with her sweet voice and tender caress, at once evoke the desire and inclination for virtue within the heart of her child. Similarly, the same mother, with one glance of disapproval, with one tear rolling down her cheek, through a single expression that reveals the pain in her heart, is capable of distancing her child from a destructive [evil] endangering the heart. As a child is raised in the motherly bosom and warmed in the maternal embrace, he begins to love even before he learns the meaning of love, and he begins to submit his will to the ethical law even before he comprehends the ethical law. A mother alone is the most suitable person to foster the initial understanding concerning God within an infant's heart.

On account of this, St. Basil the Great says: *"the understanding of God that I received as an infant from my blessed mother has flourished within me. I have not changed anything when I reached maturity, but I perfected the principles that were entrusted to me by her."* While Pestalozzi, foremost amongst contemporary educators, attributes the entire religious education of a child to his mother and proclaims: *"I believed my mother. Her heart showed God to me. My God is the God of my mother. The God of my heart is the God of her heart. O mother, dear mother! You revealed God to me through your instruction, and I found Him through my obedience. O mother, dear mother! If I forget God, I will forget you yourself."*

However, just as a mother's every virtuous deed, every good word, and each righteous disposition constitute the cornerstone for the child's ensuing virtuous works, words, and inclinations, similarly, a mother's every evil deed, word, and disposition contains destructive seeds for the child's ensuing evil actions, words, and inclinations. Thus, a child eventually becomes similar to what his mother is like. If a mother's soul is hideous,

malicious, dark, corrupt, insensitive, and coarse, if her inclinations are evil, her manners scandalous, immodest, and indecent, if she is prone to impiety, anger, hatred, and other irrational passions, then it will not be long before these evil stalks spring up from the child as well. Conversely, if a mother's soul is divine, pure, joyous, innocent, and full of the fear of the Lord, in her inclinations are noble and holy, if her dispositions are serene, God-loving, and compassionate, then a child's soul, reflecting itself in front of such a mirror and imperceptibly mimicking her, becomes similar to his mother, and, with time, he propagates seeds of virtue. Hence, when the great Napoleon asked a certain renowned educator of that time (by the name of Campan) what France was in need of in order to acquire good and virtuous men, "*mother,*" responded this prudent lady to the monarch. "*Then,*" instructed this prominent man, "*produce such women who will be capable of fulfilling this immense national goal.*"

Due to the influence that each mother exercises upon her own child, mothers are capable of molding children after their own character, just as a potter molds clay in the manner he wishes. Diogenis would say the following concerning the easily pliable years of childhood: "*The education of children can be likened to potters' vessels. Just as they shape and form clay as they wish while it is still soft, but are unable to shape it once it is fired, similarly children who are not painstakingly disciplined cannot be changed once they grow up.*" Plutarch further asserts: "*youth is easily pliable and workable, and while such souls are still tender, teachings are embedded deep within the soul.*" Hence, during the tender childhood years, mothers are capable of effectively and profoundly impacting a child's soul, mindset, feelings, nous, imagination, and ethos. After this age, the youthful heart begins to harden, and instruction becomes—if not impossible—very difficult, as the divine Chrysostom correctly attests: "*it was necessary right from the beginning when you noticed these evils developing, while your child was still young and obedient, to restrain him rigorously to make him grow accustomed to the essentials, regulate and chastise the ailments of his soul. You should have removed the thorns when it was easy to do so; when it was easy to uproot them on account of the tender age. Now it has become difficult to do so because, due to negligence, the passions have*

multiplied and increased. For this reason, it is written: 'bend his neck while he is still young,' when discipline is easier to implement."