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PREPARING OUR DAUGHTERS FOR LIFE

6^d



BY A CATHOLIC MOTHER



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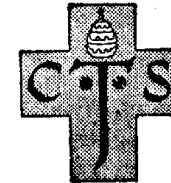
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PREPARING OUR DAUGHTERS FOR LIFE

by

A CATHOLIC MOTHER

WITH A FOREWORD BY
CANON E. J. MAHONEY



LONDON
CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY

FOREWORD

THE subject of this pamphlet is of the highest importance and it is a great satisfaction to find that a Catholic mother, without possessing any specialised knowledge of the instructions issued by the Holy See, and relying on her own Catholic faith, instinct, and experience, has reached conclusions which are identical with those taught by the Church. If there are some who still imagine that, in training the young, Catholic tradition and practice favours ignorance and concealment, they should carefully weigh the words spoken by the Holy Father, in the course of an address to Catholic mothers, on the feast of Christ the King, October 26, 1941. After recommending parents to anticipate the natural curiosity of their children by religiously, prudently, and delicately unveiling the truth, he continues:

"If imparted by the lips of Christian parents, at the proper time, in the proper measure and with the proper precautions, the revelation of the mysterious and marvellous laws of life will be received by them with reverence and gratitude, and will enlighten their minds with far less danger than if they learned them haphazard, from some disturbing encounter, from secret conversations, through information received from over-sophisticated companions, or from clandestine reading, the more dangerous and pernicious as secrecy inflames the imagination and troubles the senses. Your words, if they are wise and discreet, will prove a safeguard and a warning in the midst of the temptations and the corruptions which surround them."*

I am very happy to say that, in my opinion, this pamphlet explains exactly what the Holy See desires of Catholic mothers.

E. J. MAHONEY

* See S 168, *The Pope Speaks to Mothers*, C.T.S., p. 12.

PREPARING OUR DAUGHTERS FOR LIFE

I

I HAVE much sympathy with the mother who wants to teach her children wisely about God's laws for human life but is puzzled how to set about it. People seem to have such different ideas on this important matter and she fears to do more harm than good.

I want to set down a few thoughts that may help her, more especially where her daughters are concerned. Much of what I say does apply to boys also, but the sex-education of boys is seldom entirely the mother's affair, and there is more than enough to be said about girls in this small pamphlet.

2

Before we talk to our children about God's plan for the life of our bodies let us think about it ourselves. We must realise that, like all His plans, it is very good. We are, therefore, going to tell our children about *something good*. People can and do commit sins through their bodies, but that is because they turn away from God's plan for the natural life, and break His laws for it. And sometimes this happens because they were never taught about it properly. That is a reason why children should be taught gradually and truthfully about life by their parents before they are likely to learn about it from wrong or foolish talk outside their homes. Even if they are very good children they will not grow up happy if God's plan for life is spoilt in their minds like this, and it is hard to undo any harm that may be done them in this way.

Father Bede Jarrett tried to encourage parents to give their children a right knowledge of the facts of life: "We urge, then," he wrote, "that children should be taught about life, and that they should be taught this by their

parents, father or mother. These are the proper persons to tell the child for they have the responsibility of parenthood; also they ought to know their children and therefore know just how much can be told them, better than anyone else can. . . . Perhaps the whole of their life will be coloured by what they learn now, and when, and from whom they learn it.”*

One very important thing may be said here, and it is this: we must never begin by telling our children about sins against God’s plan for life. We must teach them first about the plan. If we teach them first about the sins we start by giving them a wrong picture of life, and they will not then understand the right picture in the simple way that is natural to children; they may even mix up wrong and right in their own minds. We must show them the right picture before they know anything about the wrong one.

3

There is one anxiety which most mothers feel when they are wondering what to tell their daughters about life:—“When shall I talk about the marriage act, and what shall I say about it?” For the mother knows that everything she tells her daughter, even from earliest childhood, is leading towards this knowledge which will have to be given sooner or later.

“When shall I talk about it? What shall I say?” These are two important questions, but they cannot usually be answered a long way ahead, because the answer will depend so much on the child’s own development, and may also depend on circumstances which we cannot yet foresee. But there is one question that should be thought about here and now, and it is this:—“Have I myself the right idea of the marriage act, as planned for us by God?”

The marriage act is good, being a part of God’s plan for life. He also made it pleasant for us, and this pleasure, which is His gift, is a good pleasure; it satisfies a human need which God ordains should be satisfied in marriage. It also enables us to have the babies who are so important in the whole plan. Some people feel ashamed of the pleasure,

* *The Catholic Mother*, C.T.S., 3d.

when they should actually thank God for it, together with all His gifts. We must not have wrong ideas about the body, which is blessed in marriage together with the soul. Soul and body were joined by God when first He made us, and we are not meant to separate them in our married lives, or in our thoughts on marriage. In marriage God blesses and sanctifies soul *and body* in husband and wife, and *in their union one with another*.

And God honours this union in the most wonderful way when, as the result of the marriage act, children are born to us. He is actually giving us a share in His work of creation.

The expression of love by the marriage act is therefore holy and happy; husband and wife are uniting in the fulfilment of a glorious vocation. It is also an honourable debt which husband and wife owe to one another; St Paul said “Let the husband render the debt to his wife; and the wife also in like manner to the husband” (1 Corinth. vii. 3). It is a way in which they honour and satisfy one another. Let us remember all this now; it will help us to feel rightly about the marriage act long before there is any question of speaking of it to our daughters, and when the time does come to speak of it this right feeling will help us to speak rightly.

We have, then, to realise the importance of a married life in which *everything* is kept near to God, but we cannot do this merely by thinking. We must keep very near in spirit to God who planned the whole of human life, and who alone can show us its full meaning, and help us to teach our daughters that meaning from early childhood until they too are wives and mothers. Even if they do not marry, their minds and characters will be enriched by a simple knowledge of God’s plan for human life.

Let us then pray to the Holy Ghost that we may be truly wise in giving this gradual knowledge; that we may teach them about life reverently yet with the frankness which is right in speaking of what is both good and natural. A frankness which avoids unnecessary mystification but which is never separated from awe for God’s purposes for the natural life. A frankness, moreover, which respects the child’s right instinct that these are intimate matters. For children *feel* that their physical development should not be

discussed publicly. But any child will accept with simplicity a gradual instruction from its own parents, quietly given, about the natural processes of human life, including its own physical development, when the right time comes to speak of this. Scientifically-minded children will inevitably compare the processes of human life with the processes of plant life, insect life, or animal life according to their knowledge of these branches of study; it is perfectly natural that they should do this, and it need in no way impair their reverence for human life; in fact the lesser examples of creation only emphasise the infinitely greater.

An example of reverence combined with the right quality of frankness in the mind of a child is to be found in the *Life of Guy de Fongalland*, the young French boy who was famed for his sanctity. He confided the following thoughts to his father: " 'Daddy, by reasoning it all out I have found that children, like insects, must exist some time before their birth in order to be formed with their organs.' His father still had this confidence in mind when some days afterwards Guy said to him, 'How beautiful it is that little Jesus wished to be like us on the earth and hid Himself nine months in His mother's womb! How beautiful it is! I have understood this by saying the Hail Mary! How Jesus must love us to have wanted to be like that.' " *

We may notice that Guy had the good instinct to make these confidences to his father. Some parents are afraid that their children will chatter to small companions about anything they have learnt about human life. Actually they are unlikely to do this if their parents have encouraged their confidences about "things they want to know"; it is usually unsatisfied curiosity which prompts them to discuss these matters with playmates. If it appears necessary, however, the small boy or girl whose mother has answered some early questions may be told not to talk about these matters with other children, because these are things which Mummies and children talk to one another about, and not to other people. The child will accept this and will soon see why; its own instinct will make it appreciate the mother's suggestion that the life of our bodies is something intimate to ourselves.

* *The Life of Guy de Fongalland*, by Gaëtan Bernoville. Translated from the French by Rev. D. H. Buckley.

Our children will, *by degrees*, see God's plan for life as we, their parents, see it. *What* we tell them is important, but *how* we tell them is even more important, and this will depend upon how we ourselves feel about the plan. To feel rightly we must think rightly, and I hope that the thoughts I have suggested may be helpful.

4

If we think rightly of our great vocation in marriage, which so closely concerns body as well as soul, we shall never fail in that reverence for the body which our children should first learn from our own example and behaviour. For we must show them, almost from babyhood, that we reverence our own bodies, *and also theirs*. Small habits of discipline and self-control, personal cleanliness and even personal neatness help to teach them respect for the body. Even the toddler will be quick to realise that *people* are far above animals; that what is all right for animals is often not the right thing for *people*, whether they are "grown-ups" or children. It is a mistake to call children "little animals," or to handle them, or cuddle them, or tickle them as if they were. When we are romping with them we must still respect their human dignity. Sometimes, perhaps, the father is slow to realise that a little girl is growing into a bigger girl and must be treated as such. A small hint from the mother that "Mary is getting a bit old for such games" will often be all that is needed where this is the case. If we want our children to grow up respecting their own bodies we, their parents, must see to it that they receive respect from all around them.

5

When should a child begin to know about the natural life of the body? We can scarcely begin too soon to give a very gradual knowledge. The toddler who asks where she came from may be told that God gave her to her parents, which is true, but if she wants to know a little more by the time she is five or six she should certainly be told more. If

she asks awkward questions when other people are in the room she should on no account be snubbed or laughed at, but should be told quietly that the mother will give her the answer when there is more time, and an opportunity should be made for this the same day if possible. For these first questions are very important. A question such as "How do babies come?" is usually a sign that the child is ready for that particular bit of knowledge, or for a part of it, and that she will be interested by the answer and therefore will not forget it. And if a question is being answered the child cannot feel that unsought knowledge is being forced upon her; this last advantage applies especially to the questions of a rather older child who is likely to be more instinctively sensitive about herself: "Did you *have* to tell me all this?" asked one child of a mother who was trying to explain rather too much, and perhaps thinking more about her facts than about the feelings of her small listener. "What I want to know" is more acceptable than "what I have got to be told." Even in answer to a question too much information should not be given once the child appears satisfied. She will have a better understanding of what she has to learn if she is taken step by step and is not forced on too quickly. But children are so different from one another in what satisfies them that no hard-and-fast rules can be made about answers to these early questions. Most small children are only concerned with some particular point such as where the baby was before they first saw it, and if they are told that Mummy had it inside her first in a kind of tiny room where she kept it warm and safe they are satisfied. Other children want to know a good deal more, and their questions may be harder to answer. "How did it get into the tiny room?" asked one child, while another said, "How does it get out?" I shall try in our next section to suggest a few simple explanations which may be given to children in answer to the more usual questions.

But of course I cannot do the whole thing for any mother. The chief point of her telling her own children about these things is that they *are* her own children. She should therefore understand them better than someone who does not even know them.

These explanations may also be given, as far as possible in the mother's own words, to the child who never does ask

questions—probably because someone snubbed her when she did ask a question a long time ago. By the time she is seven or eight we should stop waiting for questions and ask if it would interest her to know something about how the new baby comes; but let us encourage *her* to do the asking as much as possible once we have begun. If we feel that a very little satisfies her while she is small it is a mistake to take her beyond what she wants to know. If, on the other hand, she asks for knowledge which we definitely think should be given later on, let us on no account behave as though she were doing wrong in *asking*; it is most important that a child should feel that she *can* talk to her mother about these matters, and if she is snubbed when small she will only go to someone else, or to a book, for such knowledge when she is older. If therefore we are sure that the time has not yet come to speak of this or that detail, let us say something to this effect:—"Look here, I am telling you all that you will need to know by degrees; we are taking it step by step, and you have taken enough steps for your age. But I promise you that we will take the other steps in good time." Only, before deciding to say this, let us think carefully as to whether it is really better to delay the answer, and whether the child will go on puzzling in her own mind about the knowledge which we have refused to give her.

Small children have naturally a simple outlook where the life of the body is concerned: they are only likely to be shy if we appear so; otherwise it will come naturally to them to talk with us. Early childhood is therefore the time during which the mother will most easily be able to show her daughter the simpler aspects of the natural life. It is a mistake, for instance, for the "nursing" mother to send the older child out of the room while she nourishes baby. And she should make an opportunity of telling her the chief way in which a boy baby is different from a girl baby. It is right and wise to be careful that the little brothers should behave modestly while they are dressing from quite an early age, but there is no reason to make a mystery as to how they are formed and it is helpful for later instruction if such information is given quite early. One little girl asked her mother about babies and how they came, and afterwards she asked the difference between boys and girls; her mother answered her and then said: "Is there anything

else you would like to know?" but the child replied, "Oh no, thank you, it will be such ages before I shall be old enough to have a baby." Her questions had been answered and she felt in no hurry for further knowledge, but every simple fact imparted early helps for later on.

6

We must, however, remember that, although the little girl should learn about life *by degrees*, if we leave too much until she is older we are making a mistake; she is gradually growing up and her knowledge of life should be gradually growing too. The following information should belong to a child who is about twelve years old; it should have been imparted gradually by the mother from the time she is five or six. The mother herself must decide how much of this will satisfy the child and be good for her at any one time.

One thing is necessary. We who are mothers must not worry about what friends and relations might say if they knew that the child was being told this or that. We are not responsible to them in this matter, but to God and to the child whom He has given us to bring up.

Children should know quite early that the baby starts small and unformed in its mother's body. The comparison to a tiny egg can be made if the child presses for details, but she will probably be quite satisfied in the first instance by the knowledge that baby grows and takes shape gradually inside Mummy until it is quite ready. Then it comes out, or is "born." It has its own soul and its own guardian angel, so that a new baby is very important. It had this soul and this angel even while it was still inside Mummy. While it was growing inside Mummy it was in a little place kept specially for it like a tiny room, but the proper name is the womb. (Catholic children say the word "womb" in the "Hail Mary" and should have some idea of the meaning of a word which they use several times each day. No matter how small a child is, it will be interested to know what is meant by "the fruit of thy womb"; and it may be told at the same time that every baby is the fruit of its mother's womb.)

Most small children will be satisfied if told that God

chose that the baby should be "started" in its mother's body. When we say the Angelus with them they are quite likely to ask, "What does 'conceived' mean?" and we can explain that it means this "earliest beginning" of the baby.

But when the child wants to know more, we can say that the baby started growing from a little seed, like a very tiny egg, inside the mother. And a little later we can explain that this tiny egg inside the mother would not grow into a baby unless the father gave the mother a little seed which joins the egg and makes the egg able to become a baby by degrees.

If and when we decide that the child should know more about this we shall find that a reference to plant-life is useful, and most children nowadays have some knowledge of botany. The plant, we may explain, has a father-part, and a mother-part. The father-part scatters pollen, and when the mother-part, which contains tiny eggs, gets some of this pollen, the pollen makes one of the tiny eggs able to grow up by degrees into another plant. So with the real father and mother who are, of course, two people but who help one another in much the same way over the starting of a baby. This comparison with plant-life may often be better than a comparison with animal life when first talking to children of these matters, because an animal is more suggestive of "body-without-soul" and we must be careful that they never think of our bodily life without remembering the soul.

There is no sort of reason why quite a small child should not know that a baby usually takes nine months to grow inside its mother, and that it works its own way out when it is ready. Here the Catholic child will be interested if we speak of those Feasts of the Church which are spaced at intervals of nine months. The Feast of the Annunciation, which is on March 25th, commemorates Our Lady's first knowledge that she would be the mother of the Holy Child. Nine months later, on Christmas Day, we celebrate His Birthday. On December 8th we honour Our Lady's Immaculate Conception and on September 8th—nine months later—we keep the festival of her Birthday. In speaking of the Immaculate Conception we shall pass naturally to a little talk on the Baptism of ordinary babies which washes their souls clean from original sin. Almost any

discussion of the facts of life with Catholic children leads of itself to the Gospel narrative and to the teaching of the Church with regard to our own souls. Thus the atmosphere of these first talks has something of holiness which the child will feel without our burdening it with over-solemnity. And the child who knows something of the human process of conception, and something of the father's share in it, will accept quite simply the fact that Our Lady conceived the Holy Child by the power of God instead of in the ordinary way, and that Our Lord had no father on earth: St Joseph was only His guardian or foster-father.

7

It is a strict duty to tell a girl of twelve or so something about the Monthly Period; otherwise she will be both puzzled and startled when it comes. We must say how it shows itself, and explain that it is a good thing, and a part of growing up. If the child is interested she may like to hear at the same time about the reproductive process;* sometimes, however, this may be better left until she has started the Period, for she may feel oppressed if we describe all that is going to happen inside her in advance. In most cases the girl will not be particularly pleased to hear about the Period at all, but she will soon get used to the idea, and, if she leaves home for a boarding school, she will not be puzzled by any accidental discovery that other girls have started it. If she does leave home for a convent school before it starts, the mother must tell her that the nuns will know all about it, and will make everything easy for her; she must also tell her what to wear and should give her a small supply of the right "towels"—the kind, of course, which are tied on or pinned on, and NEVER the kind which have to be inserted inside; these internal pads must be absolutely avoided and she must know that she is not to use them.

* For this purpose the C.T.S. has published a pamphlet *Sex-Instruction in the Home*, by Rev. Aidan Pickering, M.A. This pamphlet is for private circulation only, and is intended for the use of the clergy, parents and teachers. Price 6d.

8

If the child of twelve or thirteen should want to know a little more about the process of reproduction, we must decide whether or not the time has come to tell her more about the marriage act. If we have explained about the process of plant generation, and compared it to the process of conception in human life, she has really learnt a good deal already, and it should not be difficult to get her to accept the fact that the rest of the knowledge is for "later on." (We might reflect here that full knowledge cannot really be given until experience completes the lesson.) But a little more knowledge *can* be given, and, especially if given early, the mother's own words will usually express it best for the girl who has already talked with her about the natural facts of life. The mother will judge, for instance, whether to continue the comparison with plant-life, or whether the child will expect her to come straight to the point. Much depends of course on how and what the child herself has asked about it.

A simple and reverent account of the marriage act is to be found in a book called *Growing Up*, by a Catholic Woman Doctor,* and this book will be very helpful in many ways to the mother who is not quite clear herself about all that her daughter may need to know. No girl needs to know more about the marriage act than is told in *Growing Up* until her own marriage is quite near. It is a book which was written for the older girl (say of sixteen or seventeen), whose mother has not told her enough about life, but no mother should take advantage of this by handing the book to her girl, having taken no trouble herself about any earlier instruction. If she does, later on, give *Growing Up* to her to read, it should be to fill any gaps that may remain in the knowledge which has already been imparted, and she should encourage her to ask any questions about anything in it. No book can convey "the whole thing" in the gradual way which is so desirable. But the mother will be helped in talking to her girl by herself reading *Growing Up* long before the girl is old enough to read the book.

* 3s. paper (Burns & Oates).

In most cases the very young girl who is likely to have her mother's guidance for some time to come should only know a part of the contents of this book, selected at the mother's discretion, and conveyed as far as possible in her own words. A girl of twelve or thirteen is quite old enough to think a little about the Catholic ideal of marriage which helps to inspire this book, but she is probably *not* old enough for such a complete description of the physical union as the author has written to satisfy the older girl. If, however, she is likely to have to leave her mother very early for an independent life it may be wiser and safer to equip her with fuller knowledge. Whatever we decide about this we may be heartened by the fact that the girl who has learnt gradually but truthfully about life is spared the bewilderment so inevitable to the girl of any age who is brought up in an atmosphere of concealment, and then suddenly instructed all at once about the physical meaning of marriage. Under ideal conditions it is usually unnecessary for a girl to know any details of the marriage act before she is fifteen or sixteen, or even older. But there are advantages in telling her about it before she is much older than that. One advantage is that she will then have heard about it, generally speaking, before she has begun to go out with men as a grown-up girl; if we tell her when she is really grown-up she may be self-conscious in the company of men; if she knows about it a year or two before this stage of her life she will have got used to the idea. Another advantage is that any "wondering" on the subject will be set at rest.

But in circumstances where the daughter has to leave home at fourteen or fifteen and mix with grown-up girls and lads we must face the fact that she is obliged to grow up early and we must see that her knowledge grows to meet her circumstances in the right way, so that she will not have her ideas of life spoilt by the talk of giddy or ill-behaved girls, and so that she will be protected from the wrong "advances" of men by being quick to see that they are leading towards something which is only allowed by God in marriage. When this early preparation is necessary it will be well first to give her some instruction on the nature of the marriage act some months previous to her leaving home, and, soon after, but if possible not imme-

diately, to talk to her about the difficulties which she may come across when she is "on her own"; we can also tell her that to know about these difficulties usually makes it quite simple to avoid them. Before we talk of danger or temptations we should speak of how God means husband and wife to be "all-in-all" to one another in their human relationship, and of how the marriage act is included in being all-in-all. Presently we can show how God's plan is absolutely spoilt by the forbidden relationships; how we must carry out the plan with the blessing of the Church and in the way appointed by God and leaving out nothing in it; how we must never mistake the excitement of a passing fancy for the love which is meant to endure through thick and thin in Christian marriage.

9

It is often said truly that such or such a girl would rather hear of life and of marriage from someone other than her mother. This is usually because the mother has refused to answer some early question or has shown embarrassment in answering it, so that the child, naturally sensitive about herself, would rather seek her knowledge elsewhere. It is a very happy state of things when the mother has entered into the child's feelings and has been ready to talk to her about the natural life from the first questions onwards without whispering or excitement or embarrassment, and with the real wish that the child should be equipped with the knowledge that she will need.

Life passes very quickly, and the little girl whom we tried to instruct truthfully and reverently goes through the stages of growing up, always finding her mother ready to help her over anything she does not understand, and finally she really *is* grown up and probably becomes engaged to be married. Her mother will have done well indeed if she has given her a right and gradual knowledge of God's plan for human life from childhood until now. To leave all explanation of that plan, and of its fulfilment in marriage, until the girl is actually engaged may cause confusion and shock and even an unhappy married life. But if she has been helped to

right knowledge through the different stages of her life she has also been helped to happiness in marriage.

And the mother, in giving this knowledge, has often helped herself as well as her child. For many a mother was not "started right" herself in her understanding of God's plan, yet by His grace, and the courage which she prayed for, she was made able to get it right in her own mind, and to show it rightly to her child.

Such a mother may join with humble confidence in the prayer which the priest makes for the bride, towards the close of the Nuptial Mass, to God, who has "sanctified the marriage tie by a Sacrament," that her own child's marriage may be to her a "yoke of love and peace."

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