

## DIVINE COMMISSION

Charming stories exist, like the one we just read, telling of couples who actually want to have children. Sometimes we almost forget, in the mayhem and concern for all the trouble and evil of our time, that lots of parents have dreamed and planned and prayed and worked for their children since long before their children were even born. Many thousands of parents go on doing their parenting while knowing themselves to be in a mysterious partnership with God. Many even suspect that though nobody does it perfectly, it is nevertheless the most important thing that they ever do.

It is easy to forget in our time that for every parent who does something wretched, there are hundreds who think constantly and work diligently to give their children the very best life they can, according to whatever light they have. And even some parents, like me, who have made grievous mistakes are caring, loving parents who try very hard but have made grievous mistakes. We have no option but to go on trying, even though mistakes always make things much harder.

On the other side of the coin: How old do we have to be before we stop expecting our parents to be perfect? There is no answer, of course, because there are too many of us and we all have our own timeline of development and awakening. But I was trying to figure it out anyway. How old do we have to be before we stop expecting our parents to be perfect? I think by the age of twelve most of us have seriously considered the possibility that our parents are not perfect. Between sixteen and eighteen, the large majority of us hold in our minds certain proof that our parents are not perfect. But those are the easy awakenings. The question is: How old do we have to be before we stop *expecting* our parents to be perfect? Meaning, before we stop believing that it was their solemn obligation to be perfect – and our inalienable right to come into this world with perfect parents? How old do we have to be before we stop being seriously annoyed that we were cruelly shortchanged by having imperfect parents?

The deal is: You get here. If you survive *at all*, you should be grateful. The rest is up to you. Lots and lots of folk have come to see and accept this, or the whole place would have imploded long ago. Many *individuals* are in the process of self-destructing because they

cannot see or will not accept this. Sometimes, becoming parents ourselves is what begins to cure us. It is nevertheless amazing that even being a parent does not always bring the truth home to everybody (if you will pardon the pun).

A man stopped at a flower shop to order some flowers to be wired to his mother, who lived two hundred miles away. He did not do this often, but you know how it is with Mother's Day. Getting out of his car, he discovered that a young girl looking in the window of the flower shop was quietly sobbing. He asked her what was wrong and she replied: "I wanted to buy a red rose for my mother. But I only have seventy-five cents, and a rose costs two and a half dollars." The man smiled and said, "Come on in with me. I would love to help buy a rose for your mother."

He bought the little girl a rose and ordered his own mother's flowers. As they were both ready to leave, he offered the little girl a ride. "Oh thank you," she said, a little to his surprise. Once in the car, he followed her directions until they came to a cemetery. She thanked him sincerely, jumped out, and went lightly across the lawns. He watched for a while, then saw her lay her rose on a grave and kneel in prayer. He was deeply moved, but also started feeling like an eavesdropper. So he started his car and drove off – straight back to the flower shop. He canceled his wire order, bought a huge bouquet of flowers, and drove the two hundred miles to his mother's home. That is called *perspective*.

One dimension of Mother's Day is personal perspective: The sheer realization that our mothers gave us birth and nurture, spent countless hours for many years tending to us and our needs, and that apart from this, we simply would not be here – we would not have survived. There is no way to pay that debt. The gifts of life and nurture were given. All of us come into this world as charity cases. The quote about "charity begins at home" is not an opinion; it is a fact. However perfectly or imperfectly, we have each experienced this charity. It is the foundation and source of our physical reality here.

There is another dimension to Mother's Day (and Father's Day, for that matter), at least within the Judeo/Christian/Islamic traditions: Parenthood is always linked with God's purposes. "*Before I formed you in the womb I chose you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you.*" (Jeremiah 1:5) In our religion, having and raising children is a sacred affair – a teamship between parents and God.

This concept has fallen on hard times in recent years. The idealization of motherhood ceased during the 1960s (along with the demise of many other “silly ideals”). Fathers had already lost authority. They had been busy with the Second World War, homes and affections were displaced, and the kids grew up without them. Fathers returned awkward to the dynamic at home and determined to put delayed careers back together. Many mothers had learned to work outside the home, and their authority and role were also different. Many sociologists have said that we won the war but at the cost of our identity. When the children of those years grew up, we got the '60s. Now, almost seventy years after the Great War, we have to wonder if we ever found a *new* identity and purpose, or if we have merely been rocking back and forth between the sacrifices of the past and some emerging new insanity.

In any case, for two generations, popular psychology taught us to hate our parents. We were told that we could not grow up or be ourselves until we had “worked through” our Oedipus complexes. While it *was* all rather complex, at least it came clear that our parents were guilty for whatever was wrong with us, and we all had a lot of hidden anger toward them because of it. Prior to that, mothers had been pictured as hard-working, self-sacrificing, and constantly concerned with their children’s welfare and development. Actually, their *reality* has not changed much since then. Before, we called it saintly, and we honored our mothers for their love. Now we have learned to call it manipulative, controlling, neurotic, and co-dependent, and we have been told we should despise them for it.

Before long, “the home” and “the mother thing” were no longer fulfilling or satisfying in and of themselves, and they were no longer adequate in the eyes of one’s peers. Besides, if you were going to put in all that time and effort only to be bad-mouthed and blamed for all the bad karma the little brats brought with them, well, a person might as well find some more fulfilling outlets.

During this pain and mayhem, two pillars of family life tottered. Not everywhere and not for all people, but in the main they fell, or at least began to list quite badly. One was the link between home and church. The other was the link between parenthood and serving God. Motherhood (parenthood) had been understood as a “calling” of God – a thing undertaken with the providence and blessing of God and for God’s larger purposes. From that conviction, it was assumed that

the church and the home were partners in the same enterprise. The parents' solemn responsibility was to teach their children the Bible and the Christian Way of Life. Church and home were allies in this high responsibility.

I mean to leave no hint about glamour or perfection, as if the past were some kind of golden age. I was there and it was not! But that was the framework and expectation in most people's minds until about fifty years ago. The residue of those old frameworks and expectations is still active in many of us, on some level. Only, it is increasingly frustrating to know what to *do* with those longings or to know how to put into effect *today* our parenthood as a Divine Commission from God. Obviously you have to start your own school to do it right, so that church and school and family can be a coordinated team once again. But such an undertaking is enormous, and few of the attempts, however high the dream, have improved on what is already offered. In most places today, that leaves the church either competing with the school or sitting on the sidelines totally ineffective. Increasingly, it leaves conscientious parents competing with the school as well.

Many people talk as if this battle were over and lost – that we will let the state decide how to raise our children and be done with it. But I suspect the issue will not disappear. In the minds of many Christians, motherhood is more than a biological affair. Family life is more than a nice way to organize the care and feeding of infants. Getting married concerns more than two individuals enamored with each other. And none of it is primarily designed to pander to the comfort and convenience of the individuals involved. ALL of it has to do with a spiritual pilgrimage – with what God is trying to do *in* and *with* our lives – and with our efforts to respond to God's guidance and assignments in each and every day.

There certainly are numerous mothers and fathers today who are not making any effort to raise their children “for or under God.” In this scary, overpopulated, undernourished world, parenthood is not an automatic blessing. Motherhood is not automatically honorable. It is a Divine Commission – or it is a great curse. It always comes round, doesn't it? That which has power for great good has power for great evil. And thankfully, that which has power for great evil has power for great good. Neither God nor Satan seems to get very excited about the lukewarm and the mediocre – which is, I suppose, why so many of us try to hang out there.

Not long ago, I was listening to a mother bragging about her son: what a brilliant boy he was; what a success he had become; how much money he was making. Nothing wrong with that, as far as it goes. At least not in my opinion. I did not know this son, nor did I have any hint about his purposes or motives. But the way his mother was talking, it was hard to imagine that she had ever asked herself what her motherhood was for in the eyes of God. She seemed to have no inkling of being a partner with God in the destiny of an eternal soul. Perhaps this mother knew the dimensions beyond but simply had no words to express it. Or maybe it was my poor ears.

It is no surprise that we live in an imperfect world. The startling thing is that the Divine Commission is still being accepted and attempted by many marvelous mothers and fathers. By the way, their children do not always turn out well, from a normal earthly perspective. Not all children respond well to the love and guidance their parents give them. Some children seem to be born with a spirit of rebellion and disobedience. Why do we forget that? Parents are not in total control of any outcome. On the other hand, we have not yet seen the end of *any* story. Why do we keep forgetting *that*? God is still working his purpose out – with all of us. All the more reason to honor and pay high tribute to all parenthood that has accepted the Divine Commission as its true purpose and aim.

It is a good day to count up some of it again, even though we all doubtless know it. Remember again the patience and sheer labor involved in receiving a squalling bundle of seven-plus pounds and knowing that somehow you have to care for it and teach it so that one day it can take care of itself. You must somehow train it to discern right from wrong, to assume responsibility, to love God enough to put long-range values ahead of short-term desires, and to avoid most shortcuts. Think of the years of quarreling and complaining that must be endured; the lessons that must be taught over and over a thousand times; the anxious fears that must be controlled but which can never be expelled; the mistakes that will bring heartache but which must nonetheless be forgiven or nobody can go on. And then there are all the purposeful revolts and belligerence that must be endured and somehow turned around.

Dr. John Homer Miller tells of a family that, when threatened by an earthquake, sent their small son to a relative's home two hundred miles away for safety. After two days, they received a telegram that read: "Returning the boy. Send earthquake."

How many times a mother must wish she could send such a telegram to God! “What kind of soul did you pack into this little body, anyway?! I’m tired of being a mother. I’m confused and worn out, I’m doing a lousy job, and I don’t know where to go from here. I’ve had it! Couldn’t I please do something simpler for You, like pay off the National Debt? Or run Congress? Or die as a martyr?”

Do you remember the story of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, whom most would still acknowledge to be the greatest of the Fathers of the early church? Augustine’s father was a pagan and his mother was a Christian. Where have I heard that before? Augustine himself was thirty-two years old before he became a Christian. I have often felt stunned by the motherhood of Monica through those first thirty-two years. St. Augustine was no saint to start out with: mistress after mistress; an illegitimate son; restless; wandering from job to job and from religion to religion; mostly broke; pandering to people with money; making his living writing and speaking high compliments about low and corrupt officials.

Monica never gave up – much to Augustine’s disgust, we might add. Talk about manipulative, interfering mothers! Again and again he took pains to ditch her, to be rid of her influence – like when he would take ship in the night without notice and leave no forwarding address. Constantly she prayed for him, and occasionally she would take ship herself, tracking him down like some indefatigable hunting hound – to Carthage, to Rome, to Milan. What could she do when she found him? Admonish him, pray for him, hope for him, keep believing that one day he would “turn and see.” I think today they call it nagging.

It is the highest, the hardest, and the most important task of all parenthood: to go on *believing* in your children. That is what the Waiting Father was doing all the time the Prodigal Son was away in the far-off country. He was *believing* in him. If the Waiting Father had not been doing that, the Prodigal would never have come home. Despite Augustine’s wretched way of life, Monica went on believing that her son had some important Christian destiny. She went on believing that God had some plan for him, and that someday he would come into it. And when he did finally turn, he turned indeed.

Augustine still stands as one of the foremost thinkers of all human history in the realms of logic, philosophy, political science, and theology, and many call him the grandfather of psychology. It is hard to imagine what would have happened to the church apart from him –

or indeed, what would have happened to Western Civilization – since, as the Roman Empire fell, he stood as the last pillar in the wreckage and cast a light that carried through a thousand years of confusion and chaos, until it was picked up again in the Reformation. Thank you, Monica, for your partnership with God.

It is a nice day and we shouldn't leave things on a serious note. I think it was Erma Bombeck who told the story first, but it has lots of editions by now:

When the Lord God was creating mothers, it was into the sixth day of overtime when an angel finally appeared and said, "You're doing a lot of fiddling around on this one."

The Lord said, "Have you read the specs on this order? She has to be completely washable, but not plastic; have one hundred and eighty moveable parts, all replaceable; run on spare time and leftovers; have a lap that doesn't get in her way but which is portable and instantly available. She has to have a kiss that can cure anything, from a broken leg to a disappointed love affair. And six pairs of hands."

The angel shook his head slowly and said, "Six pairs of hands ... no way."

"It's not the hands that are causing me the problems," said the Lord. "It's the three pairs of eyes."

"That's on the standard model?" asked the angel.

The Lord nodded. "One pair for normal, plus seeing through doors and around corners. Another pair inside for seeing into feelings and needs and what she shouldn't know but has to know. Then this special set within the first that can look at a child that has goofed up and say 'I understand and I love you' without so much as uttering a word."

"Lord," said the angel, touching his sleeve, "you've gotta get some rest. Maybe tomorrow ..."

"I can't quit right now," said the Lord. "I'm too close to creating something really close to part of myself. Already I have one who heals by laughter, and even one who can get a nine-year-old to stand under a shower."

The angel circled the model of the mother slowly. "It's too soft," he said.

"She's a lot tougher than she looks!" said the Lord with pride. "You can't imagine what she can do and endure."

"Can it think?" asked the angel.

The Lord smiled. "That will end up being a loaded question. But she can not only think, she can feel her way into unseen wisdom and, on rare occasions, can even compromise (which is more than I can say for some of my other creatures)."

Finally the angel bent over and ran his finger across the cheek. "There's a leak," he pronounced. "I knew you were trying to cram too much into this model."

"That's not a leak," said the Lord. "That's a tear."

"A tear?" said the angel. "What's that for?"

"It's for joy, sadness, disappointment, frustration, pain, loneliness, pride."

"Wow," said the angel. "You're a genius."

"Oh, I didn't put that there," said the Lord, shaking his head. "The children do that."