

## **BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES**

### **Sixth Essay: Friendship between Parents and Children & The Meaning of Human Procreation**

By Professor Michael Pakaluk

There is an ancient idea, which stretches back at least to Plato and Aristotle, but which presumably has its roots in religious systems before them, that the reason why living things procreate—not simply human beings but also any animal—is to participate in immortality. No animal can live forever: it has a span of a few dozen years, at most, and then it expires. But it is the nature of anything that is alive, to wish to continue to be alive. Life of itself accepts no limits; it recognizes and exults in its own goodness, and furthermore it sees no reason, inherent in the thing, why that goodness should ever come to an end. Life overflows: it is optimistic of its nature; life is youthful. Each living thing, then, to the extent that it is aware of it, regards death as something arbitrary or absurd. Most fundamentally death should not be.

So how does an animal solve this problem that is set for it by its very existence—the problem, namely, that it wishes to be alive without limit, but its existence is necessarily finite? According to the ancient philosophers, it does so by procreation. What each animal

cannot achieve individually, it may hope to achieve corporately, with the help of other members of its species. Although no animal, as a single thing, can live forever, the stream of animals of any species can indeed continue to live without limit.

Thus, on this view, procreation admits of a deep interpretation. To procreate is not to copulate, merely, in obedience to an animal urge. It is, rather, to consent to an activity which, by its most fundamental intention, aims at something quite beyond the scope or deliberate purpose of any individual animal. To have offspring is to enter into a larger story, in which one plays one's necessary part in imitating the Divine Being, in the admittedly limited way that one is able to do so.

On this same ancient view, procreation is a 'type' which represents, and displays in an especially clear way, what is distinctive about all human activity. As Diotima asserts in Plato's Symposium, all human activities are various forms of procreation, because all activity involves a kind of making, or the imposition of an effect on the world, which expresses what we are or what we think. Whenever we do or make something, we procreate, insofar as we replicate our purposes and personality. This is clearest in the case of authors, or other creative artists, who, as Plato points out, love their books and works of art with much the same fondness and intensity as parents show for their children. But even the most humble worker is in the business of replicating himself, insofar as he replicates his own peculiar understanding of his craft and his conception of what is good within that craft.

Observe that on this view of procreation, it is mistaken to set 'having children' in opposition to 'doing one's work', as we are wont to do. Both work and family life, in a fundamental sense, have the same goal. Yet family life, admittedly, can be more successful at it. Why? Because in family life it is possible to 'impose an effect on the world' which is hardly a partial expression of oneself. If children are raised and educated correctly, by intelligent and good parents, then the children are themselves complete expressions of the life of the parents. Human procreation is not the mere replication of biological life. It aims to be procreation with respect to the soul, mind and heart, as well as the body. It is complete love for a new person, which springs from complete love of a complementary person. Thus, it is through having children and raising them well that (on this ancient view) we may best participate in the Divine.

This ancient, pagan view is transformed within the Judeo-Christian tradition, which holds that human beings are children of God because made in his image, and that our children are not mere animals but have an orientation, individually, to immortality. "Let us make man in our image: in the image of God, he created him; male and female he created them"—therefore human beings in their procreative capacity mirror God. "Be fruitful and multiply"—therefore it is by having children ourselves, and teaching and training them in righteousness, that we especially come to resemble "the Father who is in heaven." As for our offspring, each lives forever, because each has an immortal soul. Only through procreation do we bring about an effect that is eternal. "I've never met any mere mortals", C.S. Lewis once quipped; and similarly, on this way of looking at the world, no parent

brings forth a merely mortal child. To have a child is not, as some think, a commitment to care for, and take responsibility for, another human being for some 18 years; rather, it is a never-ending relationship.

For our purposes, it is not relevant whether we adopt the ancient Greek view, the Judeo-Christian view, or some synthesis of the two. What is important is to see that human procreation looks for and demands some kind of philosophical interpretation. Inevitably we give it such an interpretation. To attempt to deny this and to say “we are just like the animals” is already to impose an interpretation, since surely the animals do not need to insist that they are just like themselves. (In fact, our mythology of procreation comes from the Courts, with their conceits of ‘autonomy’ and ‘freedom to choose’, according to which procreation is no more than the expression of the will of the autonomous agent.) In Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, the character Levin experiences the birth of his first child soon after he had witnessed his brother’s death, and he brings the two experiences together. He sees, correctly, that birth as well as death is a mystery that requires some kind of account. If we are to live human distinctively human lives, we must have some story to tell about what we are doing when we have children.

An account of the meaning of procreation is essential to this question of friendship with our children, since we cannot aim to develop friendships with them, if we have no understanding of why they have come forth from us in the first place. If they are merely consequences of animal instinct, then we might as well abort them, abandon them, or

leave them to be raised as their peers or television culture directs them. And why should we have any relationship with them? Why expect to have a friendship, for instance, with an accidental by-product of some compulsive animal force? Yet if we have an account that tells us that, in a sense, a child is meant to be 'another self', then a basis for friendship follows immediately, since a friend is another self.

### **The Gift of Self in Procreation**

We can get at these issues by pressing the question of whether it isn't repugnant to suggest that procreation is a kind of self-propagation: Doesn't such a view reduce procreation to an essentially selfish activity? Isn't it obviously wrong, in fact, for parents to try to make their children turn out exactly like themselves? If a parent insists that his child become just like himself, then he apparently makes the worth of the child depend upon the child's relationship to him. And what could be more vain, and intensely self-centered, than for a parent to aim to produce little replicas of himself?

The objection is based on a confusion. There are two ways in which persons can become like each other or assimilated to each other. Let us call these 'assimilation by restriction' and 'assimilation by gift.' The former is typically bad, whereas the latter is good if pursued in the right way. In assimilation by restriction, one person takes himself to be a kind of measure of or standard for the other, and the other is expected to conform to this standard. For instance, a gang leader makes everyone in the gang dress like him and

adopt his mannerisms. He takes himself to be the standard, and everyone else is restricted in being like him. The gang leader does nothing to effect the assimilation; the burden is placed on the others.

In assimilation by gift, on the other hand, one person gives of himself to another, and as an inevitable consequence, the other comes to resemble him. For instance, a good teacher imparts knowledge of his subject through self-sacrifice, so that his pupil comes to think and act about the subject in the same way as his teacher. This happens very clearly with music and sports instructors. The intention of the instructor is to impart to the student the good of mastery in some domain, which characterizes the teacher. In assimilation by gift, the teacher is not a standard except accidentally, because the subject matter, musical endeavor, or sport provides the standard. The teacher is to be imitated only insofar as he meets those standards. Moreover, the burden falls upon the teacher: he corrects, directs, and imparts.

In assimilation by restriction, there is a fact of the matter as to how the followers would have been, had they not been forced to conform to the leader: the gang members, for instance, would have dressed in some other, identifiable way, if they were not constrained to dress like the gang leader. But in assimilation by gift, there is no fact of the matter as to how someone would have been, because the gift itself constitutes the personality and character of the person receiving it. Did the father of Tiger Woods restrict his son by teaching him golf from an early age? No, because there was no fact of the matter of what

Tiger Woods would otherwise have been. Similarly, children receive at the very start a gift of their parents' biological constitution: they look a certain way, and have certain dispositions, because they are biological offspring of certain parents. But this is a gift rather than a restriction, because they would not have existed except on these terms.

Procreation—that is, biological reproduction, and then also mental and ethical procreation (also known as 'education'), which is continuous with biological reproduction—when properly carried out, is an example of assimilation by gift, and therefore not objectionable.

One might distinguish the two sorts of assimilation in this way as well. Assimilation by restriction terminates with resemblance to the leader; it is essentially barren. The whole point of the imitation of the gang leader is to be like him, and nothing else is meant to follow. The gang is a tight circle from which nothing escapes. In contrast, assimilation by gift naturally leads to the recipient himself making a gift. Good students become teachers in turn: the circle of knowledge and expertise expands and encompasses more and more persons.

Hence it is correct to say that the goal of procreation is to raise children to the point where they can raise children themselves. "May you see your children's children" is not without reason the standard form of blessing for earthly prosperity. Complete maturity in any living thing is reached only when it becomes capable of reproducing another member of its kind. Complete reproduction, then, the raising of another to maturity, is the raising of that child to the point of being a father or mother himself.

Paternity or maternity are essential to maturity. No man can be mature if he is not in some sense a father; no woman has lived a complete life if she is not in some sense a mother. These need not be biological relationships, and, indeed, the most human form of paternity is ethical and spiritual rather than biological. “Call no man on earth ‘father’”— because true paternity is not of the earth.

And now we have the goal of childrearing before us, which is, furthermore, the only sound basis for a friendship between parent and child. The parent must raise the child always keeping in mind the endpoint of his efforts. All sound education begins with the end. In all of his dealings with his child, therefore, he must consider: “Is this the course of action that will best contribute to my son (or daughter) becoming an admirable father (or mother)?” And only after considering this should he act accordingly. The point of child-raising is not to produce consumers, or people adept at satisfying their desires, or effective workers merely. The point of child-raising is to raise up ‘other selves’ who are similarly good fathers and mothers. A pointless circle, you say? No, it’s the very meaning of life: generation succeeding generation and bound by the gift of life. To give one’s life for another, so that he in turn can give his life—that is true human happiness. And this happiness is the core of the friendship between parent and child.

All friendship involves reciprocity. Note how the child reciprocates his parents for their love: not so much by giving back to them (that gift cannot strictly be repaid, and thus he

honors his parents and will provide for them, as much as he can, in their old age) but rather by giving to his own children in turn. Each time a young father makes a sacrifice for his child, he thanks his parents for the similar sacrifices they made for him.

### **Raising a Child to Be One's Friend**

These reflections lead to the question of how precisely children should be raised so that we can be their friends. We understand now something of the nature of that friendship, but how is it effectively fostered and maintained? We said that parents should raise their children with the proper end in mind: confident adulthood. Nearly everything follows from this good intention. But a few practical suggestions may perhaps be useful.

First, parents should take care to observe the line between childhood and young adulthood. Very young children are more like 'parts' of the parents than separately existing individuals. They naturally and easily go along with whatever their parents decide, and some parents, fathers in particular, think that a family can always be in this way an effortless and simple extension of their own outlook. They are then caught by surprise when they find their young adult children rebelling against this kind of confinement. The remedy is simple: keep in mind, as we said, the goal of child-raising. It is not to preserve a childlike contentment forever, a harmonious scene where all children dote lovingly on the parents. Rather, it is to raise confident and mature adults. And thus as children enter

their teenage years, parents must be sure to deal with them as persons who very quickly will be leaving the home and starting their own families.

Second, because the friendship a father has with his son will differ from that he has with his daughter, and likewise the friendship a mother has with her daughter will differ from that she has with her son, the parents must take care that their own friendship is good and is seen to be good by their children. The husband's relationship to the wife provides the pattern through which his children see themselves. His boy thinks of himself as similarly related to women, and the girl thinks of herself as the sort of person who deserves a similar attention. Father therefore befriends his son through direct imitation and his daughter through a relationship similar to courtship. But what is crucial is that the husband-wife relationship be sound—and likely the couple will need to give special and regular attention to their own relationship, through marriage retreats or something similar.

Third, by the logic of 'assimilation by gift', a parent should generally place upon the child only those limits that are required by an objective standard. Just as a teacher requires no further imitation than that set by the standards of his discipline, so a parent should require, as a matter of obligation, obedience only in matters of morality. As much harm is done children by forbidding what is licit, as allowing what is forbidden. The first impulse of a parent should be 'yes', allowing whatever need not be forbidden, rather than 'no', permitting only what is entirely safe.

Fourth, parents must take care that their children associate only with peers who will not undo what they have already achieved. Of vital importance here is simply the element of trust. A child must trust that his parents, in making demands upon him, have his own good at heart. But the world is filled with the spirit of suspicion, hostility, and mistrust. For many children, that something is required by a parent is ipso facto reason to avoid doing it. This would be 'enslavement' to the will of another; or, they misconstrue obedience as childishness—whereas in fact all true maturity presupposes the ability to live under proper authority. Parents must therefore take all pains to see that their children associate only with children who are similarly being raised well. The best way to do this, of course, is for themselves to befriend parents who are admirable. If the parents spend time with one another, then the children will do so naturally on their own. The attractive and sweet force of friendship will then confirm their children in virtue.

Fifth, and finally, parents must appeal to the minds of their children: they can hardly become friends of their children, if they cannot together share their thoughts. If you will, parents must try, over the years, to shift their relationship to their children to an intellectual basis. They can do this in early years by freely spending time reading to their children; in later years by spending time instructing children systematically in subjects that they know (yes, the ancient practice, whereby a father passes on his 'craft' or 'trade' to his children, should in some way be preserved today!); and throughout their childhood, by fostering good conversation, especially over meals. The family dinner is perhaps the best vehicle for friendship between parents and children. Have a common dinner every day, if possible, which everyone is expected to be present at, unless there are serious conflicting

obligations. The father, as the one who is appointed by nature to have the principal care for the education of the children, should be careful to raise topics of interest for the family to discuss. He should teach, by example primarily, but also by explicit direction, if necessary, habits of civility, politeness, and articulate expression, which are the very matter of the intellectual friendship he and his wife wish to foster with all of his children. In sharing a table, the family expresses its biological unity, and in sharing good conversation, it grows together as a society of life and love, whether there is genuine freedom and a real regard for the other, for its own sake.

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