

Leading Children to a Life of Generosity

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At times it feels like we live in a society of me-first ... and that is what children experience. Even spirituality itself often times becomes a type of exercise in self-improvement, a “me and my relationship with God” operation.

Fortunately, family stands in stark contrast to this message. Family proclaims that the basic reality of existence is communal. It reflects in everyday life the message of Christianity: a relationship with God exists only as part of a relationship with others.

Sometimes, though, we are not always aware of the generosity and selflessness that is constantly going on in family life. (It’s too easy to concentrate upon our failings.)

An ideal way to sensitize children to the importance of generosity is to affirm (and encourage) the generosity that is already going on. Point out to children – during prayer, at bedtime, when the actual “event” happens – the goodness they have done (e.g. sharing their toys or computer game; hurrying up in the bathroom so the next person has a turn; listening; helping someone with chores, etc.) ... always focusing their attention on the pleasure and/or help they have given others by their actions ... so the focus is always on the **consequences of their actions** for others and not just on themselves.

Modeling by parents is what it’s all about

“I did not go to the Master
to learn sacred scripture,
but to watch him tie his shoes.” (Chasidic saying)

This story is told of Mahatma Gandhi: A mother brought her son to Gandhi, and said, “Please Master, tell my son to stop eating sugar.”

Gandhi looked deeply into the boy’s eyes, and, then, said to the mother, “Bring your son back to me in two weeks.”

“But, Master,” she said, “we have come on a long journey to be with you. Please do not send us away. Please tell my son to stop eating sugar.”

Once again, Gandhi looked deeply into the boy’s eyes but, once again, he said, “Bring your son back to me in two weeks.”

Two weeks later, the mother and son returned. She said, “Please, Master, tell my son to stop eating sugar.”

Gandhi looked deeply into the boy's eyes, and said, "Stop eating sugar."

The mother said, "Oh thank you, Master, thank you. But, please tell me. Why did you send us away? Why didn't you tell my son to stop eating sugar two weeks ago when we were here?"

And Gandhi replied, "Two weeks ago, I was eating sugar."

Parents model for their children best when they always remember: As you are, so will they be.

How do you "explain" almsgiving to children?

Often our society describes almsgiving as the giving of money. While that certainly is a part of it, there are hazards to that way of thinking and acting. The danger in giving money to worthy people and causes is that we may be lulled into the trap that "checkbook charity" will suffice – that giving a big enough contribution will both solve the problem and fulfill our obligation. We Americans have a tendency to think that money can alleviate all pain and suffering.

This type of almsgiving can also keep us removed from the people we wish to reach out to. It can keep us in a "we and them" mentality rather than an awareness of the reality that we are all inter-connected and interdependent. What happens to one, happens to all. When one person hurts, every person hurts. When one person prevails, every person prevails.

The money we share must somehow bring us into solidarity with the people to whom we are responding. Whatever we do has to make us more aware of the real people that we're helping.

Parents need to teach their children: whatever we do for others, we do for ourselves. What is good for them is good for you. As the old proverb whimsically puts it, "We didn't all come over on the same ship, but we are all in the same boat."

A family was shopping for food for a Thanksgiving basket for the needy. The dad picked up a box of Cheerios; his six year old son immediately said, "No."

As he put the box back on the shelf, his dad said, "What's wrong with Cheerios as one of our food gifts?" His young son replied, "We bought Sugar Frosted Flakes for us. The hungry kids out there like Sugar Frosted Flakes better than Cheerios."

The six year old could see the faces of the people they were feeding.

Parents teach and model for their children that there are many forms of almsgiving. We need to view almsgiving more as self-sharing than as check-writing. It includes the sharing

of our personal comfort, our time, our privacy, all that we assume is ours (in this me-first generation). Parents can remind children that there are many ways of almsgiving:

- Sharing the world's energy
 - Turn down the heat
 - Turning off radios and stereos that no one is really listening to
 - Turn off unneeded lights
 - Walking and biking instead of always driving

- Sharing your energy
 - Help someone in the family do their chores
 - Make a concerted effort not to use all your energy in your work; share it with your family
 - Older children can play with younger children, even if their games seem silly
 - Share the spring cleaning without grumbling

- Sharing the earth
 - Recycle
 - Grow plants; take them to someone who is lonely
 - Wrap presents in comic paper instead of wrapping paper
 - Take a walk and pick up the clutter

- Sharing your commitment
 - (We recognize today that the works of mercy require more than reaching out to hurting individuals. They demand efforts to change the structures of our society that violate people's rights, causing the sufferings they endure. Almsgiving today includes works for social justice.)
 - Take time to write to congressional representatives, senators, the president on behalf of programs to help the needy
 - As a family, join Parenting for Peace and Justice Network of the Institute for Peace and Justice, 4144 Lindell Blvd., #124, St. Louis, MO 63108
 - Begin a Family Support Group. See the *Handbook for Family Support Groups* from the Institute for Peace and Justice, 4144 Lindell Blvd., #124, St. Louis, MO 63108

- Sharing your time
 - Visit a nursing home, whether you know anyone there or not
 - Watch how comfortable your children and these elderly folks quickly become with each other. Watch your children see not age or infirmity, but real human beings.*
 - Take time to listen to someone you don't enjoy
 - Attend a city commission, parish council, Board of Education meeting
 - Spend an extra week together as a family
 - Volunteer your time and talent to the people, institutions, or organizations that desperately need you.
 - When your children see you giving the work of your hands and the passions of your heart, they will learn what it means to need and be needed, to care and to share, to feel obligation and*

commitment, and to meet their responsibility to their brothers and sisters in the human community.

Visit a sick friend

When you take your children with you on a visit to the hospital or to the home of someone who is ill, you show them your caring and concern, and, more importantly, you show them your sense of responsibility to another human being who needs your presence and your help.

Volunteer as a family to help with church suppers or receptions.

Gather up books and magazines to donate to the local jail.

- Share yourself

Baby-sit for parents who don't get out too often

Volunteer to read to the blind or tutor the handicapped

Give a hug to someone in your family who seems to be having a bad day

Adopt a family that is needy in some way and share material goods, time or compassion with them

Adopt a grandparent and spend an hour or so a week being friends with someone who might be lonely

Work in a soup kitchen

Your children will see what it means to feel compassion and reach out with acts of loving kindness, to respond to the needs of others.

Arrange to meet and get to know a family who needs help and support. Help them with material necessities, but the focus should be more being *with* them than doing *for* them.

- Sharing money and things

Have a family Piggy Bank

Special, specific times can be set aside for putting coins into the charity box – perhaps on Sunday or at holiday time. Donations can also be made by anyone at any time – especially in celebration of happy events or when receiving good news (or a good grade on a test). Each time the family charity box is filled up, you can have a family meeting to decide where the funds will be donated.

Two for one

Begin a custom that when you purchase certain things for your family, you will purchase two – one for yourselves and one for the poor. E.g.: each time you purchase a jar of peanut butter, purchase two. One goes into a bag in the trunk of the car. When the bag is filled, deliver it to a local food pantry or soup kitchen.

Don't forget the little things

Many people give away an old suit, dress, or sweater, but never think of smaller items that are always needed. The next time you and your

children gather your old clothes to give away, include a good pair of socks...or toothpaste, soap, shampoo, toilet paper.

When you teach your children that giving is more than emptying closets of unwanted clothes, but is something that can be tailored to meet real human needs, you remind them to be thoughtful and respectful of the people who will receive their gifts, and grateful for the opportunity to have.

Be a tithing family

Each month decide to give a percentage of salary/earnings and allowance (everyone contributes from whatever they have) or a portion of what the family would allocate for entertainment or treats that month. Decide as a family where the money will go. Make it different each month (becoming aware of more and more people who need our concern and care).

Every day

Empty your pockets and purses of change at the end of every day (or designate one day a week) and collect it in a jar. At the end of Lent, give the money to a food pantry or homeless shelter.

Simple meal

One night each week eat a simple meal. It might consist of cereal, milk and fruit or soup and crackers. Whatever money you save can be donated to a soup kitchen.

Garage Sales

Go shopping at garage sales. For everything you buy for yourself, buy another item to be donated to the needy.

Questions and Discussion Times are good opportunities for families to explore generosity and almsgiving

- (Ages 4-8) One of your friends never gets any dessert in his lunch box and always asks you to share your cookies. What do you do?
- (ages 9-12) Your youth group leader asks you not to go "trick or treating" this coming Halloween. Instead, you are asked to go from house to house asking for donations to help build the new youth center. What do you do?
- (Teenagers) A six-year-old child in your community was in a terrible car accident. The medical bills are much more than the family can afford. You don't know the child or the family, but the hospital announces that teenagers in the community can help pay off the bills by working at the hospital every Saturday or Sunday morning for the next two months

– helping to clean up the grounds and weed the gardens. It will be hard, dirty work and you must commit yourself for eight Saturdays or Sundays in a row. Do you do it? Why? Why not?

- As you watch television programs, challenge the children to find examples of people being generous to each other.
- Create a Good News bulletin board in your home. Encourage everyone to watch for and cut out newspaper and magazine articles which tell of people being generous to others.
- Help children to evaluate their actions by using “how would you feel....” questions.
- Read the Parable of the Talents. What does it say about sharing?

Family Ideas for Almsgiving for Each Day of Lent and Easter

(These ideas can be put into a calendar format. The best way is for parishes to run one a week at a time in the Sunday bulletin. E.g.:

- Give up dessert at dinnertime tonight. Donate the money saved to a group that feeds the hungry.
- Visit a lonely person in your neighborhood.
- Call Habitat for Humanity and ask if there is a new home where your family could help to plant flowers.
- Grow a garden. Give some of your “crops” to a soup kitchen or food pantry.
- Gather items for small gift bags for a homeless shelter: soap, shampoo, toothpaste, etc.
- As a family, write a letter to the newspaper about something your community could do to help the needy.
- Visit a shut-in.
- As a family, write a letter to a politician about a life issue.
- What could you live without? Give it away.
- Buy a new item of clothing to put in with the outgrown clothing you are donating to the needy.
- Visit someone that you usually don’t have time for.

- Purchase a security blanket or teddy bear for a child in a homeless shelter.
- Name five blessings in your life that are not things. Donate a generous amount for each.
- Someone once said, "Peace begins when the hungry are fed." Draw a picture or write a poem about peace.
- How can you secretly "give" to someone in your family today?
- Offer to help someone in your neighborhood who is lonely or grieving.
- Think of all the people who love you. Give 10 cents for each person you can think of to your family Piggy Bank for the needy.
- Invite someone who is grieving or unemployed to dinner.
- Spend some time with your family.
- Give up your favorite food this week. Donate the money to Operation Rice Bowl.
- Help someone who has a disability with his or her spring cleaning.
- Listen ... when you'd rather not.
- Recycle toys by giving them to needy children. Be sure they are in good condition.
- Make Easter cards for those in homeless shelters or soup kitchens.
- Look for ways of doing a favor for someone who can't pay you back.
- Collect warm hats, scarves, and ear muffs to donate to a homeless shelter.
- Thin out your possessions.
- Have soup and bread for dinner. Donate the money saved to a soup kitchen.
- Do a chore that belongs to someone else – one that you know that person dislikes doing.
- "The extra coat in your closet belongs to the poor." Go through your closets and box up for the needy those things you aren't using.
- Set an empty place at the table as a reminder of the hungry in the neighborhood and in the world.

- Take your extra blankets to the homeless shelter.
- Are there toys that you are still using, but you don't really need, that you could give away to a shelter for abused women?
- Pick a newspaper or television story about a world problem. As a family write a letter to a politician or to the editor.
- Be on the lookout all day for ways that you can help someone else.
- Invite all your relatives to join together to provide Easter remembrances (food and clothes) for a family who is needy.
- Volunteer as a family to become involved in one of your parish's ministries.
- Make a special "thinking of you" card for someone who is lonely. Deliver it.
- Try to spend today looking for ways you can be thoughtful and helpful to all the members of your family – rather than doing things for yourself.
- Is there a relative that needs help? time? company?
- Go to a soup kitchen and help clean up – after you've visited with the people.
- Offer to do a grocery run for a young mother or elderly person.
- As a family become members of a group that works for justice issues: Bread for the World, Pax Christi, etc.
- As a family, relieve a caregiver for a few hours and spend time and conversation with the person who needs care.
- Make a list of those people who need a kind word ... and then give it.
- Bring new life to someone who is in need: a monetary gift, a gift of time, or material goods.
- Take a home cooked meal (everyone in the family can have a part) to someone who is sick or lonely.
- When you go shopping, buy doubles of everything. Give the second items to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.
- Make a contribution to a symphony, theater or museum that brings beauty to people's lives.

- Give a treasured item to a loved one, telling that person why the item is meaningful to you.
- Increase our financial contribution to the parish.
- Take someone to a concert or theater or museum who ordinarily would not be able to attend.
- Share one of your hobbies with someone who could use some attention.
- Undertake one project to beautify the world.
- Make a contribution to support an organization for the handicapped.
- Make something. Give it away.
- Write a letter to the newspaper editor or some other media representative in praise of someone or some action.
- Bake a cake, shovel the walk, cut the grass, run an errand or baby-sit for someone who needs help or cheering up.
- Give up fancy beverages or carbonated drinks and donate the money saved to a parish or civic group that helps needy people pay water and/or electric bills.
- Donate money to a pro-life group that provides baby clothes and other items for mothers in need.
- Telephone, send cards or visit sick friends. Remember them on a regular basis, not for one time only.
- Ask the parish committee for visiting the sick for the names of sick children who would welcome cards from your family.
- Prepare Easter gifts for needy families of people who are in prison.
- Go out of your way for someone (someone struggling with packages; someone needing help with a young child, etc.)
- For today, act on every single thought of generosity that arises spontaneously in your heart.
- Let someone go first today.
- Volunteer to help: at the parish, local library, Red Cross, American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, homeless shelter, etc.

- Offer to get something for another person so they don't need to interrupt what they're doing (e.g.: a phone that is ringing, etc.)
- Do something for someone who is having a rough time ... but don't let on who did it.
- Clean snow off someone's car after a snowstorm.
- Offer to do one of the "unwanted" or "undesirable" tasks at home, school, work.
- During Lent, save every penny that you get to help a struggling family pay their water bill.
- Don't just donate your used clothing. As a family, take it to St. Vincent de Paul or the homeless shelter.
- Makes sandwiches to take to a homeless shelter.
- Makes baskets full of crayons, coloring books, puzzles, etc. to give to children in the hospital.
- Run an errand for a sick neighbor.

Children's Literature that explores the themes of generosity and giving

The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein

It's Mine by Crosby Bonsall

Fuzzies by Richard Lessor

Crow Boy by Taro Yashima

Tico and the Golden Wings by Leo Lionni

Pablo the Potter by Helen V. Stone

The Emir's Son by Martin Ballard

Malachi Mudge by Edward Cecil

The Children's Book of Virtues by William J. Bennett

The Story of Jumping Mouse by John Steptoe

The Book of Virtues for Young People by William J. Bennett

That's Mine by Elizabeth Winthrop

The Biggest House in the World by Leo Lionni

Friends from the Other Side by Gloria Anzaldua

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