“The Salesian Spirit” ESSAY CONTEST

Revived in 2006, with the 40th anniversary of DeSales University and in conjunction with World Communications Day, the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture sponsors an annual writing contest for members of the campus community. World Communications Day is celebrated in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost. The announcement of the theme is usually made on September 29, the Feast of the Archangels Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, who have been designated patrons of those who work in radio. The Holy Father’s message for World Communications Day is traditionally published on January 24, in conjunction with the Memorial of St. Francis de Sales, patron of writers.

Theme for 2015
COMMUNICATING THE FAMILY:
a privileged place of encounter with the gift of love

“best student essay” award 2015

Mother (and Father) Know Best

by

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As young Christians, our first encounter with the idea of sacrifice usually comes in the form of the crucifixion story; we are taught from a very early age that Jesus suffered and died for us, that he did what he did with no benefit for him. Having spent all of my educational years (including preschool and kindergarten) in Catholic school, I encountered this image of total self-giving on a daily basis. But what I didn’t realize until I was older was that Jesus was not the first person I learned sacrifice from; this initial lesson of selfless love, the seed to my understanding of true sacrifice, came from my mother and father. Looking back, and speaking candidly, it wasn’t until I became 18 years old that the wisdom of what true love and the giving of one’s self is came full-circle for me; I’m not simply saying I was ignorant to sacrifice before then, but I didn’t fully appreciate its impact until I came to the full realization of its meaning. I am grateful for nothing more in this world than my parents and the family they created for me; I have received 19 years of unconditional and constant love, devotion, care, guidance, and support. As Pope Francis teaches us about “communicating the family” in his letter for World Communications Day, I recollect on the profound message my family has communicated to me about what true love is and how indescribably important a healthy family is to the people young children become. Through the example set by my parents, I will someday strive to be the best man, husband, and father I can possibly be, because I have personally experienced the dividends of a nurturing familial connection. Although I never always understood fully why my parents did and said what they did, I came to learn that mother (and father) truly do know best through the way they raised me and how it has impacted who I am today.

In his letter, Pope Francis talks about how the church as a whole is revealed to the youth through the domestic church; without my family, I know for certain I would not have such a strong religious connection as I do today. My mother used to read me Bible stories before bed and tuck me in with a hug and kiss each and every night; as a college student who now sees my parents once a month, I often poignantly appreciate how loving they truly are to me, from my youngest days until now. She also taught me prayers, how to pray the rosary, and to always thank God for what I had. I’ll never forget going to Church with my Dad from a very young age; we never missed a Sunday, and he was a role model for piety and holy living as I grew older and began to discern how to conduct myself spiritually. But they did more than teach me doctrine and ceremonies; my family formed my conscience properly, and I can never thank them enough for giving me the moral background they did, because I know I wouldn’t be half the person I am today without their guidance. With so much of today’s society (and subsequently, family life) focusing on the superficial, the depraved, and the parents’ wants and needs rather than the child’s, we are growing away from the nurturing “extended womb” I experienced growing up in a healthy, loving home. I don’t, however, mean for that comment to suggest that children who grow up in dysfunctional or broken homes will be any less of a decent human than those who don’t; in fact, I believe that God works in mysterious ways and seeks to bring good from the evil in the world, so some young people who are placed in unpleasant situations growing up will only become stronger adults from the trials they triumph through in their adolescence. Regardless, though, it was inspiring to me to make the realization that there was this connection between the religion I grew up in and the morals I was raised with, this gap-bridging and all-encompassing notion that God was truly working through my parents, transmitting His love to them and then to me.
In his letter, Pope Francis also highlights how important visiting family can be, citing Mary's visitation of Elizabeth and her baby jumping for joy at the sight of the Virgin Mother. I can relate this religious moment to my own upbringing as well; my family always put a strong emphasis on spending quality time together and not taking for granted the people we have in our lives. I once heard a quote that teaches us to be conscious of the fact that everyone, big or small, enters our lives for a reason. This struck a chord with me because since my family always communicated the value of strengthening ties through interpersonal interaction, I never let myself be distant, cold, or indifferent to the people around me. Nothing bothers me more than when someone is so detached from the world around them that they don’t even attempt to communicate with the people around them; this need to reach out, to love, to cherish others as gifts of God’s creation begins within the family in minute but invaluable activities such as visiting our grandparents, calling people on their birthdays, and writing thank-you notes for our birthday presents as a child. All of this adds up, and the sum of these small actions equals the character of our souls, our moral worth as members of the human family and the Kingdom of God.

Another major aspect of Pope Francis’ letter was when he implored families not to let the media take away from their connections with one another. Although we are all guilty of letting ourselves slip and checking Facebook or our emails while someone is trying to talk to us, we must never forget that God gives us opportunities to grow on a daily basis by interacting with our families, friends, and even strangers; human correspondence is an intrinsic function of life that is often stifled by the faced-paced and boisterous world around us. Families, like my own did and still does, must recognize this problem and nip it in the bud before they become detached from one another. Communication, as the Holy Father stressed, is a bonding and powerful mechanism for becoming one with others; although we can’t choose our family, we are given the opportunity to love them fully and unconditionally just by giving them the time of day. We become exposed to love through the day-to-day experiences that manifest when human beings naturally desire to reach out to one another. No cell phones at the dinner table, coming to your parents for advice, and honesty are all fantastic ways to break down barriers of life and build new structures of openness and love that are conducive of a spiritual environment.

Although I have named all of the things my family does in relation to what Pope Francis said defines a communicative family, I have not specified why I am so truly lucky for having what I have and how their sacrifices impacted me so profoundly. It all started last year when I experienced the life-changing decision of ending a negative and out-of-control relationship that burdened me for far too long. The girl had the highly adverse effect of slowly (and without me even being cognizant of it at the time) taking me away from my family simply because she didn’t get along with them; this toxic situation only worsened when I unwittingly allowed it to happen, always taking her side over my parents, never agreeing with them on anything, and even going out of my way to do things I wouldn’t normally do just so I could go against their will. I became to hate the person I became, and, moreover, it made me resent her that much more after the break-up. But then I had an epiphany; through psychological apathy and the attachment to that unfixable dilemma, I denied the love and care my parents were trying to convey. They weren’t doing it because they were trying to be harsh on me, they were treating me this way because they knew what was best for me and I wouldn’t allow myself
to listen. When the situation was all said and done, I kissed and embraced the earth I walked on and came to full understanding of what my parents did for me all of these years: my mom quitting her stable job to take care of me when I was young, my dad working long hours to put me through private school and allow me to do all the extracurricular activities I enjoyed, and my parents giving me their undivided attention, love, support, and compassion 365 days a year for 18 years. My entire attitude was overhauled, my paradigm altered; I became once again the person I longed to be. That girl who caused me so much trouble goes to this very University, and every time I see her on campus I am reminded that I need to always stay true to myself and the man I was raised to be.

Just as we can relate to Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross by seeing the sacrifice our families make for us, the domestic church we all are born into has an infinite number of lessons to teach us from early childhood to our final moments as long as we have the ears to be receptive to them. When we define gratitude, we often consider what material things we have, what notches we have on our résumés, and how we measure against others. But I believe true Christian gratitude comes in the form of the things we can't see, the intangible and infinitesimal daily occurrences that make us feel lucky to alive. Maybe if we lived life more in touch with God and the world he created around us, we could understand how vastly important family is to our experience on this Earth. It is something never to be taken for granted, something never to be underestimated in its power to move hearts and shape souls. We are truly blessed to be in the presence of such love, a taste of the divine Heaven that grows stronger with each passing day and never stops teaching us lessons about life and how we should live it. Next time I think an unthankful thought, I will stop and realize that without my family, I would never be where I am today; going into Spring Break, even the writing of this essay has made me that much more excited to reunite with my Mom, Dad, sister, and all of the family and friends that made me who I am today. An appreciation for family comes hand-in-hand with an appreciation for God, and if mother knows best, God knows even better. Following our parents' will is only a small sacrifice to repay the countless sacrifices they make day in and day out, and Jesus, by dying for us, gave us an ultimate sacrifice upon which to learn from and appreciate.