

The Chief Activities of the Body, Soul and Spirit

by St. Theophan the Recluse

The sermon emphasizes the importance of directing the developing powers of the soul and body in children, surrounding them with sacred images, and forming good attitudes through discipline and training.

Scripture: Psalm 127:3, Proverbs 22:6, Proverbs 29:15, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21, 1 Timothy 4:12

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Self Control"

Description

St. Theofan the Recluse preaches about the importance of directing and developing the powers of the soul and body in children. He emphasizes the need to place bodily needs within proper bounds, strengthen them with good habits, and train children to master their desires. The sermon highlights the significance of selecting healthy food, establishing eating rules, and teaching self-control from a young age to avoid sinful indulgence. St. Theofan also stresses the importance of guiding children in movement, training the will to obey and do good, and forming a conscience rooted in awareness and repentance.

Transcript

I. Directing the Developing Powers of the Soul and Body.

First of all, the needs of the body are aroused, and then are in a constant state of living activity until death itself. It is all the more essential to place them within their proper bounds and to strengthen them with the force of habit, so that later there will be less disturbance from them.

In Relation to Food.

The first requirement for bodily life is food. With relation to morality, this is the seat of the passion for sinful enjoyment of the flesh, or the arena for its development and nourishment. Therefore, one must feed the child in such a way that in developing the life of the body, furnishing him strength and health, one will not ignite in the soul the pleasing of the flesh.

One should not consider that the child is small (and therefore in no need of such concern). From the very first years one must begin to restrain the flesh which is inclined to crude materiality, and train the child to become master of it, so that in adolescence and youth, and in the years thereafter, he might easily and freely be in control of this need. The first attempt made is very precious. Much that happens subsequently

depends on the feeding of the child. Without noticing it, one can develop in him the love of pleasure and immoderation in food -- the two forms of the sin of gluttony, the two inclinations bound up with eating that are so ruinous for the body and the soul.

Therefore, even physicians and teachers advise: 1) to select a healthful and suitable food, depending on the age of the child, for one food is suitable for an infant, another for a child, yet another for an adolescent and a young man; 2) to subject the use of food to definite rules (again, adapted to age), in which there should be defined the time, the quantity, and the means of eating; and 3) not to depart later from this established rule without need. By these means the child is trained not to demand food always whenever he wants to eat, but to wait for the assigned time; here are to be found the first attempts at exercising oneself in denying oneself one's desires. When a child is fed every time he cries, and then every time he asks to eat, he is so weakened by this that later he cannot refuse food except with great pain. At the same time, this accustoms him to getting his own will, because he succeeds in getting whatever he asks for or cries for.

Sleep also should be subjected to the same kind of measure, as should warmth and cold, and other comforts which are necessary in one's upbringing, having unflinchingly in mind not to ignite the passion for sensual enjoyments, and to train one to deny oneself. This should be strictly observed during the whole time of the upbringing of the child -- changing the rules, it goes without saying, in their application (to circumstances and age), but not in essence, until the child, being firmly established in them, will take himself in hand.

In Relation to Movement.

The second function of the body is movement. Its organ is the muscles, in which lie the power and strength of the body, the means of labor. With relation to the soul this is the seat of the will, and it very easily develops self-will. The measured and sensible development of this function, giving to the body stimulation and animation, trains one to labor and forms the habit of stability.

On the contrary, an unsteady development, left to the will of the child, develops in some a hyperactivity and inattentiveness, and in others a slowness, lifelessness, and laziness. In the former case, self-will and disobedience are turned into a law, in connection with which are to be found also aggressiveness, anger, and unrestraint in one's desires. In the latter case, one becomes immersed in the flesh and given over to sensual enjoyments.

Therefore, one should have in view that in strengthening the powers of the body one should not thereby inflate self-will and destroy the spirit for the sake of the flesh. To avoid this the chief things are moderation, a definite schedule, and supervision. Let the child play, but let it be in the place and in the way which are indicated to him.

The will of the parents should be imprinted upon each step -- of course in a general way. Without this, the behavior of the child can easily become corrupted. After enjoying himself according to his own will, the child always returns unwilling to obey even in the smallest things; and this is if it happens only once -- what then can one say if this part of bodily activity is completely neglected? How difficult it is later to uproot self-will, which so quickly seats itself in the body as in a fortress. The neck will not bend, the hands and feet will not move, and the eyes will not even wish to look as they are told. But on the contrary, a child comes out ready to obey any kind of order when from the very beginning he is not given total freedom in his movements. In addition, there is no better training in being the master of one's body than by forcing it

to exert itself according to orders.

In Relation to the Nerves and Senses.

The third function of the body is the nerves. From the nerves come the senses -- the means of observation and food for curiosity; but more of this later. Here we will talk about the general purpose of the nerves as the center of the sensuality of the body, or the capability of receiving outward impressions which are unpleasant for it.

In this respect one must make a rule to train the body to endure every kind of outward influence without misfortune: whether from fresh air, water, change of temperature, heat, cold, pain, wounds, and so forth. Whoever has acquired such a habit is the most fortunate of men, capable of the most difficult actions at any time and in any place. The soul in such a man is the full master of the body; it does not postpone, or change, or leave off actions fearing bodily unpleasantness. On the contrary, it will turn with a certain desire to those things that can bring danger to the body; this is very important.

The chief evil with relation to the body is love for the body and pitying it. This takes away all the soul's authority over the body and makes the soul the slave of the body. And on the contrary, one who does not spare the body will not be disturbed in whatever he does by apprehensions born of blind love of life. How fortunate is one who is trained to this from childhood!

Here also is the place for medical advice concerning bathing, the times and places of walking, and clothing; the chief tuning is to keep the body not in such a state that it would receive only pleasant impressions, but on the contrary, to keep it more under the impression of those things which cause it disturbance. By pleasant impressions the body is pampered, and by unpleasant ones it is strengthened; in the former condition the child is afraid of everything, but in the latter condition it is ready for anything and is capable of continuing patiently what it has begun.

Such an attitude toward the body is prescribed by the science of raising children. Here we will only indicate how these counsels are useful also for the development of Christian life -- because the zealous fulfillment of them protects the entrance into the soul from the evil poison of sensual enjoyments, of self-will, of love for the body and self-pity; and it forms in the child the dispositions which are opposite to these, and in general trains him to be the master of his body and not to be in submission to it. This is very important in the Christian life, which by its nature is remote from sensuality and every kind of pleasing of the flesh.

Therefore, we should not leave to arbitrary decision the development of the child's body, but must keep it under a strict discipline from the very beginning, until later it may be given into the hands of the child himself as an organ already adapted to Christian life and not hostile to it. Those Christian parents who truly love their children should not spare anything, even their own parents' heart, in order to furnish this good thing for the child. For otherwise all the acts following their love and concern will either bear little fruit or be entirely fruitless.

The body is the dwelling place of the passions, and chiefly of the fiercest ones, such as lust and anger. It is also the organ through which the demons penetrate into the soul or come to settle near it. It goes without saying that in this process one must not leave out of sight the influence of church life and everything in it that affects the body, for by this the body itself will be sanctified and the greedy, animal life of the child will be restrained.

We will not discuss all this here, but only indicate the chief tone of the influences upon the body. Life itself will give the details for those who need them. In accordance with this outline one may understand also how to treat the body in all the other seasons of life, for the question is the same in all of us.

Together with the manifestation of bodily needs, the lower capabilities of the soul are also not slow in expressing themselves in their natural order. The child begins to look more closely at one object or another -- at one more, at another less, as if one pleases him more and another less. These are the first beginnings of the exercising of the senses, after which there follows immediately an awakening of the activity of imagination and memory. These capabilities stand at the transition point between the activity of the body and that of the soul, and the two act together, so that what is done by the one is immediately communicated to the other.

Judging by the importance which they have at the present time in our life, how good and salutary it is to sanctify these first beginnings with objects from the realm of faith.

First impressions remain deeply imbedded in the memory. We should remember that the soul appears in the world naked; it grows, becomes rich with inner content, and undertakes various forms of activity only later. The first material, the first food for its formation it receives from outside, from the senses, through imagination. It is self-evident of what nature the first objects of the senses and imagination should be in order not only not to hinder, but even more to aid the Christian life which is just being formed. It is well known that just as the first food has a significant influence on the temperament of the body, so also the first objects with which the soul occupies itself have a powerful influence on the character of the soul or the tone of its life.

2. Surrounding the Child with Sacred Images.

The developing senses furnish material for the imagination: the imagined object is preserved in the memory and comprises, so to speak, the content of the soul. Let the senses receive their first impressions from sacred objects: the icon and the light of the lampada for the eyes, sacred hymns for the hearing, etc. The child as yet understands nothing of what is before his eyes, but his eye and hearing become accustomed to these objects, and they, occupying the heart beforehand, by this very fact put other objects far away. Following the feelings, the first exercises of the imagination will also be sacred; it will be easier for him to imagine these objects than others; such will be his first exercises. Then, in future, the beautiful, which on one side is essentially bound up with the forms of the senses and the imagination, will attract him not otherwise than under sacred forms.

And so, let the child be surrounded by sacred forms, objects of all kinds, and let everything that can corrupt in examples, depictions, and things, be put away. Later, and for all the time that follows, one must keep the same order. It is well known how powerfully corrupt images act upon the soul, no matter in what form they might touch it! How unfortunate is the child who, closing his eyes, or being left alone and going within himself, is stifled by a multitude of improper images -- vain, tempting, breathing of the passions. This is the same thing for the soul as smoke is for the head.

One should likewise not neglect the manner in which these powers act. What the senses do is to see, to hear, to feel -- in general to experience, to test. This is why they are the first arousers of curiosity, which later, because of them, goes over into the imagination and memory and, having acquired a seat in them, becomes an unconquerable tyrant for the soul.

It is impossible not to use the senses, for it is only through them that one may know the things one must know for the glory of God and our own good. But in doing this it is impossible to avoid curiosity, which is an irresistible inclination to see and hear without purpose -- what is being done where, and how things are. How should one act in this regard?

Investigation is already inevitably curiosity. Curiosity consists of trying to know everything without order, without aim, without distinguishing whether it is needful or not. It is only necessary that one should preserve a measure and order in exercising the senses, and direct them only to what is needful and to awareness of what is needful -- then there will be no food for curiosity. That is, one must train the child to investigate what is considered to be essential for him, but to refrain from and avoid everything else. Then, in the very act of investigating, one should preserve a progressive order -- not jumping from subject to subject, or from one feature to another, but looking at one thing after another and taking care afterwards to picture the subject in the mind in a fitting way.

Such a method of study will save the child from distraction even in the midst of what is allowed; it will train him to master the senses, and through them -- the imagination. He will not jump from one thing to another without need; nor, consequently, will he dream and be distracted by images and thereby give no rest to his soul, muddying it with the ebb and flow of his loose fantasies. One who is unable to master the senses and imagination will inevitably be distracted and inconstant, being overcome by curiosity, which will chase him from one subject to another until he is exhausted, and all this without fruit.

At the same time with these capabilities, the passions arise in a child and begin to disturb him from an early age. The child does not yet speak, does not walk, has just begun to sit and grasp toys -- but already he becomes angry, envies, takes for himself, is selfish, and in general manifests the activities of the passions. This evil, which bases itself on the animal life, is very harmful; therefore, one must oppose it from its first manifestations.

How to do this is difficult to define. Everything depends on the good sense of the parents. However, one may lay down the following rules: 1) One should, as much as possible, anticipate their appearance; 2) then, if some passion has appeared, one must hasten to quench it with well thought-out and tested means. Thus they are prevented from becoming rooted and a predisposition to them is avoided. A passion which reveals itself more frequently than others should be treated with special attention, because it can be the ruling element of one's life.

The most trustworthy way of treating the passions is the use of the means of grace. One should turn to them with faith. Passion is a manifestation of the soul, and in the beginning parents have no way of acting (directly) on the soul. Therefore, first of all one must entreat the Lord that He might do His work. Experience will be a further guide in this for a zealous father, mother, or nurse.

When the child begins to understand, the general means of fighting passions can be used. One must arm oneself against the passions from the beginning, and persecute them thereafter for the whole time of upbringing, so that the child might be able and might become accustomed to mastering them; for their disturbing attacks will not cease to the end of one's life.

3. Forming Attitudes.

If the prescribed order of action on the body and the lower capabilities is strictly kept, the soul will receive from this a splendid preparation for a truly good attitude. However, this is only a preparation; the attitude

itself must be formed by a positive action on all his powers: mind, will, and heart.

The Mind.

In children the power of thinking is quickly manifested. It comes at the same time as speech and grows together with the development of the latter. Therefore, the formation of the mind must be begun together with words. The chief thing to be kept in mind is that there should be sound concepts and judgments, in accordance with Christian principles, about everything the child encounters or that comes to his attention: what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. This is very easy to do by means of ordinary conversations and questions. Parents often speak among themselves; children overhear and almost always assimilate not only the ideas, but even turns of speech and gestures.

Therefore, let parents, when they talk, call things always by their proper names. For example: What is the meaning of the present life, and how does it end? Where does everything come from? What are pleasures? What value do certain customs have? etc. Let parents talk with their children and explain to them either directly or, best of all, by means of stories. Is it good, for example, to dress well? Is it pleasurable when one receives praise? etc. Or let them ask the children what they think of one thing or another, and then correct their mistakes. In a short time, by this simple means, one may communicate sound principles for judging things, and these principles will not be erased for a long time, and may remain for life.

In this way worldly thinking and evil, insatiable curiosity are suppressed in their very root. Truth binds the mind to what satisfies it, but worldly thinking does not satisfy and thereby ignites curiosity. One does a great favor to children by saving them from this worldly thinking. And this is still before they begin reading books.

Further, one must on no account give children books with corrupt concepts; their minds will thus be preserved whole, in holy and divine healthiness. It is useless not to try to exercise the child in this way, under the supposition that he is still small. Truth is accessible to everyone. That a small Christian child is wiser than philosophers has been shown by experience. This experience is repeated sometimes today, but in earlier times it was everywhere. For example, during the period of martyrdom, small children discoursed on Christ the Saviour, on the folly of idol-worship, on the future life, and the like; this was because their mother or father had explained these things to them in simple conversations. These truths had then become close to the heart, which began to treasure them all the way to readiness to die for them.

The Will.

A child has many desires. Everything catches his attention, attracts him, and gives birth to desires. Being unable to distinguish good from evil, he desires everything, and he is ready to do everything he desires. A child left to himself becomes untamably self-willed. Therefore, parents must strictly watch this sprout of the soul's activity.

The simplest means for confining the will within its proper bounds lies in disposing children to do nothing without permission. Let them be eager to run to their parents and ask: May I do this or that? They should be persuaded by their own experience and that of others that to fulfill their own desires without asking is dangerous; they should be put in such a frame of mind that they even fear their own will. This disposition will be most fortunate, and at the same time it is the easier one to be imprinted. Since children for the most part do address their questions to adults, realizing their own ignorance and weakness, this state of affairs

has only to be elevated and placed as an absolute law for them.

The natural consequence of such an attitude will be total obedience and submission in everything to the will of the parents even against one's own will; a disposition to deny oneself in many things, and the habit or ability to do this; and, the chief thing, the conviction, based on experience, that one should not obey oneself in everything. This is all the more understandable for children from their own experience, because they desire many things, and often those things are harmful to their bodies and souls.

While accustoming a child not to do his own will, one must also train him to do good. For this, let the parents themselves furnish a fine example of good life and acquaint their children with people whose chief concerns are not pleasures and awards, but the salvation of the soul. Children love to imitate. How early they learn to copy a mother or father! Here there occurs something similar to what happens with identically tuned instruments.

At the same time, one must inspire the children themselves to good deeds. At first one must order them to do good deeds, and then guide them into doing them themselves. The most ordinary good deeds in this regard are: almsgiving, compassion, mercifulness, yielding to others, and patience. It is not difficult to train them to do these things. Opportunities for them occur every minute; one has only to use them.

From this training, the will emerges well disposed to various good deeds and in general with a tendency towards the good. Doing good must be taught just like everything else.

The Heart.

If the mind, will, and lower powers are acting in this way, it goes without saying that the heart also will be disposed to have sound and true feelings and to acquire the habit of enjoying what is truly enjoyable and of having no sympathy whatever to that which, under the guise of pleasure, pours poison into the soul and body. The heart is the capability of tasting and feeling satisfaction.

When man was in union with God, he found delight in divine and sacred things by the grace of God. After his fall he lost this taste and thirsts for what is sensual. The grace of Baptism has removed this, but sensuality is again ready to fill the heart. One must not allow this; one must guard the heart.

The most effective means for the education of true taste in the heart is a church-centered life, in which all children in their upbringing must be unflinchingly kept. Sympathy for everything sacred, pleasure in remaining in its midst for the sake of quietness and warmth, separation from what is bright and attractive in worldly vanity -- all this cannot better be imprinted in the heart (than by a church-centered life). The church building, church singing, icons -- these are the first objects of fine art in content and power.

One should remember that it is in accordance with the taste of one's heart that the future eternal mansion will be given, and that the taste in one's heart there will be the very one that is formed here. It is evident that theaters, shows, and similar things are not suitable for Christians.

A soul that has been calmed and ordered in this way will not, in accordance with its natural disorderliness, hinder the development of the spirit. The spirit develops itself more easily than the soul, and it reveals its power and activity earlier than the soul's. To the spirit belong: the fear of God (corresponding to the mind), conscience (corresponding to will), and prayer (corresponding to feeling). The fear of God gives birth to prayer and makes the conscience clear.

There is no need to direct all this to the other, invisible world. Children already have a predisposition for this, and they assimilate these feelings. Prayer is especially ingrafted very easily and acts not through the tongue, but through the heart. This is why children willingly and without fatigue participate in prayers at home and in the church services and are happy to do so. Therefore, they should not be deprived of this part of their education, but little by little they should be led into this sanctuary of our feelings. The earlier the fear of God will be imprinted and prayer aroused, the more solid will piety be for the rest of one's life.

In some children this spirit has been manifested of itself, even among evident obstacles to its uncovering. This is very natural. The spirit of grace received at Baptism, if it has not been quenched by an improper development of body and soul, cannot but give life to our spirit, and what can prevent it from being manifested in its power?

The Conscience.

Conscience, however, demands the closest guidance. Sound concepts and prayer, together with the good example of the parents and with other means of teaching the good, illuminate the conscience and imprint in it sufficient foundations for subsequent good activity. But the chief thing is that one should form in children an attitude of conscientiousness and awareness. Awareness is something extraordinarily important in life; but however easy it is to form it, it is just as easy to stifle it in children.

The will of the parents is, for small children, the law of conscience and of God. Let parents, in accordance with their best understanding, give their commands in such a way that children are not forced to be transgressors of their (the parents') will; and if they have already become such, they should be disposed as much as possible to repentance.

What frost is for flowers, so is the transgression of the parents' will for a child; he cannot look you in the eyes, he does not desire to enjoy kindnesses, he wishes to run away and be alone; but at the same time his soul becomes crude, and the child begins to grow wild. It is a good thing to dispose him ahead of time to repentance, so that without fear, with trust and with tears, he might come and say, "I did something wrong."

It goes without saying that all this will concern only ordinary things; but what is good is that here a foundation is placed for a future constant and truly religious character -- to rise up immediately after a fall -- and there is formed the capability of speedy repentance and cleansing or renewing oneself by tears.

We have given here the order of a child's life. Let a child grow in it, and the spirit of piety will develop more in him. The parents should follow all the movements of the child's awakening powers and direct everything to a single end. This is the rule: begin with the child's very first breath; begin everything at once, and not just one thing; do this all unceasingly, evenly, by degrees, without jumps, with patience and expectation observing a wise gradualness, taking note of the sprouts and making use of them, considering nothing unimportant in such an important matter. We will not go into details here, for we have in mind to indicate only the chief direction of upbringing.

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