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Filial Piety - Marian and Family

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Brother Gerald J. Schnepp, S.M., vice-president of St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas, has been a leader in the Catholic sociological field for many years. Born in Chicago, he graduated from the University of Dayton in 1928, and took his M.A. at Catholic University in 1932, majoring in anthropology. His doctorate, also from Catholic University, was received in 1942. In 1945 he was elected president of the American Catholic Sociological Society. He taught at St. Mary's, Incarnate Word College, and Our Lady of the Lake College (all in San Antonio) from 1932 to 1945. From 1947 to 1954 he was professor of Sociology at St. Louis University, St. Louis, Mo.

Brother Schnepp has written over fifty magazine articles, is the author of one book, Leakage from a Catholic Parish, and co-author of five others: Marriage and the Family, Parish Sociology, Social Theory, Industrialism and the Popes, and A Guide to Catholic Marriage.

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(published with ecclesiastical approval)
God is our Father, Mary is our Mother. Jesus Christ is our Brother. We are the children of God, we are the children of Mary, we are brother and sister to Jesus Christ.

Within this simple framework of interpersonal relations, we can consider the concept of filial piety as laid down by Father William Joseph Chaminade, and as developed by his successor, Father Joseph Simler. Then we can make applications, feeble though they may be, to the interpersonal relations within the natural family of father, mother, and children. In this way, we may be able to set up Marian or supernatural Filial Piety as a model after which natural filial piety can be patterned.

Mary is really and truly our Mother. Father Chaminade insists that we are not merely adopted children of Mary. As he explains it: “We all have life in Christ; Christ took life in the womb of Mary; we are one with Christ; hence, we also took spiritual life in Mary.” (Spirit of Our Foundation, p. 142. Hereafter cited as Spirit.)

Mary first became our Mother when she consented to become the Mother of God: “Be it done unto me according to Thy Word.” Again quoting Father Chaminade: “The life of Jesus Christ originates in us through baptism and faith, and by these we are conceived of the Holy Ghost; but, like unto our Savior, we should be born of the Virgin Mary. In the virginal womb of Mary, Jesus deigned to assume a form resembling ours and there, too, we should shape ourselves to His likeness, conform our morals to His, our inclinations to His inclinations, and our life to His life.” (Spirit, p. 144.)

Mary brought us forth a second time at the foot of the cross. Just as our natural Mother gave birth to us in pain and anguish, so Mary on Calvary, “broken-hearted with sorrow . . . offered her only Son to the Eternal Father as a holocaust for our sins . . .” (Spirit, p. 146.)

Father Chaminade points out that “our natural birth was involuntary as far as we were concerned. But the same cannot be said of our spiritual birth of Mary by grace.” (Spirit, p. 140.)
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And Father Simler elaborates on the idea that those of us who have religious vows have an even greater union with God, Christ and Mary. He says: "Religious profession is called a second baptism, not only because, like baptism, it effaces our debts to the justice of God, but particularly because it perfects the bond of our divine filiation and permits us with more truth, to call God our Father, Jesus Christ our Brother, and Mary our Mother; it is, then, in some manner, the beginning of a new life." (Simler, Filial Piety in Christian Life, p. 84. Hereafter cited as Filial Piety.)

The moment of our natural conception was a moment of joy for our natural parents, just as the moment of our spiritual conception at the Incarnation is a mystery of joy.

The time of our natural birth was a time of pain and suffering for our mother and probably a time of anxiety for our father. Likewise, our spiritual birth on Calvary occurred at a time of intense suffering for Our Blessed Mother as she joined with St. John and the Holy Women in the death-watch for her beloved Son.

In both the natural and the supernatural order, we can see that the sacrifices involved in giving us life created a bond of union which we as natural children did not realize until many years after the event, and which we as supernatural children may not have realized to the fullest even now.

In our analysis of piety, there will no doubt be something to be desired. Even Father Simler, toward the end of his little book on filial piety, reminds us: "Piety is truly a mystery, a great mystery, because it contains so many treasures hidden from the vulgar; it is the distinctive character, the supernatural instinct, the filial disposition of the children of God. It is, as it were, the soul of the Christian life; it is Jesus extending to us the fruits of His Incarnation; it is Mary admitting us with her "First-born into the family of God." (Filial Piety, p. 121). Earlier in his work, he points out that the family of God is the Catholic Church; the society of God in Himself and His children—with Jesus, His first-born Son into the adoptive family; with Mary, His privileged daughter and Mother of Jesus; with the angels and men made children of God in Jesus Christ. In this way, he relates our subject to the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ.
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FILIAL PIETY RELATED TO FAITH, HOPE, AND CHARITY

In his development of the subject, Father Simler relates filial piety to faith, hope, and charity. I believe we can profit from following this line of thought, although we cannot develop the subject as thoroughly as he did.

Faith. Faith is a positive affirmation based, not upon evidence, but on the authority of someone in whom we have confidence. If this authority is divine, faith is divine. In order to believe reasonably, we must know that he in whom we believe is worthy of belief. We must have confidence in the authority. The greater this confidence, the stronger our faith. We believe in God our Father. This filial piety leads us not only to accept the truth of what He has revealed, but also leads us to admiration of His wisdom, knowledge, goodness. It leads us to respect, honor, love, and be grateful to Him.

We have a similar filial piety toward Mary and for obvious reasons. If we have faith in God, should we not have faith in the Mother of God? If we admire God’s power, should we not also admire Mary through whom that power is made manifest to us? If we wish to share in the treasury of grace, must we not have filial devotion to Mary through whom these graces are dispensed to us as to all mankind?

This model of filial piety based on faith can readily be applied to the natural family. As Father Simler puts it: “Behold the child: he believes the words of his father with absolute and unreserved confidence. It is the most complete certitude, because the child cannot even suppose that his father is deceived or that he takes pleasure in deceiving.” (Filial Piety, p. 69.)

The same is true of the child’s relations to his mother. The words that Father Chaminade applies to Jesus apply to all children: The Son of God permits Himself “to be nursed, clad, fed, and educated by a creature that fulfills towards Him all the duties of a Mother . . . .” As a helpless babe, He rests on the knee of Mary and, close to her heart, is nourished with milk from her breast. He invites her tender caress, keeps near her feet, and listens with all docility. (Spirit, p. 154.)
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If children today sometimes fail to develop that type of faith in their parents that our model suggests, the fault may lie in the parents themselves. Parents must be careful to strike the balance between being over-restrictive and being over-indulgent toward their children. Either attitude could weaken or destroy the faith of the child as also, of course, could an attitude of neglect.

**Hope.** Faith and hope are closely related. Hope is confidence in the power, the goodness, the benevolence of our Father. Take away from the child’s confidence in his father and you will, at the same time, destroy the faith he had in his father’s word.

"Why do we hope that God will fulfill His promises?" asks Father Simler. "It is not because we know that He is our Father and we are His children?" It is Jesus Christ, our Brother, who inspires us with confidence in His Father and our Father. Christ tells us that even wicked fathers give good things to their children. How much more so, then, will our Heavenly Father, the height of all Goodness, give us graces and the gifts that we need. (*Filial Piety*, p. 70.)

Mary our Mother also inspires us with hope in our Heavenly Father. In the Magnificat she tells us that, "He that is mighty hath done great things to me . . . . His mercy is from generations unto generations, to them that fear Him . . . . He hath filled the hungry with good things . . . Luke 1: 49-54).

In the natural family, hope is also engendered by confidence in the parents. If the parents are mature, if they accept their responsibilities, if they are reasonably successful in providing for their family within their means, children will have confidence in them, confidence based on the proven ability to produce. Contrariwise, nothing will weaken confidence faster than repeated promises which are not fulfilled, evident neglect of the duties of parenthood, and immaturity which makes it clear that this individual is incapable of doing the things that a parent can reasonably be expected to do.

The comparison is feeble, of course, because confidence in God is so much more complete and soundly founded than the child’s confidence in a human being, even though that human being is his father or mother. Confidence in God, as Father Simler says
in another work, "knows neither measure nor reserve. It embraces the present and the future, the end and the means; it expects more than it would think of asking, because it trusts in an infinite goodness, a sovereign wisdom, unlimited power, inexhaustible benevolence." (Filial Confidence, p. 15.) Evidently, a human being cannot supply this. But such confidence can serve as an ideal toward which we can strive.

Charity. Charity is the tie of perfection, the complete expansion of faith and hope. We could not abandon ourselves entirely to our Father by absolute faith and hope unless we could say to God: You are my love and my All; the spirit of filial piety is inseparable from the spirit of charity. (Filial Piety, p. 70.)

We love God as the Author and Preserver of our natural life, but also as our beloved Father who has given to us the life He Himself lives, the divine life of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. We are more closely united to Him, says Father Simler, than to our own mother. (Filial Piety, p. 12.)

We love our Blessed Mother, too. Father Chaminade exhorted his disciples to a love of esteem and appreciation of Mary based on her extraordinary prerogatives. Our love should be a tender one "because of the love and tenderness with which her amiable heart burns for us." We cannot comprehend this "ocean of love"; we cannot conceive Mary's "eager desire to enrich us with spiritual blessings"; we cannot know "all the evils (she) wishes to avert from us." In every way Mary's heart shares in the sentiments of her Divine Son who is Himself the God of Love. (Spirit, p. 155.)

If we could begin to comprehend the extent and depth of the love of God and Mary for each one of us, our filial piety would know no bounds.

We find some approach to it on earth in the love which lovers have for one another and, more so, in the devoted love of a mother and a father for their children.

In the natural order, the child needs this love and affection for the full development of his personality. Yet, parents' love must not be oversolicitous lest it destroy the freedom of action of the child, a freedom of action which, like affection, is also necessary
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for the development of the child’s personality.

Here we can take a cue from God and Mary. Although They love us with an intense love, a sacrificial love, an unselfish love, yet They do not force our wills to accept Them. Too well do we know how many men resist this love, to their own undoing. But, undoing or not, all men are free to choose. In the same way, the child must not be overpowered with love—a selfish love, no doubt—to the point where he is no longer able to exercise freedom of choice. If this happens, he has become so emotionally involved with his parents that he cannot now, nor can he ever, be free to act without consulting their whims and wishes.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FILIAL PIETY

Having seen how filial piety is related to faith, hope, and charity, let us now consider the characteristics of filial piety as outlined by Father Simler: dependence and respect, submission, devotedness, tenderness and affection, devotion to Mary.

1. First of all, filial piety is characterized by a spirit of dependence on God and respect for His creatures. Christ gives us the example: The glorification of His Father has been His mission on earth. In His prayer, He thinks first of honoring His Father: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.” He invites us to ask His help, but with only one purpose: “Whatsoever you shall ask the Father in my name, that I will do: that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” (John 14:13)

Since we are all sons of God and Mary, we are all brothers in Christ. Therefore, we must love our neighbors as other Christs. Father Simler offers us a test of our filial piety based on these truths. “If you wish to know whether you are animated with the true spirit of piety, examine what respect you entertain for God, for His holy name, for His word, for objects consecrated to Him—for priests, for religious, for the Christian who is a child of God, for superiors of both the spiritual and temporal order . . . (Filial Piety, p. 56.)

Christ Himself forcefully underlined this test when He told us that he who says he loves God and hates his brother is a liar.
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If we truly love God and Mary, it is automatic that we will love our fellowman.

In the family of nature, filial love must be characterized by dependence on parents and respect for all. Of course, father and mother must act in such a way as to merit respect. Even so, children, once they are aware of human weaknesses, will make allowances and will not permit minor failings to interfere with the honor and respect due to those who are the source of the child’s physical life and who have made sacrifices to develop him spiritually, morally, intellectually, and emotionally.

Within the family there will be unity and charity if all constantly are aware that the other members are children of God and Mary and brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

2. A second characteristic of filial piety is a spirit of submission. Here again Christ is our Model. His whole life was a life of obedience to His heavenly Father. He wills only what His Father wills. His Father’s will is His food, His joy, His sole occupation. Prompt, generous, constant, and universal obedience is His, even to death on the cross.

In the family of Nazareth, He showed the same submission to His Mother Mary and to His foster-father Joseph. He was subject to them in all things. Mary and Joseph themselves demonstrated a spirit of obedience to the Heavenly Father. For example, why should Mary, in her condition, travel in order to fulfill the command of a temporal ruler to take the census? Why should Joseph take the Child and His Mother and fly into Egypt? Mary and Joseph did not ask these questions. They heard the command of God and they obeyed promptly, unquestioningly.

In the natural family, there is need today to re-emphasize the necessity of obedience. The authority of the father has declined as mother has taken over more and more of the care and development of the child. Further, the authority of the school, the Church, and even the child psychologist has become more pronounced—an almost inevitable by-product of our cultural development.

An adjustment to these changes is necessary. The concept of shared authority of husband and wife is being developed. And,
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with our stress on democratic action, the notion of the family council in which the children participate in the process of decision-making, is held in high esteem in some quarters.

What needs to be emphasized, it seems to me, is not that these new developments are bad and should be nipped in the bud, but that in the final analysis, the ultimate authority in the home is that of the father. We can all help him reach the decision, but when he makes the decision we all have the duty, in filial piety, to obey.

3. Thirdly, filial piety is characterized by a spirit of devotedness, a willingness to do all in our power to promote the glory of God. This calls for a great unselfishness, a desire to sacrifice oneself. Father Simler frequently summed it up in these few words: “Desire nothing, refuse nothing.” (Filial Piety, p. 72.) Look for nothing for yourself and never turn down an inspiration from God or His Blessed Mother to do good.

In trying to make an application to the natural family, we again see how limited the application must be. Some children are selfish by nature, others are selfish because they have been pampered by their parents. Again, we hope for and try to develop unselfish, mature human beings. But can we expect that, on the average, they will sacrifice all for their family? The individual has a right and in most cases a duty to live his own life. It is only the exceptionally devoted child whose vocation it is to give up his own future in order to take care of aged or infirm parents, or brothers or sisters who need guidance and protection, perhaps because the parents have already been called to their eternal reward.

Thus we see that the complete self-abandonment which is necessary at the supernatural level in order to attain sanctity does not have its perfect counterpart in the natural order. Nevertheless, the devotedness which characterizes spiritual filial piety can serve as a model for natural filial piety—a goal to be striven for even though we cannot attain it in its perfection.

4. The fourth characteristic of filial piety is a spirit of tenderness and affection. “Piety is essentially love, charity, tenderness; it is the free, voluntary, spontaneous, yet just and reasonable
homage of the heart, of the mind, of all the faculties of the soul, of all the powers of life. . . .” (Filial Piety, p. 58.)

Father Simler exhorts us to search our souls on this point: “See whether you serve (God) not by constraint, but through love, not occasionally, but constantly; in small things as well as in great things, in dryness as in consolation; if you do not love Him in this manner, you have not the true spirit of piety, such as God gives it to His children.” (Ibid., p. 59.)

We have already discussed the place of love in the natural family. We may merely add here that love begets love. Especially for the small child, any discussion of love of his parents as an obligation will be meaningless. But he can feel the warmth of their affection in the way they speak to him, caress him, minister to his needs. This has real meaning, and this the child will reciprocate.

5. The final characteristic of filial piety is that it is Marian. It is through the Mother that the Father is glorified in His Son, made man. Or, as our motto expresses it, “Through the Mother to the Son.”

Christ “pays a similar homage of respect, submission, devotedness, and affection to His Mother; he continues to honor her in heaven, living with her equally for the honor and glory of His Father.” (Filial Piety, p. 59.)

Father Chaminade then goes on to make some absolute but none the less true predictions: He “who would try to acquire the spirit of piety without having a tender devotion to the most holy Virgin, would be losing his time; on the contrary, whoever endeavors to find the spirit of piety in the practice of filial piety towards Mary, chooses the shortest, the easiest, and the surest way.” (Ibid, p. 60.)

Father Chaminade explains this close relationship in this way: “Christ has so ordained all concerns of religion that Mary participated and cooperated in all of them. If other proof were wanted, would we need aught else but to mention that Mary is the Mother of Jesus and of all those that are born of Jesus?” All the graces we receive from Christ pass through the hands of Mary. “The best and richest of Fathers prepares the means of our salvation” and “through the hands of the most tender Mother He applies these
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means to us! . . . Having thus placed all the treasures of His grace in the hands of Mary, He thus evidences His intention of having us ever apply for them to her; our confidence in her reverts to His honor.” *(Spirit, p. 150.)*

Since filial piety is Marian, its applications in the natural family are fairly obvious. But let us consider them nevertheless, in the final section of this discussion on the exercises of filial piety.

**EXERCISES OF FILIAL PIETY**

Let us consider merely two exercises of filial piety—imitation of virtues and the family reunion.

Mary, of course, is the epitome of all virtues. No virtue can be mentioned which she did not practice in its highest perfection. But it is interesting, and, I hope, instructive, to note that the *Spirit of Our Foundation* refers to an interesting gathering of Sodalists to discuss the ten principal virtues which the Gospel records of Mary.

We demonstrate our filial piety towards God and Mary and our spiritual brotherhood with Christ by practicing these, and of course all the other, virtues of which Mary is our model.

The ten virtues and the scriptural references, in brief, are these:

1) Her chastity: “I know not man.”
2) Her prudence: “She thought within herself what manner of salutation this should be . . . Mary kept all these words, pondering over them in her heart.”
3) Her humility: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord . . . He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid.”
4) Her faith: “Blessed art thou that hast believed.”
5) Her piety: “My soul doth magnify the Lord . . . The apostles persevered in prayer with Mary, the Mother of Jesus.”
6) Her obedience: She obeyed the law of the state in going to Bethlehem to be inscribed, and the Mosaic Law ordering her to visit the Temple in Jerusalem.
7) Her poverty: “She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger . . . She offered a sacrifice of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.”
8) Her patience: She fled into Egypt; she sought her Son
for three days; she beheld Him suspended on the cross.

9) Her charity: "They have no wine." She visited Elizabeth.

10) Her compassion: "A sword of sorrow shall pierce thy heart."

Mary is our Mother. We should imitate her in the practice of the virtues which she developed to such perfection. For the Marianist, the Constitutions of the Society of Mary have reminded him of this from the earliest days of his formation: "As an effect of this filial piety, the child of the Society is instinctively led to imitate the life of Jesus and Mary by applying himself, with marked predilection, to reproduce the virtues most conspicuous in the family of Nazareth. Among these virtues he discerns especially humility, simplicity, the spirit of faith and of mental prayer, and the family spirit; these ought to be the prominent features of the Society of Mary." (Article 296.)

In the family of nature, parents should also recognize that children are great imitators. Even at a very early age they are quick to pick up moral attitudes, not from an understanding of the words they hear, but from the intonation of the voice, the emotional tone, and the actions they witness.

By being models of the virtues Mary practiced, parents give good example to their children and gradually develop in them the habits of right action which are the virtues.

Contrariwise, if parents do not practice what they preach they may be almost certain that their children will ignore the preachments and imitate the practices.

Besides the imitation of virtue, another exercise of filial piety is the family reunion.

Reversing the order for this once, let us first consider Father Simler's pen picture of the reunion in the family of nature. In this day of television, motion pictures, and the family car, we may have to make some revisions, but the central idea is still practical. He says: "When night comes on, terminating the labors of the day, the whole family assemble around father and mother; all the children are happy and content; the absent ones are not forgotten, for them there is a memento of prayers. The hardships of the day are over
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and forgotten, there is mutual encouragement for new exertions and, after renewed devotion in the morning, they disperse with joyful hearts, each resuming his allotted occupation.” (Filial Piety, p. 105.) He then goes on to sketch the happy renewals of filial piety on special occasions throughout the year: namedays, anniversaries, a family event, “not to mention any of the sweet surprises invented by the piety and delicacy of every member of the family!” (Ibid.)

Then he goes on to the spiritual family reunion and waxes eloquent in his description. “What a family! There is one heavenly Father Whose loving eyes dwell upon us. Mary, our Mother, whose ineffable smiles assuage our pains and dissipate our sadness; our heavenly brothers, the angels and saints who tell us of the Father’s glories, of the Mother’s tenderness; we are surrounded by our brothers on earth and, united in prayer, we ask of our Father graces and blessings. Above all Jesus, our elder Brother, receives us with love, introduces us, as it were, by the hand, into the knowledge and intimacy with the Father, for it is He Who reveals to us what is pleasing to the Father. ‘Hear ye Him.’ (Matt. 17:5). (Ibid., pp. 105-6.)

There is much more But this is sufficient to give us an idea of the richness and beauty of the family reunion if we are animated with true filial piety.

This, then, is filial piety—Marian and family, as taught by the founder of the Society of Mary, William Joseph Chaminade, and his successor as Superior General, Joseph Simler.
MARIAN REPRINTS

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NO. 4—THE IMITATION OF MARY—Rev. Placid Huault, S.M.
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NO. 7—MEN, MARY, AND MANLINESS—Ed Willock
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NO. 22—THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND THE APOSTOLATE—
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NO. 24—MARY'S APOSTOLIC ROLE IN HISTORY—Bro. John Totten, S.M.
NO. 25—AD DIEM ILLUM—Pius X
NO. 26—KNOW YOUR MOTHER BETTER: A MARIAN BIBLIOGRAPHY—
    Bro. Stanley Mathews, S.M.
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