

Ought children to be spanked?

To this modern question, there is an obvious, age-old answer, concerning whether or not corporal punishment is an essential part of education. However, more important than the answer, is the why and the how of the answer, which can be best understood in answering the objections that are commonly presented.

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There is an objection that is incompatible with the Faith, that of the naturalism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who maintained that every child, born naturally good, is corrupted by his social environment, so that he should be allowed entirely to find himself, without any so-called negative influence, such as restraints, controls, exterior discipline, either from society or from his family.

cannot be considered in the purely natural order, but must be treated as one fallen through original sin. Although redeemed and sanctified through baptism, he still does not recover the preternatural gift of integrity, lost by our first parents, that maintains perfect control and order. "There remain, therefore, in human nature the effects of original sin, the chief of which are the weakness of the will and disorderly inclinations." (Ib.)



This error is clearly condemned by Pope Pius XI under the name of "Pedagogic naturalism" (Encyclical On the Education of the Redeemed Man". He teaches that the child to be educated

Quoting from the book of Proverbs, the Pope draws the conclusion, which is the theological explanation of the necessity of corporal punishment: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child and the rod of correction shall drive it away" (Prov. 22:15). Disorderly inclinations then must be corrected, good tendencies encouraged and regulated from the tender age of childhood, and above all the mind must be enlightened and the will strengthened by supernatural truth and by the means of grace, without which it is impossible to control evil impulses..."

Note that the Pope does not consider corporal punishment as effective in itself, as a purely natural means, but within the entire supernatural context of the elevation of fallen human nature to acts of supernatural value. The rod of correction of disorderly inclination is only of value inasmuch as it is in constant alliance with the teaching of the Faith and the cooperation with the working of divine grace. It is not the spanking alone that works, but corporal punishment

when it is seen as a preparation for the child's living according to the commandments and charity, by mortifying the disordered inclinations and selfishness of fallen human nature, that so often stand up as a powerful obstacle to God's working in the soul. The Pope's conclusion extends much further than simply the approval of corporal punishment, but includes in its condemnation everything that denies the duty of educators, and parents in particular, to correct, control, direct and punish the disorders to which all children are subject:

"Every form of pedagogic naturalism which in any way excludes or weakens supernatural Christian formation in the teaching of youth, is therefore false. Every method of education founded, wholly or in part, on the denial or forgetfulness of original sin and of grace, and which relies on the sole powers of human nature, is unsound. Such, generally speaking, are those modern systems bearing various names which appeal to a claim to self-government and to unrestrained freedom on the part of the child, and which diminish or even suppress the teacher's authority and action, attributing to the child an exclusive primacy of initiative..." (Ib.)

Corporal punishment not psychological

Granted that there is a place for restraint, control and exterior discipline, as a Catholic must, are we not to admit that there are serious objections to the practical application of corporal punishment, objections that effectively exclude it, with the possible exception of some extreme cases? These arguments are principally of a psychological nature, namely that:

- corporal punishment is very burdensome, shameful and disgusting to the person who has to bear it, and that consequently it causes him to rebel against authority;

- corporal punishment humiliates the delinquent;

- and diminishes esteem for the person who inflicts it, interpreted as it frequently is, as an expression of frustration and lack of patience and charity on the part of the educator. (Cf. Quenette; *Education de la puereté*, p. 189)

These arguments are well expressed by no less an author than the greatest educator the Church has known, St. John Bosco: "To strike

one in any way, to make him kneel in a painful position, to pull his ears, and other similar punishments, must be absolutely avoided, because the law forbids them, and they greatly irritate the boys and lower the reputation of the educator" (In Avallone; *Religion, Reason & Kindness*, p. 80). The saint continues, speaking about his preventive system of education, drawing on his own wealth of personal experience: "If this system is carried out in our Houses, I believe that we shall be able to obtain good results, without having recourse to the use of the cane and other corporal punishments. During the forty years I have lived among boys, I do not remember having used punishments of any kind, and by the help of God I have always obtained not only what duty required, but also whatever I desired from those very boys in regard to whom all hope of good results seemed lost." (Ib.)

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The truth of these observations, and the incomparable wisdom of a saint cannot be denied. We have all heard of cases in which corporal punishment has produced anger, resentment and rebellion, especially when inflicted under the influence of anger and impatience. We can all understand that corporal punishment, especially if done in public, is humiliating and shameful. We have all heard of cases of adults who now despise those who punished them physically when they were young, and we are all aware of the cruelty with which such discipline can be administered, which is nothing other than child abuse. How could we not be full of admiration for a system of education that excludes all these dangers, a system of constant and preventive vigilance, "based entirely on reason, religion and charity; therefore it excludes all violent punishment and tries to do without even the slightest chastisement" (St. John Bosco, *Op.Cit.* p. 74).

But corporal punishment is Catholic

Yet the traditional rite of penance, as contained in the Roman Ritual, Tit. III, Cap. 3, #4 orders the priest who is to absolve the penitent

from an excommunication in the external forum, that if he is a man, he is to be beaten with a rod or with cords, as he recites Psalm 50. This is corporal punishment in the Church's liturgy! Moreover, St. Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews, speaks of the chastisement of corporal punishment as the duty of a father, and a sign that he truly loves his son, so that only illegitimate children are to be deprived of this wonderful medicine. In applying this remedy to his son's rebellious fallen nature, he is really only imitating God, who likewise chastises because He loves, as the Apostle of divine love himself points out: "Such as I love, I rebuke and chastise" (Apoc. 3:19). Here are the words of St. Paul:

"For whom the Lord loveth, he chastiseth; and he scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. Persevere under discipline. God dealeth with you as with his sons; for what son is there, whom the father doth not correct? But if you be without chastisement, whereof all are made partakers, then are you bastards, and not sons....Now all chastisement for the present indeed seemeth not to bring with it joy, but sorrow; but afterwards it will yield, to them that are exercised by it, the most peaceable fruit of justice." (Heb. 5:6-11)

Moreover, we are all aware of the inspired wisdom of Sacred Scripture, which speaks repeatedly and explicitly of corporal punishment, as in the following texts:

"Withhold not correction from a child: for if thou strike him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and deliver his soul from hell." (Prov. 23:13,14).

"He that spareth the rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him correcteth him betimes." (Prov. 13:24).

"The rod and reproof give wisdom: but the child that is left to his own will bringeth his mother to shame." (Prov. 29:15).

"He that loveth his son, frequently chastiseth him, that he may rejoice in his latter end, and not grope after the doors of his neighbours... Give thy son his way, and he shall make thee afraid... Give him not liberty in his youth, and wink not at his devices. Bow down his neck while he is young, and beat his sides while he is

a child, lest he grow stubborn, and regard thee not, and so be a sorrow of heart to thee." (Ecclesiasticus 30:1, 9-12).

Although we cannot help but understand how repugnant it is to administer physical punishment to those whom we love, we also realize how great an act of charity it can be. It is inconceivable that the new covenant of divine charity promulgated by our Divine Savior, could have nullified this wisdom of the old law, truly timeless and eternal as it is, for it is based upon the realities of fallen human nature and of grace. More yet: - we have all personally experienced the truth of these observations, namely that the child who is not punished in a real and physical manner becomes impossibly selfish, self-willed, paralyzed by his passions and by his sense of self-importance and independence, and ultimately a fanatical liberal, resistant to grace.

Can psychology and spirituality be reconciled?

Does not every child need to feel the authority of real punishments? Does he not have to realize that there is one who can control him even physically? Does he not need a strong character over him, with the kind of non-sentimental strength that will inculcate the good of self-discipline, learned as it is by inflicted discipline? Is not this mortification of nature essential to the work of grace in the supernatural life? Does not every child have a right to experience the combination of inner strength and firmness on the one hand, and tenderness and loving care on the other, that is the perfect imitation of the working of divine Providence?

But if all these spiritual observations are true, how can they be reconciled with the psychology of a child, so carefully understood and explained by St. John Bosco? Is there any way out of this apparent contradiction, any secret, then, to the application of corporal punishment? Is there any corporal punishment that neither incites to rebellion nor humiliates, and that does not demean the educator?

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE