



The Ascetic Lives of Mothers

I heard it said once that motherhood is a type of asceticism. Like the ascetics, mothers find themselves in a situation that requires their utter devotion, self-denial, daily emotional exercises, facing extreme challenges, and much prayer. I have read about the lives of many saints who became brides of Christ and lived as monastics. The idea of being able to spend sustained time in prayer or the reading of the Holy Scriptures made me wonder how on earth a lay person — a mother — could possibly contend with this world and reach that heavenly finish line St. Paul talks about. After expressing this concern to the Mother Abbess of a monastery, I was relieved when she responded with this quote.

“You greatly delude yourself and err, if you think that one thing is demanded from the layman and another from the monk; since the difference between them is in that whether one is married or not, while in everything else they have the same responsibilities... Because all must rise to the same height; and what has turned the world upside down is that we think only the monk must live rigorously, while the rest are allowed to live a life of indolence.” (St. John Chrysostom)

When we accept a little child (or bigger one) in His name, we are accepting the ascetic life of motherhood. The “rules” of motherhood include the two commandments Christ gave: “The first of all the commandments is: *‘And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’* There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29–31).

How do we apply these commandments to the mothering of our children? Consider the virtues taught by the Church and how they apply to your own life. These are spiritual habits we can pursue at any time. They are tools to help us as we endeavor to “*work out our salvation with fear and trembling*” (Phil. 2:12), both for the salvation of our own souls and so that we may be light-bearers for our children as we help them walk along the way.

Each “rule” is given with the understanding that you will seek out the guidance of your own spiritual advisor, the person who knows you and your life and family situation, for the specific ways to walk forward in Christ.

The Virtues Humility

Humility is the weapon used against pride. It is thinking of others before yourself. You might be thinking, “Wait, I’m a mom. I’m always thinking of others before myself!” I agree. We do spend a lot of time thinking of our children and providing for them day in and day out. Humility is tied in with the virtue of happiness. When Christ endured the cross, it was “*for the joy set before Him*” (from Heb. 12:2). Letting our joy be evident as we serve in our homes or in our churches shows our children the blessing that comes from service.

Liberality

Liberality is living generously; it serves as a weapon against greed. Give freely to others when it is within



your power to do so, without any expectation of getting something in return. This includes giving to the homeless, friends, enemies, neighbors, and those in our own families.

Chastity

Chastity is a weapon against lust; it isn't only for virgins. Chastity is purity of heart, mind, and body. This means being mindful of what we watch, read, listen to, and say. We don't want to hide our heads in the sand or make some alternate reality for our children, but we do want them to understand the world around them in a loving and godly context.

Mildness

Mildness is used to fight wrath and anger. It consists of kindness, gentleness, and calm in word and action. Whether you have one child or many children, home can become a chaotic place. Mildness is closely related to temperance and humility because it requires a lot of self-control and humility to address the myriad of issues each home faces with kindness, gentleness, and calm. Of course there will be those days you are tempted to lock yourself in the closet and curl up in the fetal position, but the God of the universe is there on those days, too. As we seek the Lord, through prayer and the observance of the sacraments, we can be the calm in our homes. His power is that big!

Temperance

Temperance is a weapon against gluttony. Practicing self-control, moderation, and restraint as a mother sets a good example to your children in how they should approach life. These lessons are taught each church year through the observation and celebration of the fasts and feasts. Learning to celebrate without gorging ourselves helps us to appreciate the sacrifice of the fast and embrace the blessing of the feast.

Happiness

Happiness protects us from envy. There is a time for great rejoicing and a time for sorrow. For Christians, even the times of sorrow are tempered with joy, because we know this world is temporary and we press on toward the world to come. We can help our children embrace happiness by being, well, happy. We can be happy because we are thankful to the Lord for all His blessings, for our family and for how He provides for us. We can also be happy for how He provides for others. The Bible tells us to rejoice in the Lord always. Because of His great sacrifice for us, we can truly rejoice even in the midst of trials.

Diligence

We use diligence to fight against sloth or laziness. Diligence is doing any task (work/chore/job/responsibility) until it is completed to the very best of our ability. Of course, as mothers, we have times when emergencies come up and plans must change, but if we strive to set the example of managing our time well so we can be diligent in our responsibilities, we will find it time well spent.

A few years ago I had the rare opportunity to visit a monastery. This was my first visit to a monastery and I was nervous.



Reading about the lives of the saints, the monastics, made me wonder if I would feel discontent with my life after spending time there, longing for the a focused life of prayer and service to Christ.

Standing in the newly built church I was drawn to the icon of the Annunciation. There was Mary in the presence of the Archangel Gabriel willingly accepting the call to be the mother of Christ! She was called and her response made it possible for mankind to be saved! At that moment I realized that my responsibility as a Christian wife and mother was to be an imitator of the Theotokos. Of course I would not be called upon to bear the God of all creation, but, I realized, I had been called upon to be mother to the children the Lord had blessed me with and He daily awaits my answer. Will I surrender my will and follow Him as our own Blessed Mother did?

Each of us, mother or not, has a calling to embrace the life Christ has called us to. We are not forced to submit or coerced into obedience. We are presented with a question. We are each asked if we will follow Him. He leaves the answer to us.

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