

# Teaching the Way of Love



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## Are You Teaching Your Family the Way of Love?

“Why are we hiking on this trail? Why can’t we just go back to the car?” My daughter’s sulky complaint came from further behind me, as she had sat down on a bench yet again.

“We want to go see Lake Superior,” my wife responded.

“Nobody wants to see the stupid lake,” my daughter grumped.



That conversation pretty much summed up the entire family vacation this past summer. All I wanted to do as a father was to spend some quality time with my family and share with them the beauty of God’s creation. My two children wanted nothing of it. This happens to me a lot as a father. I have in my head an ideal of parenting that I would share certain values with my children in fun, meaningful ways and they would enjoy the learning experience. But with my two head-strong children, that ideal has not come true. It’s frustrating. However, this is a valuable lesson for me to struggle with.

Marriage (and by extension parenthood) is a vocation to learn to love my wife and my children with the complete, self-sacrificing love of Christ. My vocation is not necessarily to use my God-given talents to shape my children’s interests. It’s not even primarily to help my children be successful in life. It’s certainly not to shape my children in my own image. My vocation is to love my children and in the process to teach them what authentic love means. I am learning that self-sacrificing love may even mean letting go of my ideals for parenthood.

In his apostolic letter, *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II calls the family the “school of love.” He points out that the family is the first place that children encounter authentic love. Therefore, the family is the first place that children encounter the love of God. The primary job of the parent is to introduce children to authentic love through the love of the family so the family can move together closer to the love of Christ.

### What Is Authentic Love?

Authentic love is more than an emotional bond or the recognition of the good in others. Authentic love means making the choice of putting the good of the other person before your own good. The love that Jesus Christ modeled for us and then commanded us to have for one another is to pour ourselves out for the other in loving sacrifice for the sake of their good.

## How Do We Teach the Way of Love?

The family is the best place for people to learn about love. Father Stan Fortuna (and others) teach the acronym **FAMILY Forget About Me I Love You**. Family life offers many teachable moments in which you can encourage every family member to forget about themselves and to put others first. Of course, this all starts with you as a parents. Let's look at a few examples of how to do this.

The most important teachable moments come in your own examples of selfless love. Do your children see you sacrificing yourself for them? When I was a child, one theme of my family was parental prerogative. Mom and Dad got their selection of food first. Kids got what the parents didn't want. Parents got seconds on dessert. Kids got only one piece. As a parent, I decided not to claim the parental prerogative. Instead, my wife and I ask our children what food they would choose and we negotiate. Sometimes I give up my preference for my children, other times I ask them to give up their preference. In this way, I hope to model sacrificial love and give them a chance to practice it as well.

The most powerful example of selfless love I can give my children is to love them even when they oppose my ideals. Embracing Jesus's call to love selflessly means sacrificing the ideals of parenthood I had in my head. It means parenting the children God gave me, not the ones I wanted.

It's also important not to adopt a "poor me" attitude when we sacrifice for our children. The temptation might be to make your children painfully aware of the sacrifices you're making for them. You want them to acknowledge your sacrifice and even to feel bad about it. I am often tempted to point out that I gave up my teaching career to be a stay-home father. It's not a decision I ever regretted, but sometimes I feel like my children owe me for my sacrifice. But that's not really love, That's self-serving sacrifice. Sacrifice that is born out of love is done joyfully. It's done with joy for the good received by the beloved. Selfless love is not an easy lesson to learn. It takes time and effort to overcome the selfishness we inherited from Original Sin. But with consistent lessons and role modeling, you can teach your children the way of love.



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