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AN AUGUSTINIAN APPROACH TO  
PARENTING FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Introduction

These are not easy times in which to grow up. All sorts of social factors are involved. The increased impact of Narcissism and Nihilism on American society, the breakdown of standards, and the divorce epidemic are all factors.<sup>1</sup> These trends have had especially unhappy implications for the African-American community. Some of them are more pronounced in this sub-culture, and they tend to exacerbate the likelihood of a Black family falling into or remaining in the state of poverty.

While in 1960, two-thirds of Black children lived in two-parent homes (compared with 91 percent of white children), by 1995 the number had shrunk to one-third, compared to 76 percent of whites. In 1960 only 22 percent of births to Black women were out of wedlock. By 1994, that figure was 70 percent. Likewise while only 28 percent of Black women between fifteen and forty-five had never been married in 1960, by 1998 the figure was more than 50 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Such single motherhood entails a higher likelihood of poverty among African-American adults and their children than their white counterparts. And the increased poverty makes the success of marriage in the Black community, especially in its impover-

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<sup>1</sup>For the impact of Nihilism on American society, see Cornel West, *Race Matters*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); also see this writer's *Blessed Are the Cynical: How Original Sin Can Make America a Better Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>See Ellen Willis, *Don't Think, Smile!: Notes on a Decade of Denial* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 106-107.

ished segments, less likely. Without the economic security of steady employment on the part of a husband, marriage seems less like a good situation for the Black woman. The pressures of racism on the Black man have led some to claim a kind of macho attitude that some African-American women have found problematic, particularly in view of the self-reliance Black women have tended to display since slavery.

Other sobering statistics regarding the welfare of children could be cited. While in 1970, 10.2 million children lived below the poverty line (14.9 percent of American children); by 1999, 12.8 million children (18.3 percent of the population) fell in this category.<sup>3</sup> One million per year suffer homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

The staggering statistics reported in 2000 by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect are relevant. As recently as 1998, almost 3 million children (1 in 23) were alleged victims of maltreatment.<sup>5</sup>

We also see the neglect of children in the statistics on "dead-beat dads." While according to 1997 government statistics, 6.3 million American men not living with their children were liable for child support, only 2.6 million are actually paying.<sup>6</sup>

But even in functional families, parenting has fallen on hard times in American society. The writer submits that the

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<sup>3</sup>United States. Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 121st ed. (Washington, DC: USGPO, 2001), 442. A more recent report, noted in *Time*, 19 August 2001, 58, mediated somewhat by population data increase, places the figure at a still-too-high 16 percent.

<sup>4</sup>CBS's *Sixty Minutes*, August 19, 2001.

<sup>5</sup>United States. Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 120th ed., 219. See also Elizabeth Bartholet, *Nobody's Children: Abuse and Neglect, Foster Drift, and the Adoption Alternative* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 61.

<sup>6</sup>United States. Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 121st ed., 355.

crisis relates to a loss of African/Augustinian roots in American society. In place of its realism, many families have fallen prey to the optimistic understanding of human nature advanced by the European Enlightenment and especially promulgated since the dawn of the television age by the media elite and the cultural gurus. Certainly such a view of human nature undergirds much contemporary parenting ideology. We have assumed that what children most need in order to become well-adjusted adults is self-respect and that we want to be their "friends."<sup>7</sup> Note how the assumption that fundamentally good children will develop into healthy adults without much help as long as we do not get in the way. (Of course, we also insist that they need to respect the "needs" of adults.) Thus we count "quality time" more valuable than quantity of time, as if children were good enough to rear themselves most of the time with just a little "quality" help from adults.

These dynamics have roots in the 1930s and 1940s as a stress on the insights of therapy to improve parenting began to undermine parental confidence. The results have been permissiveness and an opening for a whole new market for business in clothes, vitamins, cereals, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Also note how the lack of parental confidence feeds the marketing of youth culture businesses. Instead of guiding children, recent clinical models of parenting like Parent Effectiveness Training urge adults only to "hear" the feelings of their chil-

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<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of this view, see Penelope Leach, *Children First: What Our Society Must Do—and Is Not Doing—for Our Children Today* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); also consider the suppositions of Parent Effectiveness Training Techniques.

<sup>8</sup>For this insight the writer is indebted to Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978); see chapter seven, "The Socialization of Reproduction and the Collapse of Authority," especially pages 162-165.

dren. As a result, today's parents often spend a lot of time not leading, because they are struggling to "keep up with the kids," to master their jargon and even their fashions.<sup>9</sup>

Other contemporary social dynamics have had a striking impact on parenting styles and the children we rear. There can be no denying that the increase of women in the work force was justified with the sort of optimistic view of human nature that has been at the expense of children. The idea that "women [and men] can have it all" became manifest as early as the 1970s, when 66 percent of American adults surveyed agreed that "parents should be free to live their own lives even if it means spending less time with their children." Such attitudes were evident even earlier, as women and later men were advised by cultural gurus of the era that they dare not make children more important than themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the neglect of parental duty that has ensued from such ideology has been balanced by a permissiveness and an obsessive concern to get just the right things for our children—the right educational toys, the right schools, placed on the right athletic teams, in the best music programs and summer camps, etc. This sort of obsessiveness about scheduling our children's activities is not unrelated to the fact that such activities alleviate "busy" parents of child-care responsibilities. The permissiveness undergirding such obsessions, which also became a watchword in our schools, was popularized in the late 1970s by the English baby guru Penelope Leach, who claimed that the word "no" crushes children's self-esteem.

There is an interesting paradox here between the indul-

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 169.

<sup>10</sup>David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70s: The Decade That Brought You Modern Life for Better or Worse* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 109.

gence of parents and their neglect of their children in terms of time and supervision. It is not so hard to understand. One word explains it: GUILT. If I'm not spending time with my kids like I should, if I'm not always there to supervise them or attend their games, at least I can indulge them with money and high-powered activities. Social commentator David Frum also has a valid explanation of these dynamics. He wrote:

Indulgence follows neglect as surely as hangovers follow booze....But this sort of obsessiveness [typical of today's parents] flows much more from the parent's own ego than from the needs of the child. There was much talk in the 1970s of how male sexual hunger transformed women into objects. Parental obsessiveness can do the same to children.<sup>11</sup>

### The Augustinian Antidote

Given these dynamics, it is obvious why we need to return to an Augustinian viewpoint when rearing children. The African Father's wise (biblical) insights remind us that children and their parents are not as good as we think.

Recall the basics of Augustinian thinking. The African Father believed that since the Fall, human beings are concupiscent. This entails, in his view, that we are so tied into finding self-satisfaction and instant gratification that we are almost addictive about it. And there is no escape.

The term concupiscence allowed Augustine to express this bondage in terms of a compelling desire not unlike what one feels in the foreplay leading to sexual climax.<sup>12</sup> Just as in the heat of sexual passion we cannot stop the sexual encounter, so

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<sup>11</sup>Frum, *How We Got Here*, 111.

<sup>12</sup>Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, 1.21.24-22.25; 419-420; cf. Augustine, *To Simplician: On Various Questions* 2.20, 395-396.

sinners seeking their own gratification cannot stop seeking it, even when they know better. It is as Paul said in Romans 7:15 and 19: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Augustine conceives of fallen human beings as addicts. Like sex addicts, the more we are driven to seek pleasure and self-fulfillment, the less we will be satisfied, and so the more pleasures we will need to seek. The more you desire, the more you sin, and the more you sin, the more you desire. The African Father more or less made this point when he claimed that (human) nature and custom (our actions) join together to render cupidity stronger.<sup>13</sup>

Every aspect of human life is permeated by our insatiable selfishness, even social life. Thus Augustine wrote:

Worldly society has flowed from a selfish love....In the city of the world both the rulers themselves and the people they dominated are dominated by the lust for domination....Hence, even the wise men in the city of men live according to man, and their only goal has been the goods of their bodies or of the mind or of both.<sup>14</sup>

It is no different in families according to Augustine. And so he wrote:

But who can enumerate all the great grievances with which human society abounds in the misery of this mortal state? Who can weigh them?...I am married; this is one

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<sup>13</sup>Augustine, *To Simplician*, 2.10.

<sup>14</sup>Augustine, *The City of God* 19.5, 413-426.

misery. Children are born to me; they are additional cares....Who ought to be, or who are more friendly than those who live in the same family? And yet who can rely even upon this friendship, seeing that secret treachery has often broken it up, and produced enmity...<sup>15</sup>

Augustine's realism about marriage and family could lend helpful insights for couples and parents who do not feel their needs are being met in a relationship. In our Post-Augustinian era such feelings characteristically result in giving up the relationship rather than recognizing the inevitability of some clash of concupiscent egos in any relationship and using the relationship as an occasion for joyfully and lovingly to purge one's concupiscence. That is a topic for another article.

With regard to the matter at hand, Augustine's realism entailed that he did not advocate a parenting style in which no member of the household be allowed to disrupt domestic peace by disobedience.<sup>16</sup> The African Father's worldview seemed to entail the exercise of discipline. And yet he was not blind to abuses parents and their concupiscence could perpetrate on their children. Thus he advocated a kind of check-and-balance system of parental authority, contending that we must not allow parents to thwart our ministries and lives of faith.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 19.16.

<sup>17</sup>Augustine, *On Faith and the Creed*, 4.9, 393.

### Augustinian Parenting for the New Millennium

Given these suppositions, it follows that we can and should assume that children (and adults) will always look for the easiest, most fun way to do things. They will not discipline themselves or take the high road unless coerced into it.

This realistic view of children and their dispositions entails why it does indeed take a village to raise a child. If kids are not constantly supervised and disciplined, they will find a way to "do their own thing" often to their detriment. The village needs to be around for those moments when children "pull the wool over their parents' eyes." Though not directly dependent on Augustinian insights, the old African adage regarding the role of the community in bringing up kids obviously trades on a view of human nature compatible with the Augustinian vision.

Likewise, we must not idealize parental love in any context, as too many of today's parents so intent on managing their children's loves are wont to do. Even parental love at its best has elements of selfishness. A latter-day Augustinian, the great American Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, said it well in a 1961 sermon:

The love of parents for their children is a virtuous going out from ourselves. It is one of the ways of grace that overcomes our selfishness; that we fall in love, that we love our families, that we love our mates and we love our children. We think we are virtuous. Looking at our virtue, we say, 'I am a good parent.' Probably we are not as good as we think we are. Our children may not have the same complacent judgment about us. And they may be good children, they may not be even rebellious. They are just trying to establish themselves, and they detect, with being



psychiatrists, that there is a curious combination of possessiveness with our love, particularly if we are good parents.<sup>18</sup>

Parents need some Augustinian realism, and the good ones already have it. It is hardly surprising after all that we would be possessive with our kids' lives. It makes biological sense. In loving them, we are loving our genes. Never forget, then, parental love is as such a selfish love, for in loving our offspring we love ourselves.

What might happen if American parents had a self-understanding like Augustine regarding their own "needs" and how the fulfillment of parental pride is a manifestation of self-interest, hubris, and concupiscence? If we could blow the whistle on ourselves when we are organizing their activities, defending their "rights" and preferences in face of the exercise of valid authority by other adults over them, if we keep an eye on our egos as much as possible, we would probably be more effective parents. Again, at this point, the old African adage about it taking a village to raise a child introduces a point, which relates to Augustinian insights. Precisely because parental love is concupiscent, the village needs to intervene sometimes, to function as a check-and-balance to the sometimes insidious ways parents may try to manipulate their children to suit their own egos.

The adoption of this realistic, common-sense Augustinian view of human nature also entails a renewed appreciation of the fact that children are not innocent and devoid of selfishness. Consequently, they will not grow up to be responsible

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<sup>18</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy* (New York: Harper & Row, [1974]; reprint, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 40-41 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

citizens if left to their own devices. As the African Father insisted, children need consistent discipline and instruction in values. Would the results of American society's widespread appropriation of such Augustinian insights entail that more children grow up in stable, happy homes? And, of course, the childrearing process would even work more efficiently if we could get the entire American community to take its responsibilities for children in our neighborhoods more seriously.

The Augustinian vision of human love, with its contention that in loving our children we are really loving ourselves, is good science. Modern science has shown us that parental love is loving our own genes. Armed with this insight, the Augustinian vision may function as a watchdog of our tendency to live vicariously through our children, of trying to manipulate them to be the kind of people we want them to be.

An Augustinian view of parenting, then, concedes the inevitability of our failures. It also recognizes that with hard work, love, and some miracles children can still turn out well. One sixteenth-century Augustinian, Martin Luther, summarized the matter powerfully. He offered an observation that reflected the Norwegian folk-wisdom that the writer heard throughout youth from his mother and from his Norwegian immigrant grandmother born in 1879. In essence, they and my culture were just echoing what Luther had said before them (in a manner consistent with Augustine's African wisdom). Their collective point was that if a child turns out good, it really is a miracle, the work of God:

It still happens to many parents that their children turn out to be bad—even when they have had good training. God does want us to give them free rein and to grant them their will....If our efforts are successful, we should

thank God; if not, we have at least done our part. For that children turn out to be good does not lie in our power and might, but it is God's. If He is not in the ship with us, we shall never sail smoothly.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

This Augustinian/African insight can lift the weight, make parenting more fun. When you realize that you can not do it all, that can make parents a little less obsessive. Augustinian Christians are people who know that parenting is nothing more than the joyous experience of beholding a miracle, of sometimes functioning as a vehicle of the Will of God, and not really being the determinative factor in who our children are or will be. For ultimately, the way a child turns out in adulthood (especially the good things) is God's work.

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<sup>19</sup>Martin Luther, *Sermons*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel*, vol. 24 (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883), 591ff.





