

## MODERATION

### Adapted from "Character Building" by Prof David Isaacs

*A person who is moderate distinguishes between what is reasonable and what is self-indulgent and makes reasonable use of his senses, his time, his money, his efforts and so on, in accordance with true and upright principles.*

The main reason why we should teach this virtue is to enable our children to learn self-control and to live a genuinely Christian life. It is impossible to have self-control or to advance in the Christian life if we are attached to human pleasures, or if we make immoderate use of them, because the saturation of the senses makes us slaves to them.

Moderation is one of the virtues which seems of least interest to youngsters, mainly because they regard any control of their appetites for pleasure as a constraint, failing to realise that if they are immoderate, they can easily fall prey to outside influences and be manipulated by others such as the media and by advertising.

If we do not see that our human existence has a purpose, then pleasure becomes an end in itself and everything else is justifiable on the basis of this criterion. If we admit that human existence has a purpose, then we must admit that pleasure is something which leads us to behave as we should provided we control it with our will. Thus, for instance, there is certain pleasure in eating, but the purpose of eating is to nourish the body; the pleasure involved encourages us to eat properly and this is quite acceptable so long as it does not become immoderate.

We should note in passing that we are not saying that one should not have a good time. The point we are making is that there is a higher purpose, which should regulate our mode of behaviour. Each individual should take responsibility for his own life, in such a way as to make good use of everything he possesses, in the service of God, and of others. He must not only avoid doing harm: he must also do positive good. There is no point in spending his money and time simply for his own pleasure, he must use them for his own benefit and the benefit of others.

#### **1. The consumer society**

Even when we fully realise that our life has a purpose, it is not easy to practise moderation, because the consumer society makes it difficult to distinguish between genuine needs and mere tendencies or whims. If we compare what our grandparents had in their houses with what we have in ours, this point will become clear. How many of our possessions are necessary and how many are superfluous?

A moderate person ought to know, in general, if he needs the things he actually acquires; in other words, he should have certain principles. To see what these principles might be, we could ask ourselves how a certain person actually spends his money.

Apart from what we have said about the conscious search for pleasure, people also act instinctively and let themselves be carried away by mere impulses; the result is an action which responds to an appetite without any thought behind it. Besides this, some people acquire property in order to show off, to be in fashion, just for a change, to compensate for some inner dissatisfaction or to fill some kind of vacuum in their lives. Yet other people always want new things, interpreting "new" as the latest product on the market, instead of realising that the genuinely new thing is the one that keeps on offering us something of value. This rather pessimistic view of society is reinforced by the sales experts, who understand how

people behave and take full advantage of it. It is therefore essential to be aware of what is happening in order to be able to use our will and our ability to reason, so that we can take our own decisions on the basis of some principle or criterion.

A moderate person does not deceive himself. He recognises the value things have and, therefore, he is a realist. He is in a position to use his resources for the benefit of others and has the assurance that, in fact, is what he is doing. But moderation does not mean that a person should not spend money or eat or drink, etc. This is obvious, if we consider the case of a person who does not spend money unless it is absolutely necessary and even then spends it with bad grace. The name for this is "avaricious".

But it is difficult to find the just mean between wasteful and reasonable expenditure. The question is how are we to teach our children to be moderate in using their money and, in general, in acquiring things which are related to superficial pleasures.

The important thing is not to bring them up merely to know what is practical and useful, but also to ensure that they are able to enjoy the things that God has provided in a reasonable and legitimate way.

## **2. Whims or genuine needs?**

Perhaps we could say a word here about whims. By a whim, we mean a superficial, passing desire produced by an unthinking and unjustified reaction.

Once again, we are discussing motives.

If a parent buys a toy simply because his child has seen it in a shop window and screams that he wants it there and then, he is showing little respect for the virtue of moderation and he is not training his child on the right lines. Furthermore, it is important to develop the child's self-control, so that he will not be unduly perturbed if some desire remains unsatisfied.

Countless opportunities arise in the normal course of events which can be put to good use in this regard.

For instance, there are not enough apples to go around the whole family, the favourite breakfast cereal has run out, the child sees something he wants after he has spent all his money for the week or, indeed, when there is plenty of his favourite food on the table. In cases like these, parents can teach their children not to get annoyed, or to make a special effort to leave something which they could actually have and, furthermore, to do so cheerfully.

If children are not to regard moderation as something unpleasant and boring, the parents themselves must show that they are practising it joyfully. If a person gives up smoking for Lent, this is both a mortification to be offered to God and, at the same time, something which will help him to practise moderation. However, he must be very careful not to be bad-humoured and force the rest of the family to mortify themselves on his account, for this would encourage a view of moderation as something associated with long faces. On this point, it is often useful to motivate children by teaching them that these little efforts on their part can be offered up to God or to our Lady, for instance.

Another good reason for practising moderation includes a realistic assessment of the financial position of the household, for this will encourage the children to keep the good of the family in mind depending, of course, on their age and maturity so as not to worry them unduly.

Here, it may help a child to acquire this virtue if it is suggested that he should get a job to bring some extra money into the home, if this is needed. Similarly, a mother may take her children shopping to let them see the price of food.

In general, what we are suggesting is that children should know the value of things and be able to distinguish between what is necessary and what is pleasant but unnecessary, so that they will realise the difference between a mere whim and a justifiable desire on their part.

### **3. Parental Example**

We have already emphasised the importance of the example that parents give their children, but perhaps we could discuss this point further because many of the conflicts between parents and teenage children have something to do with the virtue of moderation.

If parents give bad example, their children may acquire certain habits by imitating them before they understand the principle underlying what they are doing. Parents should therefore realise that their behaviour may not only be harmful to themselves but also have repercussions on their children.

For instance, if parents go out every weekend with their children, and spend an inordinate amount of money on drink they can hardly expect the children to be careful about how they spend their money.

If a parent thinks and talks about nothing but entertainment, films and shows, he can scarcely expect his children to take other aspects of life seriously, though we are not suggesting that, in itself, there is anything wrong in enjoying films or shows.

Parents should also be careful about the relationship between their work and their free time, because if they regard their work merely as a means to earn money, they are quite likely to think that the purpose of their free time is to allow them to spend it and, consequently, they would work simply in order to enjoy themselves and satisfy their whims.

From what we have said so far, we may now stress the importance of teaching our children the following:

1. To value what they have and what they might have.
2. To control their whims and to do so cheerfully.
3. To think about their reason for spending money.
4. Not to be attached to pleasure.
5. To identify the appetites that should be controlled.
6. To have high ideals that will give them deep satisfaction, rather than seeking superficial pleasures.