

In this Vale of tears...

I read recently a heart-rending *cri de coeur* from a Catholic mother. She was throwing up her hands and saying, 'I find it so difficult to home-school – I feel I'm so bad at it!- but I know I *cannot* put the children in school'. She felt trapped. I think we all have days when we feel like that, when the joys, the blessings, even the practical advantages of homeschooling seem dim and distant and school begins to look attractive. But it only takes a quick prayer and a cursory glance at what goes on in the local Catholic school to remind us of how essential this work of ours is and to send us racing back to the books. So what is the solution? What do you do when those days come along?

Well, I wish I could offer a solution and promise that if only you do x,y, and z, you'll have the perfect home-school and all will go swimmingly (see my earlier article for the story of my own hunt for the perfect schedule!). But it doesn't exist; there is no such solution. There is only a year by year, day by day struggle to keep things going, to do the best we can, to keep praying and never to give up hope that all our efforts will be rewarded. Reflecting on this question, I was struck by a recurrent theme in conversations amongst Catholic home-educating mums: 'I'm so bad at this, I wish I could do better, I don't feel that I'm doing enough' and I wondered if it might not be the case that we are making a very fundamental mistake in falling for one of the greatest 'cons' of our modern age. Are we not in danger of measuring our home-educating endeavours by those standards of our age which prize personal happiness, contentedness, ease of life, material comfort and worldly success above all else? In other words, are we falling for the lie which says, 'If you are not blissfully happy in what you are doing, if in fact you are struggling and finding things difficult, then you have a right to stop, to get out, to abandon your duty (marriage, children, job, whatever is applicable)'. I certainly know people who have walked away from an ordered if difficult situation in life (sometimes abandoning spouse and children) because the World tells them that they have a *right* to be 'happy' (what they usually mean is 'have as easy a life as you can') and should do whatever it takes to achieve that. Of course we are not (hopefully!) contemplating such drastic measures, but perhaps there is a sense in which this feeling creeps into our lives and make us feel that we are somehow failing if we do not experience that happy, contented buzz which the World promises.

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves, "Whose standards am I failing to live up to? Whose standards am I measuring myself by? In what sense am I 'failing'?" If we find that the answer runs along the lines of, 'Well, if I were doing a good job, then life would be easier: I would feel more contented, my children would always be happy, the days would run smoothly, the children would learn what they needed to learn, the meals would be nutritious and on time' and so on, I would say we need to reassess things! We are, by and large, educating our children at home because we feel that the school system is unusable: it is failing Catholic children spiritually (by not teaching the Faith effectively), socially (by not distancing its internal culture from that of the world outside), and often academically too. What this means (sorry to state the obvious) is that we are keeping our children out of the schools (partly) because we want to teach them the Faith 'properly' and because we do not want them to be immersed in the anti-Catholic, anti-life, liberal, secular, atheistic culture in which we find ourselves living. Given these stated aims, should we be surprised that our day to day lives do not measure up to much on the World's scale of individual, self centered contentedness? Should we not, since we are fighting what the World stands for, actually expect tremendous struggles, long periods of discouragement, an almost complete lack of support and encouragement from those around us, a battle, in truth, for the souls of our children which will often manifest itself in their opposition to our efforts as the World lures and pulls them away from us. As my husband likes to say, we are at War, and we should not expect an easy time of it (well, he is named for the Archangel Michael!). Does this mean we should be happy to be miserable, or not even try to be happy? No, it simply means that we shouldn't take every setback, every difficulty, every bad day, as a sign that we are failing and should give up on homeschooling altogether.

Perhaps it does mean we need to think more deeply about what happiness and contentedness are really all about (ideally, of course, our deepest contentment should derive from doing God's Will in our daily lives and accepting whatever He chooses to send us, but some of us are a long way from that!).

When all is said and done, perhaps the best way to look at this is to try to judge our efforts not by the standards of the World, but by the standards of Him under Whose banner we fight: He never promised that our days would be easy, that we would drift along with a warm happy glow, that we would not meet with adversities, struggles and setbacks. Quite the opposite! So, next time you sense an imminent attack of 'I am so bad at this homeschooling thing', just be sure to ask yourself what exactly you are failing at. If you are failing by the World's standards, then put it out of your mind and don't be discouraged (discouragement is a favourite tool of the Devil). You will most likely find that if you look at it all again from a supernatural perspective, you're doing just fine. Just pray for the strength to carry on fighting the good fight, and keep up the good work – and remember, there are plenty of others out there feeling the same way!