



Picture Perfect

by Ellie Hrkach

I tried to take a mental snapshot of the previous 10 minutes or so. Everyone had come to the table for dinner without being asked twice. The food was piping hot. All five children were sitting and quietly waiting for grace to begin. A soft snow had started falling outside, the woodstove was crackling, cookies were baking in the oven and the Christmas tree, which smelled fresh and green, sparkled with the twinkling lights. It all seemed so

perfect, like a painting by Norman Rockwell or a scene from "Ozzie and Harriet." For just a minute, I had wished that, like in the "Twilight Zone," life would stop so I could savour the moment. I knew, however, that the scene wouldn't last like that for long.

"Uh, oh," exclaimed my six-year-old son, Adam. While I was visiting Ozzie and Harriet he had tried to pour himself a glass of milk. Now it was all over the perfectly set table. "I didn't want to bother anyone."

I took a deep breath and headed over to the counter to get a towel to clean up. In the meantime, Paul, the three-year-old, started jabbing his 13-year-old brother with his fork. "Ow, cut it out," Ben replied. Paul turned and starting bothering the brother on the other side of him, Josh, who was 15. "Hey, stop it." Just then, Tim, the 10-year-old who was sitting next to Adam, started complaining that he was getting wet from the spilled milk.

My husband, sensing my frustration, replied with his usual empathic, "Welcome to motherhood."

Over the years, I have found it difficult to adjust to the fact that real life is just not like television. I had grown up in the 60's and 70's watching family sitcoms such as "Brady Bunch," "Partridge Family" and the like. I spent hours watching reruns of the "Dick van Dyke Show", "I Love Lucy" and others. While still entertaining, most of these shows were two-dimensional: there was always a problem and it was

(usually) solved in less than 30 minutes. Everyone always ended up happily ever after. And, as always, I was entertained.

It became quite evident that the TV land I experienced while growing up had very little to do with real life. I did grow up in a real family but since I spent so much time watching television, I grew up with the illusion that life, especially motherhood, is two dimensional and problems are usually solved in 30 minutes.

My illusion came crashing down with the birth of my first son, Josh. Newborns are supposed to come out and sleep all the time. Mine didn't. In fact, he not only didn't sleep, he cried most of his first six months. After one particularly difficult night of not getting any sleep at all, I sat on the edge of our bed, holding our screaming infant and started crying and bawling myself. My husband, ever patient and blunt, replied (for the first time) "Welcome to Motherhood." Admittedly, I wanted to slap him, but later when we talked, much of what he said made perfect sense.

"Ellie, God has given you this particular baby for a reason. We don't know what that is but we have to trust His wisdom." I started thinking about that. Sleep had always been an important part of my life. Previous to this, I resented anyone who used to wake me up: people calling on phone, noisy neighbors, etc. Now, I had no choice but to wake up for this little baby. What better way for God to help me become less selfish about my sleep than to give me a baby that rarely slept.

With each child, I have seen how much more patient I can be. Seeing to the needs of two, three, four and then five children can be overwhelming. Sometimes I just want to sit back and watch an old rerun of "I Love Lucy" or "Partridge Family." However, if I (try) to put God first, my family second and myself third, I can step back and see to the "Duty of the Moment," as Catherine Doherty from Madonna House once said: "The duty of the moment is what you should be doing at any given time, in whatever place God has put you. If you have a child, your duty of the moment may be to change a dirty diaper. So you do it. But you don't just change that diaper, you change it to the best of your ability, with great love for both God and the child." This is not always easy, but always seeing to someone else's needs (my children or husband) is a perfect way to grow in virtue, especially patience.

Several years ago, when I trudged into the vehicle registration office to renew our car's license plates, I sat down next to an older woman, who commented, "Are these children all yours?" "You bet they are," I replied, counting all five heads. "Five children, that's a large family these days. You must be very patient," she said.

I smiled and thought of a reply. "To tell you the truth, I have become more patient with each child I have. But, you know, I certainly 'haven't arrived.' I definitely need more patience so I'll probably have to have at least one more child."

The look on her face was utter shock! And then she sighed and went back to reading her paper.

This is so true of motherhood, I believe. If everything was really perfect with no messes, no fights, no sicknesses, no crying babies, then we, as mothers, would never have an opportunity to grow in virtue and in character, not only as mothers but as human beings made in the image and likeness of God. Caring for children is a perfect way to quash selfishness because they are, by nature, very selfish. We, as parents, are totally responsible for these fellow human beings until they are old enough to be on their own and proceed on their own journey toward selflessness.

Motherhood is the ideal life for those of us that need to grow in virtue. Rarely, does life seem perfect, and yet we picture it that way in our own mind's eye. In reality, there are always messes to clean up, fights to help settle, a sick child to comfort or a crying baby to nurse, not to mention the stresses from outside of the family. And, while it is a tremendous and awesome responsibility, motherhood is ultimately, a "perfect" opportunity for us to grow in virtue.