





# FATHERHOOD IN CRISIS



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# FATHERHOOD IN CRISIS

The Absent Father



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**T**he imbalance that assails our society is, in large part, a crisis of fatherhood. I am speaking principally of the role of the male parent but, *mutatis mutandis*, much of what follows could be applied to motherhood and to the crisis of spiritual fatherhood such as that exercised by educators, every person in authority, priests, men and women religious, etc. The French feminist sociologist Evelyne Sullerot recognized this (causing a great deal of discomfort among her cohorts) when in 1993 she wrote: “What I want is to try to understand and to explain the decline of fathers that we are presently experiencing, a decline that affects both their civil and their social condition, their biological role in generation, their role in the family, their image in society, the idea that they form for themselves of fatherhood, of their dignity, of their duties, and of their rights, of their own perception of their identity as fathers, of the way they establish their relationships with the mothers of their children and with women

and the way in which they envision the future of fatherhood.”<sup>1</sup> The author maintains that the fact that man has been deprived of his fatherhood is something evident.

The dissolution of the family is one of humanity’s most dramatic wounds, and, because of its consequences, it is the one that best explains the contemporary crisis. It’s beyond doubt that among the characteristic elements of the crossroads of the third millennium, we can and should list globalization, the universalization of information, the energy crisis (which will likely cover the world with new wars), and others. However, if I’m not mistaken, the crisis that is currently producing the greatest consequences is the destruction of the family, and the horizon will not begin to clear until the current anti-family politics, which seem to infect many governments throughout the world, are reversed. By “family” I mean its traditional understanding: a man and a woman, united in a legitimate marriage in order to love one another and to beget children. The “destruction” of the family, therefore, includes: the impersonation of the institution of marriage by temporary unions (concubinage, pairing up, getting back together, etc.), divorce, the falling birthrate,<sup>2</sup> abortion, the legalization of homo-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sullerot, Evelyne, *El nuevo padre. Un nuevo padre para un nuevo mundo*, Barcelona (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Even China has begun to be concerned about this problem. In a historical declaration, *Il Corriere de la Sera*, of Feb. 29, 2008, announced that China wanted to revisit its “one child” policy. The reason: “We have to make sure that ‘the nation doesn’t become old before it becomes rich.’” The newspaper attributed the statements to the vice-minister of family planning, Zhao Baige. In fact, some studies show that, if the current trends continue, in 2030 one of every five Chinese will be over the age of 60, double the current proportion. Bear in mind that at present, only 30-40% of Chinese are allowed to have two or more children.

sexuality (the legal equality of homosexual unions with marriage, adoptions by homosexual couples, etc.), new “models” (meaning, parodies) of the family, etc. The destruction of the family is not simply a chance occurrence; in many cases it is an objective. It’s not a consequence of an intrinsic dissolution, like the aging process of any living being, but rather the fruit of an erosion caused by external toxic agents (ideologies, institutions, and people, whose ultimate goals can be very different, from economic interests to individual or communitarian vices). Moreover, if these corrosive agents haven’t been able to eliminate the institution of the family with the campaigns that we have seen in the last decades, this is because, fundamentally, of this natural institution’s ability to resist, an institution which is essential for human society.

The result of this war against the family is the current and unprecedented crisis of the family. So, too, is the social crisis that affects the entire world at all levels without precedent.<sup>3</sup>

One of the consequences of this dissolution of the family is the breakdown of the paternal figure. Perhaps it could be objected that the problem cannot be reduced simply to the father; this absence also affects (and with ever increasing frequency) the figure

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<sup>3</sup> This can’t even be mitigated by making a comparison with the two world wars of the twentieth century, since during those the vast majority of the world had only partial information about the atrocious events that were taking place, and the little that was known was followed with great anxiety. Today, there are tragedies that cover the world in blood in even greater proportions (such as the massacre of abortion, the enslaving industry of prostitution [even child prostitution], the dizzying increase of pedophilia, the willful abandonment of extremely poor countries that are wiped out by hunger and war, etc.), which are seen with nothing but indifference by millions of people who are not unaware but rather, on the contrary, suffer indigestion from information about it.

of the mother, and sometimes both parents. Nevertheless, because of the inescapable law that physically unites children with the mother who begets them and gives them birth—and, as a consequence, keeps them united to her after birth—it is more common that children remain bound to their mother than to their father, making the father’s absence all the more well-known in what society has come to call, euphemistically, “single-parent families,” that is to say, mutilated families.

When I make reference to the absence of the father in the family, it must be kept in mind that the reality is very complex. This absence can have very different causes, some of which do not, perhaps, imply moral culpability and others which, in contrast, imply great responsibility (be it on the father’s part, or on the mother’s part, or on the part of both). The father (and the same could be said for the mother) could be missing because they abandoned the home (with only themselves to blame, or perhaps both are at fault), or because they were abandoned by the other. They could be missing because they died, or because of causes completely beyond their control (war, imprisonment, slavery, or work). There is no doubt that the cases of a father who is missing because they died are minimal compared to those absences that result from broken marriages. What’s more, those who study the topic (psychiatrists, psychologists, and sociologists) agree that when the absence is a result of death, the consequences are notably less harmful for the children, because the separation is more understandable for these cases. In some cases, the father’s ab-

sence can also conceal many sufferings on the father's side (perhaps they were unjustly kicked out of the house or abandoned by the wife) or heroic deeds on the part of the mother who was abandoned or who was forced to take over a work as difficult as the material and spiritual (psycho-affective) upbringing of her children by herself. Bear all of this complicated framework in mind as you read the following pages. Hence, I don't judge any particular case: every person must examine their conscience before God and before society (especially before their own children), in order to see if they find any guilt in the distance they have with respect to their children.

In any event, whatever might be the cause, and without judging the responsibility that weighs upon each and every father or mother who ceases to fulfill their essential duty of being near the children who they have brought into the world, the consequences (or at least the risk of having consequences) for the children deprived of this presence are very real and serious. We will examine them in order to touch the conscience of those called to the gift of fatherhood/motherhood and in order to invite them to prevent this drama or to seek solutions in the measure that it is possible.

\* \* \*

The situation is extremely serious. It is enough to consider what the reality in North America was in 2000. At that moment, one researcher said the following: "Two out of five children under the age of 18 in North America live, and have grown up, without their biological father. Be it a consequence of a divorce, or a birth

to a single mother, 40% of children under the age of 18 in the United States live in a single parent family. This 40% represents more than 20 million children and adolescents. The probability that a white child born today grows up with his or her father and lives with him until the age of 18 is 25%. For a black child, the probability drops to 5%. In 1950, families in which the children lived with their biological fathers and mothers made up 43% of families. In 1995, that percentage fell to 25%, and the percentage of single parent families rose to 35% of the total of families with children. This tendency appears in almost all industrialized nations, with the exceptions of Japan and Israel. The percentage of births to single mothers doubled or tripled in first world countries between 1960 and 1990. In the United States, it went from 5% to 35%, that is, an increase of 600%, and today it has the highest percentage in the world, with a projected rate of 50% in 5 years. Out of all the births to single mothers, a third are to single adolescent mothers.”<sup>4</sup>

If the numbers from this study are exact, then in the United States, three of out of every four white children will not reach adulthood enjoying the presence of their father, and the proportion is even worse for black children. There are countries where the statistics are better, and others where they are worse.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ricardo Chouhy, *Función paterna y familia monoparental: ¿cuál es el costo de prescindir del padre?*, in: *Psicología y Psicopedagogía*, Online publication from the Department of Psychology and Psychopedagogy at USAL, Año I, N° 2, Junio 2000; ([www.salvador.edu.ar/ua1-9pub01-2-02.htm](http://www.salvador.edu.ar/ua1-9pub01-2-02.htm)).

Other studies reveals very similar statistics; for example, an article by Aurora Pimentel on David Blankenhorn's book, *Fatherless America*, gives the following chart:<sup>5</sup>

### Percentage of U.S. Children in Various Family Arrangements

	1960	1980	1990
Father and mother	80.6	62.3	57.7
Mother only	7.7	18	21.6
Father only	1	1.7	3.1
Father and stepmother	0.8	1.1	0.9
Mother and stepfather	5.9	8.4	10.4
Neither parent	3.9	5.8	4.3

In terms of absolute numbers, what decreased the most from 1960 to 1990 (only thirty years) is the number of children who live with both parents. What increased the most are the children who live only with their mother or live with their mother and a stepfather.

Rightfully, then, did David Blankenhorn, the director of the *Institute for American Values*, say: "After the year 2000, as people

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Cf. Pimentel, Aurora, *Cuando la paternidad se desmorona. Los hombres bajo sospecha*, Aceprensa, October 18th, 1995. The article makes reference to David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995). The chart is taken from his book, 18.

born after 1970 emerge as an increasingly large proportion of our working-age adult population, the United States will be a nation divided into two groups, separate and unequal. The two groups will work in the same economy, speak a common language and remember the same national history. But they will live fundamentally divergent lives. One group will receive basic benefits—psychological, social, economic, educational and moral—that are denied to the other group.

The fault line dividing them will not be race, religion, class, education or sex. It will be patrimony. One group will consist of those who grew up with the daily presence and provision of fathers. The other will consist of those who did not. Here is the current scale of the problem: The two groups will be roughly the same size.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Blankenhorn David, *Las raíces de la paternidad*, Touchstone, 3 de agosto de 2001, ([www.mujernueva.org/articulos/articulo.phtml?id=305&td=1&tse=DOC](http://www.mujernueva.org/articulos/articulo.phtml?id=305&td=1&tse=DOC)). English text from his article in the LA Times, “Perspectives on Fatherhood,” June 20, 1993.



# 1.

## The sociological drama<sup>7</sup>

In recent decades, this topic has interested many sociologists: I don't know if it's in order to find solutions, or simply to have a rich vein for research.

Some of the conclusions that observers have reached are very interesting. Ricardo Chouhy mentions the studies of Sara McLanahan (Princeton University) and Gary Sandefur (University of Wisconsin), published in 1994 in their book, *Growing up with a Single Parent*. Following the various parameters that they specify earlier in the text, the authors conclude: "Compared with teenag-

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<sup>7</sup> Even if in the pages that follow I will mention the risks that the lack of a father (or his "negative" presence, as in the case of abusive fathers, indifferent ones, etc.) cause in children, it must not be forgotten that we are dealing with "risks" and not inevitable effects. It's beyond doubt that a bad father figure is harmful for the education and for psychic, moral, and spiritual formation of children, but it is also certain that there are other factors that can mitigate these risks: for example, the presence of a good adoptive father, of grandparents, of aunts and uncles, of model teachers and priests, and even the heroic struggle of a single mother (abandoned or, even, single) in order to save the souls of her children and to be both mother and father. Regrettably, however, the cases in which a child who is abandoned by their father suffers no harm are not very common.

ers of similar background who grow up with both parents at home, adolescents who have lived apart from one of their parents during some period of childhood are twice as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to have a child before age twenty, and one and a half times as likely to be ‘idle’—out of school and out of work—in their late teens and early twenties.”<sup>8</sup> It’s important to point out that, according to these researchers, none of these three items increases when the father’s absence is the result of death.<sup>9</sup> Other studies agree with similar results: for example, according to a study undertaken in the United States by the *Progressive Policy Institute*, “crime is more linked with single parent families than with race or poverty.”<sup>10</sup>

Even more interesting are the results of the work carried out in Switzerland by another sociologist, Duncan Timms (of Stockholm University). It concerned the monitoring, for 18 years, of all the children born in Switzerland in 1953 (some 15,000). Each and every one was given a psychological evaluation at regular intervals. “Those who presented a greater level of psychological dysfunction were males born to a single mother and who were raised without a father. These conclusions agree with the results of monitoring of more than 17,000 minors for 17 years carried on in the United States by the *National Center for Health Statistics* (1988): the risk of psychological dysfunction (emotional and/or behavioral

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<sup>8</sup> McLanahan, Sara and Sandefur, Gary, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Chouhy, *Función paterna y familia monoparental*, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Pimentel, Aurora, *Cuando la paternidad se desmorona. Los hombres bajo sospecha*, Aceprensa 18 Octubre 1995.

problems) is significantly higher for children who have been raised without a father (between two and three times higher). In 1993, Ronald and Jacqueline Angel, researchers at the University of Texas, published a work in which they evaluated the results of all the quantitative studies that analyzed the effects of paternal absence. They said: ‘Children in single-parent families suffer more psychiatric illness . . . have more problems at school, have less self-control . . . are more vulnerable to peer pressure and are more easily led to commit delinquent acts than children with a father present. . . . Taken as a whole, then, the research we reviewed indicates that father absence places both girls and boys at elevated risk of emotional, educational, and developmental problems.’<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the different studies coincide in attributing serious consequences in many different aspects, from problems in school<sup>12</sup> to criminal activity, to father absence. The investigations undertaken by sociologists and psychologists show with complete clarity the connection between juvenile delinquency, homicide,

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<sup>11</sup> Chouhy, *Función paterna y familia monoparental*, *op. cit.* Citation from Angel, Ronald and Jacqueline Lowe, *Painful Inheritance: Health and the New Generation of Fatherless Families* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 118.

<sup>12</sup> “A series of studies done by H. B. Biller agree with Mc Lanahan’s results in that they make a positive correlation between paternal absence/presence and the child’s academic performance. Thus, just as paternal absence increases the risk of dropping out of school, the father’s presence and proximity is correlated with a greater performance in school. In this way, Blanchard and Biller compared four groups of children: (a) absent father with the loss before the age of three, (b) absent father with the loss after the age of five, (c) father present with less than six hours of living together per week, and (d) father present with more than 14 hours of living together per week.” The study showed that the variables “contact with father” and “academic development” were strongly correlated. The lowest academic development was that of the first group, with the loss of father before three years of age (Cf. Chouhy, *Función paterna y familia monoparental*, *op. cit.*).

social maladjustment, drug addiction, serious sexual offenses (including rape) among those people who have been raised without a father (while there is not so great an impact when it is the mother who is missing); on the contrary, the father's presence during childhood is seen as a fundamental factor in controlling impulses, self-control, and empathy (the ability to understand someone else's suffering).<sup>13</sup> Even the FBI recognizes that the crime rates

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<sup>13</sup> Here I cite extensively the statistics given by Chouhy: "In the United States, 70% of juvenile delinquents, of murderers under the age of 20, and of individuals arrested for rape and other sexual offenses were raised without a father. In the black community, in which the paternal figure has practically disappeared, one out of every three youth under the age of 25 is either in jail or on parole. The absence of the father is the greatest predictor of criminality in a male child. In the last twenty years, the number of annual arrests for violent crimes committed by those under the age of 20 went from 16,000 to 100,000, and this was a period of time wherein the percentage of youth in the population was stable. Episodes of juvenile violence with the use of firearms appear with growing frequency in North American public schools. The *National Center for Educational Statistics* (Washington D.C., U.S. Department of Education) indicates that in the 1996-1997 school year, schools tallied 11,000 episodes of violence in which firearms were used. In 10% of North American schools, there were violent acts carried out with firearms (robberies, murders, and/or suicides).

The connection between father absence and delinquency appears in a great number of research works (Adams, Milner & Schrepf, 1984; Anderson, 1968, Chilton & Markle, 1972; Monahan, 1972; Mosher, 1969; Robins & Hill, 1966; Stevenson & Black, 1988; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985; Bohman, 1971; Kellam, Ensminger & Turner, 1977). Llad Phillips and William Comanor, two economists at the University of California, basing themselves on more than 15,000 adolescents who were monitored each year by the *Center for Human Resources* (at The Ohio State University), found a strong statistical connection between the father's absence and juvenile delinquency and violence: the risk of criminal activity in adolescence doubled for males raised without a paternal figure. An interesting point in this study is that the impact of an absent mother with respect to the variable of criminality is almost nothing, which confirms the specificity of the paternal figure with respect to aggressive behavior. Likewise, two anthropologists, M. West and M. Konner, found a connection between the absence of the father and violence by studying the behavior of a number of different cultures. The cultures with more involvement by the father in the raising of the children are the least violent (West & Konner, 1976).

Some works of research suggest that the father's task has a critical role in establishing the ability to control impulses in general and the impulse to aggression in particular, that is, the ability to self-control (Mischel, 1961a; Mischel, 1961b;

are higher in places where there are many births to single mothers, that is, in fatherless “families.”

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Billar, 1974; Billar, 1976; Billar, 1982; Billar, 1993; Billar, 1994; Billar & Trotter, 1994; Haapasalo & Tremblay, 1994; Patterson & DeBaryshe, 1989; Phares & Compas, 1992; Herzog, 1982; Snarey, 1993; Lisak, 1991; Lisak & Roth, 1990). This connection between the paternal task and impulse control might have an important role in addictions (Stern, Northman & Van Slyk, 1984). In fact, 50% of drug addicts in France and in Italy come from single parent families (Olivier, 1994).

The ability to control impulses is necessary in order for a person to be able to function within the law. It's essential to have the ability to delay gratification ingrained, the ability to resist the impulse to act in order to receive gratification in a set moment. It is a critical component of the responsible conduct of an individual within society, but it's not the only one: a person also needs the ability to recognize and bear in mind other people's feelings, that is, the ability to empathize. One investigative work based on the following of children and youth for 26 years revealed that the best predictor of empathy as an adult was having had a father who was involved in their upbringing. In other words, more than any other variable linked to the mother's conduct, empathy, which gives a person the possibility to have a good grasp of another's suffering and thus inhibit aggression, is once again something of a father's task (Koestner, Franz & Weinberger, 1990). Other studies confirm this connection between the father's role and empathy (Sagi, 1982; Billar, 1993; Billar & Trotter, 1994).

Above and beyond the effect that the lack of a paternal figure can have on a child, the relative presence or absence of paternal figures in a community, which we could call the paternal network, seems to be strongly correlated with the crime rate. The murder rate and number of violent crimes committed by minors under 20 is higher in communities with a greater proportion of families without a father, when taking into account the effect of other variables like socio-economic factors, race, or the density and size of the city (Sampson, 1992). For example, if the rate of births to single mothers in each of the fifty US states is taken and compared to the rate of violent crimes in those states (using the FBI's statistics), the statistical association between these two variables, that is, their correlation, is 0.825 ( $p < 0.01$ ). The greater the rate of births to single mothers, the higher the crime rate, with a coefficient of correlation that is surprisingly high (for reference, the correlation between the crime rate and unemployment is 0.187). If the rate of births to single mothers is taken and compared to the murder rate per state, the correlation is high once again: 0.8565 ( $p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, if the rate of births to single mothers and the murder rate per country are compared, using the United Nation's statistics for 45 countries, the correlation is 0.889 ( $p < 0.01$ ) (Mackey, 1996). The statistical association between father absence and delinquency is stronger than the one that links smoking and lung cancer/cardiovascular diseases” (Cf. Ricardo Chouhy, op.cit).

On account of these statistics, then, we can subscribe to Canadian psychoanalyst Guy Corneau's expression: "Père manquant, fils manqué," absent father, ruined child.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Corneau, Guy, *Père manquant, fils manqué*, Les Editions de l'homme, 1989.

## 2.

# The confusion caused by father absence

Tony Anatrella, a specialist in social psychology, writes: “Beginning several years ago, the relative lack of the role of the father in the psychic and social structure of many people has been noticed. Disorders of filiation and sexual identity, confusion between what is imaginary and what is real, the increase of addictive behaviors (that is, dependence) through drug addiction, which indicates a difficulty in filling the interior emptiness, bullying, which is a sadistic and destructive relationship, and juvenile violence, are its primary symptoms.”<sup>15</sup>

In a beautiful writing, Fr. Joseph Kentenich, founder of the Schoenstatt Movement, also speaks about this problem: “Thus, just as authentic maternity is an integral element of a woman’s—

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<sup>15</sup> Anatrella, Tony, *Las consecuencias psicológicas de la disfunción del sentido de la paternidad en la sociedad actual*, Familia et Vita - (edición española) - Año IV, No 2 - 3, 1999.

even a single woman's—maturity, in the same way a great amount of firm fatherhood is needed for a man. Fatherhood shouldn't be valued only as a presupposition for a living knowledge of God and considered as a 'prolongation of the divine fatherhood,' but rather it also preserves human existence from degradation and saves man's social order.

Effectively, the lack of fatherhood brings greater dangers to humanity than the equivalent loss of motherhood would bring with it. It's worth saying that it's not enough to complement masculinity with maternity in the cultural mix and to make a unity in tension with it, but rather that masculinity should find in itself an equilibrium. This happens by means of the richness of fatherhood which makes man—to borrow a phrase that Lacordaire applies to the priest—tough as a diamond and gentle as a mother.

Masculinity without fatherhood becomes an arrow that continually seeks the infinite without returning to its point of departure; in a workaholic who, in perpetual uncertainty, plans and puts into action, puts into action and plans; into a dissolving force that neither unites nor reunites on the wings of a deep responsibility for love and life; in a destructive fury that transforms the world into a mountain of rubble. The man who isn't a father becomes a beast, a monster, a murderer, a gravedigger of culture. Behold, before our eyes, the images of the West and the ideal of a collectivist and technological era. . . .

In light of the importance that fatherhood has, it can be understood, therefore, why all the movements that want to create a



new social order, detached from the natural law and from positive Christianity, oppose in every possible way this fundamental pillar of life and of human order, and they work for its destruction. This is because *as long as fatherhood exists, there can't be sterile repetition, nor 'equality,' nor anonymous individuals reduced to mere numbers, nor flocks nor wild hordes that bow, docile and anxious, before the whip or the sugar of the dictator, at once worshipping and glorifying their own torturers.*"<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Kentenich, Joseph, *En las manos del Padre*, Santiago de Chile (1999), 199-200.



### 3.

## The father's role and other psychological consequences of his absence

The father plays an important role in the process of a child's maturation, and he affects numerous aspects of his child's personality. Let's consider some of them.

First and foremost, the father is fundamental for the *general process of the child's affective maturation*. With regard to this, the famed professor Aquilino Polaino-Lorente has said the following: "The absence of the father is, first of all, the absence of a necessary presence that in many cases is the condition for the appearance of numerous *psychological disorders*. . . . This is entirely logical, since the lack of interaction and connection between father and child gives rise to numerous lacunae in the spheres of the child's emotional, cognitive, and social development. By means of father-child relationships, the father's behavior gives the child the range

of necessary norms that allow the child to become aware of reality and to overcome his or her provisional rooting in simply the intrinsic desirability of things. . . . Now then, it would be a mistake to attribute to this model only more or less normative outlines or characteristics. A father also contributes to the self-constructed mold of the child's affectivity by means of attachment, tenderness, and displays of affection, and, in turn, to the formation of the child's personality. . . . As a consequence of the father-child bond, the child is provided not only with the security that he or she needs so badly, but also self-confidence, the key element upon which the growth of his or her initial self-esteem can rest. After the loving demand of the father, the child increases their self-confidence, overcomes their initial uncertainty, discovers that they can do much more than they are doing at present, and that what is done for their father is valuable, since in any other way their father wouldn't approve it. . . . Insecurity, immaturity, and infantilism are the immediate consequences in the child that are brought about father absence. . . . If the child doesn't perceive and realize in themselves the concept of filiation because of the father's absence, it's highly unlikely that he or she will have at hand the necessary maturity to assume within himself the demands proper to fatherhood. . . . Without a father there is no family, since every family has two heads and demands the simultaneous copresence—simultaneous, and not successive—of a father and a mother.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Polaino-Lorente, Aquilino, exposition in the symposium “Paternidad de

Secondly, the presence of and the role of the father is a fundamental reference point in the *formation of respect for authority*. “The stable presence of a masculine authority in the house is necessary in order to control excesses and in order to teach boys self-control, especially during adolescence. If the authority of the adult male disappears within a community, the process of socialization fails, and the life of boys becomes chaotic. Robert Rector alludes to a description that the novelist William Golding makes in *Lord of the Flies* of the process of disintegration of a group of boys when there is no adult authority. The presence of the father-husband, as the one who has the responsibility to obtain what is necessary so that the family can live, is important because it offers a model that a young boy can identify with. Without that goal, his efforts in education and in work deteriorate. It must be kept in mind that if a young boy doesn't identify with that figure, other models will come to fill that void, with great likelihood that they will not be great role models, like the gang leaders, etc.”<sup>18</sup> From the point of view of the formation of respect for authority, the father's absence affects boys more than it does girls. “From the age of eight,” comments sociologist Evelyne Sullerot, “in the absence of an authority for reference, boys tend to surpass the limits of what it permitted, to break boundaries. Studies have also found a high

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Dios y paternidad en la familia,” Vatican, June 3 to 5. Cf. Contreras, Diego, *Papá, vuelve a Casa. Simposio en el Vaticano sobre la paternidad*, Aceptensa (93/99), 23 Junio 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Contreras, loc. cit., exposition of Robert Rector, of the Heritage Foundation.

rate of fatherless homes among young people who are addicts.”<sup>19</sup> From this follows that one of the effects of father absence is social maladjustment, juvenile violence, and an increase in adolescent criminality (and, also increasing, child crime).

Thirdly, the father figure is also crucial for the *psychosexual* development of children. Thanks to their relation with their father, both boys and girls affirm their sexual identity. “The rejection or absence of the function of the father carries with it, in the long run, the very rejection of the difference between the sexes and the valuation of the social myth of the homosexual ideology as a sign of modernity.”<sup>20</sup>

In his book, *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, Joseph Nicolosi, a specialist in the problem of childhood homosexuality, affirms this truth: “Many of my homosexual patients tell me that their fathers had nothing to do with them. One of my homosexual clients, who was twenty-six, told me recently, ‘My Dad was there but not there. I mean, he was in the house, but I can’t remember anything memorable or significant about him.’” He also recalls the astonished question of a man (who was consulting him about the serious case of his son) to whom he was explaining that as a father he needed to be deeply involved in his son’s emotions, to be with him, to be affectionate and sensitive, to make him be loved and to become a model for him, etc.: “So you’re saying that

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<sup>19</sup> Sullerot, E., op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Contreras, loc. cit., referring to the exposition of Tony Anatrella, expert in social psychiatry.

[my son] doesn't need therapy?" The doctor replied, "[Your son] did not really need therapy. He needs his dad."<sup>21</sup>

The presence (active and positive) of the father is therefore fundamental for the healthy maturation of children's sexual identity, be that for boys or for girls. In his commentary on the book by Bishop Paul Cordes, *El eclipse del padre*,<sup>22</sup> Juan Manuel Burgos summarizes the positive characteristics and contributions that Cordes accredits to fatherhood in the following words:

"1) First, and although at first glance it might seem to be contradictory, the rupture of the mother-child unity. The unity of mother-child is essential in the story of every person, both from a physical point of view (unavoidable), as well as spiritual. However, that unity cannot be absolute, and it pertains to the father to redirect it to its proper limits for the good of them both. The father's entrance into that unity opens the child to the necessary relation with the world, which will allow him or her to develop as a man (or woman) outside of the influence of the maternal lap, which is protective and comforting, but limiting. However, that break also frees the mother from being closed in and possessive. The maternal instinct of self-giving can be transformed into an instinct of possession and exclusion, and it is the father's mission to save the mother from that danger.

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<sup>21</sup> Nicolosi, Joseph and Linda, *Una guía para padres sobre cómo prevenir la homosexualidad*, México D.F. (2005), 36-37. The translation is very defective; the original is much to be preferred: *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, InterVarsity Press (2002). Text is taken from page 30 in the English version cited.

<sup>22</sup> Cordes Paul, Josef, *El eclipse del Padre*, Madrid (2003).

2) The role of the father is also essential in the formation of a child's identity. Following the studies of Eriksson, the well-known researcher of childhood development, Cordes shows how the father represents the key elements and points of reference for the son: strength, wisdom, the necessary company in order to introduce himself into the world and to learn to be a man.

3) However, Cordes points out, the child's identity also includes sexual identity. Clearly, the father constitutes the model and point of reference for the son who finds in him the paradigm of masculinity. In that model he can learn to be strong but not violent, impulsive or daring but not aggressive, decided but not obstinate. However, the father's influence isn't limited to sons; it also affects daughters. Femininity is realized and defined in the face of masculinity, and the father provides for his daughters, in addition to the aforementioned virtues of strength and wisdom, the sexual opposite in the face of which they are defined and, consequently, they are strengthened as women."<sup>23</sup> Regarding this last point, another author adds: "A girl brought up without a father has less self-assurance, a low self-esteem, demands much less from men, and, in turn, falls before the first mirage or promise of sporadic love. When a young woman cannot trust and love the first man in her life—her father—the rest of her relationships are damaged."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Burgos, Juan Manuel, *La ausencia del padre en nuestra sociedad. Comentario al libro "El Eclipse del Padre"*, Revista Arbil 69 ([www.arbil.org/\(69\)cord.htm](http://www.arbil.org/(69)cord.htm)).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Cf. Pimentel, Aurora, *Cuando la paternidad se desmorona. Los hombres bajo sospecha*, Aceprensa 18 Octubre 1995.



From here it follows that when a father is absent (or, even though present, doesn't fulfill his role), numerous problems for the son's or daughter's sexual identity can appear. The specialist in the problem of homosexuality, G. van den Aardweg, recognizes it: "A boy can come to feel less masculine, less manly, when he has been raised in an overprotected and anxious way by a meddling mother, when his father has given little importance to raising him."<sup>25</sup> In fact, homosexuality, a phenomenon which is on the increase today, has as one of its causes the deformation of the relationships between father/son-daughter and mother/son-daughter. Aardweg again explains: "In 60-70% of cases, the mother, in one way or another, has been too involved: overprotective, dominating, meddling, overly affectionate, scheming, or inclined to corrupt. She's treated her son like a baby, or as her favorite, her confidant. These influences have made the boy dependent and weak; they've suffocated his enterprising spirit, his courage, and his self-confidence. This type of mother passes on her fearful attitude towards life to her children; a mother who wants to decide everything for her child destroys his will and his initiative. Children raised this way are very different from the normal childhood development; they are overly obedient and inhibited. It can also happen that a son is too attached to his mother as a result of an un-moderated affection—which is essentially egocentric—or of the mother's adoration of her son, which sets him apart in his own special world. Later, he will be unable to

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<sup>25</sup> Aardweg, G. van den, *Homosexualidad y esperanza*, Navarra (1997).

leave that atmosphere of security and the caresses of his mother, and he will return to her just as soon as the outside world doesn't respond to him pleasantly. Whoever wants an example of the harmful effects of this unhealthy love between a mother and son should read the life of the French novelist Marcel Proust: he would write love letters to his mom when he was a teenager, while both of them lived in the same house!

In spite of the efforts by militant homosexuals and liberal sexual reformers to minimize it, it is certain that mothers occupy too important of a place in the childhood of numerous homophile men. The consequence is that the son depends too much on his mother, and he maintains that attitude towards her without ever changing that 'child who is to be pitied' that he carries within himself. This 'child' will tend to transmit that attitude towards other women. He has been a 'pretty mama's boy,' an 'obedient and fearful child,' the 'dependent boy,' and, in some cases, 'the repressed and tyrannized boy.' These maternal bonds are unhealthy, and they are a great obstacle for the boy to become an adult man. After many conversations with men who are in anguish because of their homosexual tendencies, the researcher and therapist Bieber affirmed that none of his patients had had a normal father-son relationship. In the majority of cases, the father was 'distant'; he didn't get involved in the interests and in the daily life of his son. My experience is the same. A detailed analysis of a series of psychological factors—carried out on a subgroup of 120 of my male patients with this problem—had as a result that in

only two or three cases could the relationship between father and son be considered positive; even in these cases, the relationship was a distant one. One of the fathers was already old when his son was a boy; in another case, the affective bond between father and son seemed too frivolous to me. We can affirm, therefore, that rarely is the relationship between father and son positive: the man who develops a homosexual inferiority complex didn't have the opportunity to know his father as a real father."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.



## 4.

# Consequences in one's image of God

The crisis of fatherhood also has serious consequences on the spiritual and theological plane. Elsewhere I have taken the time to briefly treat the great insight, *without reflection and in spite of himself*, of Sigmund Freud in his explanation of his theory of the Oedipus complex. Indeed, according to Dr. Paul Vitz's detailed studies, the Freudian theory doesn't offer sufficient evidence (as its author pretends) that men, by means of a projection of the dramatic and conflictive relationship with their fathers, invent the idea of God, but the idea is curiously interesting for explaining that men who have a bad relationship with their father end up by projected a negative image of God, and even to the point of denying His existence.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to Freud's hopes, the Oedipus complex serves rather to explain a certain sort of atheism and a lack of be-

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Vitz, Paul, *Faith of the Fatherless. The Psychology of Atheism*, Dallas (1999); Id., *Sigmund Freud's Christian Unconscious*, Grand Rapids, Michigan (1993).

belief in God.<sup>28</sup> Freud himself recognizes the many cases of “youthful persons [who] lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the crisis in fatherhood undermines the image that men have of God.

This is acknowledged by many specialists. For example, Anatrella says: “Many people feel torn between positive and negative images of their experience of their fathers. That conflict, with such contradictory desires, can be transferred to God the Father by means of a projective interpretation. Adolescents and adults reject God, whom they had learned to discover during infancy, because they haven’t been able to deal with the conflict of the image of a father. Some are unconsciously distressed by the very idea that God could be a Father, to the point of fleeing from Him.”<sup>30</sup>

Fr. Kentenich affirms the same with greater strength and insight: “The irrational root<sup>31</sup> of our faith in God is sick. . . . This irrational root of our faith in God is the natural experience of fatherhood that penetrates even into the subconscious of the soul and, in accord with the law of transmission of emotions, can and

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Fuentes, Miguel, “Razones psicológicas del ateísmo,” in *Diálogo* 45 (2007), 103-124.

<sup>29</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Un recuerdo infantil de Leonardo da Vinci*, in *Obras completas*, vol. II, Madrid (1948), 394. English trans. from *Faith of the Fatherless. The Psychology of Atheism*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Anatrella, Tony, *Las consecuencias psicológicas de la disfunción del sentido de la paternidad en la sociedad actual*, op. cit. The perspective used in this article is psychoanalytic, and so I don’t necessarily share all of his points of view; nonetheless, many of his observations are certainly valuable.

<sup>31</sup> In this text by Kentenich, “irrational” means that it is more bound to feelings than to reason. It is something prior to reason; he doesn’t mean “against reason.”

should be passed on to God the Father, the only one in whom we have a resting place, an assurance that overcomes all difficulties in the midst of the present torments.”<sup>32</sup> A little further on he adds: “Am I right when I say that we live in a fatherless age? Am I right to add: because we live in a fatherless age, we also live in a godless age? . . . We no longer have countries of God, because we don't have countries of fathers. For this reason, we no longer have countries of sons. Usually people cite Pestalozzi's affirmation: ‘The greatest tragedy of the present day is that the sense of being a child has been lost, since without it, it is impossible for God to act as a father.’ Seen psychologically, the deepest root of this loss of the sense of being a child is to be found in the fact that we live in a fatherless age. *It is a depressing fact that we don't have healthy fathers who can awaken the natural sense of filiation that pierces even into the soul's subconscious and embraces the entirety of man.*”<sup>33</sup>

Appealing to Nietzsche's exclamation about the death of God, Kantenich says: “I would like to cite another phrase of Nietzsche's and put it into this context. We know his cry: ‘God is dead!’ Would you admit that I am right if I affirm that God is dead because the father, in the natural order, has died? Without a profound experience of being a son or daughter in the natural order, in the face of a real or substitute father, it is, normally speaking, extraordinarily difficult to have an experience and consequently an image of a supernatural father. Thus, where does this strong repression of the desire for God that we speak of today

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<sup>32</sup> Kantenich, op. cit., 101.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, 101-102.

come from? It's owed to the fact that we live in a fatherless age and, therefore, a godless age. Whoever understands this has one of the deepest answers to the religious needs of our times, especially in reference to young people."<sup>34</sup>

This is a fundamental truth that does nothing more than simply apply a basic principle: the supernatural is rooted in the natural: the lower order (the natural) is the expression, means, and protection for the higher one. When a child's love towards their earthly father "becomes real, it deeply penetrates even the preconscious, unconscious, and subconscious life of the mind; in this way, according to the law of organic transference, it will be easy to transfer it to the Father in heaven. As experience shows, innumerable Catholics cannot have a profound, filial relationship with God the Father because they are missing that base in the lower order. For that same reason, for a great many people the Heavenly Father becomes less and less real over time; He fades away like a mere idea. . . . *An era without fathers is an era without roots and without a home, but also without God.*"<sup>35</sup>

We live in an era marked by ideologies, by desktop theories that are unaware of the most basic laws of real psychology. "A person becomes strongly rooted and reaches their full development only by means of another person, by means of personal bonds. What happens to a human being without these multiple roots in the lower or natural order is like what happens to a tree

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<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, 102.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, 186.



without roots: it is quickly thrown out from that order and it doesn't grow with sufficient depth towards the higher order, towards the supernatural order. This is the normal course of events; exceptions only confirm the rule."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the human person cannot reach full maturity by being cared for by social "beings," like the state, a school, or systems, but rather by people of flesh and blood, who relate to that person *from* natural bonds (flesh and blood, friendship, love). The state, schools (as impersonal institutions), systems, etc., *by themselves* do not form people, but rather "disconnected beings," closed in upon themselves, universal orphans, hungry and helpless persons, in short, social misfits, beings without empathy, full of resentment.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 187.



## 5.

# The ways that the “father is kicked out”

The causes for the dissolution of the vocation to be a father are many: on one hand, it is a result of the cultural and social corruption that has been taking place for centuries and, on the other hand, it is an objective for systematically organized and executed campaigns. That the end goal of these campaigns is to create a society of depersonalized individuals so that they can be manipulated according to the arbitrary whim of mysterious powers might be mere speculation, or perhaps not; however, it is undeniable that the noticeable result is a mass of sheep who can be easily led. I have neither the authority nor the elements to say whether this is a deliberate goal (as some affirm) or not. Historically, this is the way it has been in some cases; that doesn't mean it is necessarily true in all cases.

We can easily identify the factors and circumstances that have contributed to this phenomenon:

- The first (and, in many individual cases, the fundamental) factor are personal vices. There are many fathers (and mothers) who don't fulfill their mission as parents simply because they don't want to, nor are they interested in doing so, because their vices push them to this. This is personal egoism, and everything that is born from it (at least on the part of one of the spouses) leads to the drama of divorce, adultery, abandoning the home, concubinage, free unions, etc. There are fathers who leave their children (and their spouses) moved by their egoism (which is the soul of lust, avarice, disordered loves, sloth, and of the other sins), just as there are many who, without abandoning their children, live as if they had done so, that is, completely unconcerned about their problems, their education, the formation of their emotions, their character, or their future. In the vast majority of separations and divorces (not all of them, certainly), the harm (often irreparable) caused to the children (and often to the innocent or not so guilty spouse) isn't enough to stop the dissolution of the family. What weighs more are personal passions, disordered loves, unchecked desires. There are also cases (alarmingly on the rise) in which the fathers are not absent from their children, but rather maintain a *negative* presence: in the case of physically violent fathers and even—a crime that cries out to heaven—sexual abusers of their children or those who tolerate this reality.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> This tragedy, which has very serious consequences, seems to have become

- Connected with this, we can also point out as a cause, at least in some cases, the inability of many people to solve the conflict within themselves of having been victims of abandonment or abuse within their own families. It is a fact that many people who have been abandoned by their parents, in spite of having suffered that wound themselves, later repeat it with their own children and spouses. I will return to this point at the end, since I consider it very important.
- Scientists of this last century also have a great deal of blame, since they had taken to playing God. This is something significant. False science (some aptly speak of “bio-ideology”) has divorced fatherhood and motherhood from generation. With the technology of artificial reproduction and cloning, the man and the woman cease to be the father and the mother of the

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more common as of late. Many news reports affirm that, in fact, pedophilia, the sexual abuse of minors, is *principally* an intra-family phenomenon, and rarely an extra-familiar one. For example, in *La Nación* of February 2008, we read: “Frequently abuse occurs within the family, either by one of the parents (biological or not), or a close family member. The child can’t say anything, because he or she feels guilty and fears that if the secret is revealed it will destroy the family. The cases in which the abuser is a teacher, another child, or a stranger are fewer” (*La Nación*, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, “Los síntomas que develan un drama secreto”). In another article: “In addition to the panorama uncovered by statistics, we can add the reality confronted by those professionals who help minors: the majority of cases of sexual abuse, especially those that have young boys and girls as victims, occur within the home, and the perpetrators are usually parents, step-parents, grandparents, or aunts and uncles” (*La Nación*, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008, “Creció 50% el abuso sexual de menores”). Nonetheless, it is extremely important to set the statistics regarding intra-familiar sexual abuse that the newspapers mention in context, because, even if it’s true that the majority of these problems occur within the nuclear family, more and more often it happens that the abuser isn’t the child’s biological father, but rather the mother’s “new partner,” which also reveals that the increase in sexual abuse of child is directly linked to the deterioration of fatherhood (Cf. Pimentel, Aurora, *Cuando la paternidad se desmorona. Los hombres bajo sospecha*, Aceprensa, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1995. The article makes reference to the book by David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, New York [1995]).

being that they produce, and instead become the biological material from which life is obtained: “the male reproducer” or “the female reproducer.” A man can simply be the sperm donor or seller, without being a father to his children; a woman can be a rented womb, or an egg donor or seller; the spouses, a couple of buyers of different germ cells. The majority of those “test-tube babies” (of whom the vast, vast majority don’t pass beyond the stage of cryopreservation and are destined to never complete their development) are no one’s children, the fragile and useless manufacturing of scientific curiosity and ambition. Nevertheless, the seriousness of the drama is seen even more when we notice that our society, which knows about all of this (or at least most of this), isn’t scandalized and doesn’t react; in other words, it has thrown in the towel in the face of evil.

- Lastly, I point out ideologies that want to destroy the family. First and foremost are the ideological and political movements that undermine and destroy the father’s authority within the family. There is also the extreme feminist movement that, with the excuse of vindicating the role of the woman, introduces a dialectic between man and woman, between woman and motherhood, between spouse and motherhood, etc. In particular, we have the ideologies of gender theory, which separate biology (male, female) from sexuality (the sexual roles). We also have all of the cultural movements that try with all their strength to destroy the family, especially the so-

called “gay culture,” which promotes marriage between homosexuals and adoption by homosexual couples.





## 6.

# To recover the father: the solution

With everything that we've already said, it's clear that many of the current socio-cultural dramas (the *culture of death*) cannot be reversed without recovering the figure of the father.<sup>38</sup> For this reason, fathers must learn to be fathers and to fight to be that, in spite of the opposition present in the world. In order for this to work, we must remember three things. The first is that fatherhood is a reality of the natural order, something essential to human society, unable to be substituted in the social order. Secondly, it is also a gift and a divine vocation, and thus a responsibility before

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<sup>38</sup> Even if in this article I have focused fundamentally on pointing out the need to defend and recover the figure of the biological father, I do not deny (on the contrary) that many adoptive fathers (and those who, without the legal title, really exercise an authentic spiritual fatherhood) are more than capable of fulfilling this lack of fathers in the lives of so many people. In any event, it's clear that the crisis in fatherhood will not be cured simply with the generosity and surrender of either adoptive or spiritual fathers, and while the family continues down its destructive path that the dominant culture imposes on it, men will become less and less able to exercise any sort of fatherhood.

God, since every child is a gift from God, and therefore every parent will have to answer for their children: if Abel's blood cried out against Cain, will not God cry out against those to whom He has associated His creative power by means of biological fatherhood? Lastly, all fatherhood comes from God (James 1:17: *All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights*), and therefore men learn to be fathers in the school of God the Father.

This last point is very important, and by means of it the recovery of the awareness of being a father can, in large part, take place. Even though we have said that a bad experience of human fatherhood influences the image of the divine that every person forms, this can be reversed and even made to go in the opposite direction: that is, *in spite* of the bad experiences in each person's life story, if they drink in the healthy waters of the Gospel, men can learn *from God* (from *God the Father*, taught by Jesus Christ) to be fathers.

"The human father," wrote Kentenich, "is, in every way (in accord with his vocation and according to his possibilities), the most marvelous transparency of God the eternal Father, and the most direct one, even when there are deformations in the transparency that, in accord with the psychological law of transference of emotions, are also applied to God. It's appropriate, therefore, to examine these qualities of the eternal Father, and meditate on how those qualities can also be applied to the human father."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kentenich, op. cit., 115.

We can learn to be human fathers from God the Father. The same author points out some features of God the Father that every father should make the effort to imitate in exercising their fatherhood: immutability, omnipresence, omniscience, wisdom, holiness, mercy, and justice.

God is immutable; in the same way, there must be an immutability (or stability, if you prefer) in the principles and decisions of every earthly father; stability is the foundation of all authority. It's true that a human father isn't infallible and must, therefore, have a certain flexibility in the face of reality, in order to know how to correct his errors or to adjust things to the innumerable contingent factors of daily life. However, the capricious and fickle spirit that is seen in the men of today (in their intellectual and moral principles and in their life decisions) undermines all fatherly authority. A changing father, one who is insecure, fickle, inconstant, unpredictable, indecisive, etc., has no authority, and he passes on to his children a spirit of unpredictability and whim, and a great insecurity and disorientation in life.

God is omnipresent; He is everywhere. The human father cannot be everywhere, but he should try to be present to his children when it's possible. This means not only affectively, carrying them in his heart and in his mind (acting for their good and out of love for them), but also physically: Don Bosco's "preventative system" is based on this fundamental principle: "the director must live entirely dedicated to his pupils, and he must never accept any

task that would separate him from this duty”<sup>40</sup>; and he adds, speaking of the role of the assistants: “In the measure that it’s possible, the assistants must always arrive to the places where the students will gather together before the students do, and they should be with them until someone else comes to take their place as assistant; never ever leave them free, not even in times of recreation.” Parents should adapt this to their own role. With even greater reason than the director of a school, they should spend time with their children; without suffocating them and without ignoring their need for privacy,<sup>41</sup> parents should provide their children with an assuring presence that feeds their confidence. In a valuable document from the Church, we read: “Parents must find time to be with their children and take time to talk with them. As a gift and a commitment, children are their most important task, although seemingly not always a very profitable one. Children are more important than work, entertainment and social position.”<sup>42</sup>

God is omniscient and wise; no creature can be that. However, a father should know, in the measure that it’s possible, everything

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Memorias biográficas del Oratorio*, volume 4.

<sup>41</sup> The Pontifical Council for the Family’s document *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* (1995) says: “Respect for privacy must be considered in close connection with decency and modesty, which spontaneously defend a person who refuses to be considered and treated like an object of pleasure instead of being respected and loved for himself or herself. If children or young people see that their legitimate privacy is respected, then they will know that they are expected to show the same attitude towards others. This is how they learn to cultivate the proper sense of responsibility before God by developing their interior life and a taste for personal freedom that makes them capable of loving God and others better” (n. 57).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, n. 51.

that concerns their children. I don't mean theories about children; I mean actually knowing their children: their identity, their problems, their goals, their ideals. This can only be accomplished by listening to their children and observing them. If the fathers don't know their children, who will know them? One of the most painful reproaches that is heard from children who were abandoned by their fathers is that their fathers weren't interested in them. Children can't be expected to speak with their parents if the parents don't show any willingness and interest in knowing their children's souls.

God is holy; good fathers must aspire to holiness. Holiness is the universal vocation of all men. In order to be perfect, a person must be united to God by grace. In order to be good (and *very* good) fathers, a father must be united to God. It's very likely that the root of the drama in many families is nothing other than the rejection of holiness on the part of the parents and/or the children. The majority of problems are solved by means of grace, since 90% of problems are problems of a lack of virtue and a rejection of eternal life.

Lastly, God is, at one and the same time and without any dialectic, merciful and just. Earthly fathers should seek to know how to be just but also forgiving, like Him: to have an iron hand in a velvet glove, firmness and gentleness at the same time.

In this way, fathers learn about fatherhood from God, and they can teach their children the path to God.



## 7.

# A good father “is” and a good father “is not” . . .

So, if we look at the divine example of the Heavenly Father and of Jesus Christ, we will find the most perfect guide of “serious fatherhood”<sup>43</sup>: what does a good father do that imitates the Divine Fatherhood? What does a good father avoid doing, and in this imitates God?

### 1) What a father does

<sup>1st</sup> A father is someone who loves first: *In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins* (1 Jn 4:10); *We love because he first loved us* (1 Jn 4:19).

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<sup>43</sup> I owe the consideration of this point to Father SV, who has kindly permitted me to use them in this work.

2<sup>nd</sup> A father is someone who forgets himself in order to look after the good of his children: *The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.* (Mt 20:28); *My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!* (Gal 4:19).

3<sup>rd</sup> A father is someone who gives life, truth, and good: *I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly* (Jn 10:10); *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* (Jn 14:6); *He [Jesus] went about doing good* (Acts 10:38).

4<sup>th</sup> A father is someone who sympathizes with and who acts with mercy towards his children: *Be merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful* (Lk 6:36); *When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things* (Mk 6:34); *As he drew near, he saw the city and wept over it: Jerusalem, Jerusalem! . . . How many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling!* (Mt 23:37 and Lk 19:41).

5<sup>th</sup> A father is someone who corrects and educates the one whom he loves: *Endure your trials as “discipline”; God treats you as sons. For what “son” is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are without discipline, in which all have shared, you are not sons but bastards* (Heb 12:7-8).

6<sup>th</sup> A father is someone who defends the life of his children, above all their spiritual life: *When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and none of them was lost except the son of destruction. . .* (Jn 17:12); *I am jealous of you with the*



*jealousy of God. . . . But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts may be corrupted from a sincere [and pure] commitment to Christ (2 Cor 11:2-3).*

7<sup>th</sup> A father is someone who is prepared to give his life for his children: *Jesus answered, "I told you that I AM. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." This was to fulfill what he had said, "I have not lost any of those you gave me." (Jn 18:8-9); I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me (Gal 2:20).*

8<sup>th</sup> A father is someone who always observes and listens to everything that concerns his children, but he speaks and reprimands only when prudence requires it: *What were you arguing about on the way? (Mk 9:33); Simon, I have something to say to you (Lk 7:40); I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now (Jn 16:12); Brothers, I could not talk to you as spiritual people, but as fleshly people, as infants in Christ. I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were unable to take it (1 Cor 3:1-2).*

9<sup>th</sup> A father is someone who gives without counting the cost, who doesn't seek from his children the efficiency of employees, but rather the company of friends: *Now I am ready to come to you this third time. And I will not be a burden, for I want not what is yours, but you. (2 Cor 12:14); I no longer call you slaves. . . . I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father (Jn 15:15); Father, they are your gift to me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me (Jn 17:24).*

10<sup>th</sup> A father works in order to feed his children: *Now I am ready to come to you this third time. And I will not be a burden, for I want*

*not what is yours, but you. Children ought not to save for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?* (2 Cor 12:14-15).

11<sup>th</sup> A father is someone who hopes to be loved, and is not embarrassed to demand that love from their child: *Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?* (Jn 21:15ss); *We have spoken frankly to you, Corinthians; our heart is open wide. You are not constrained by us; you are constrained by your own affections. As recompense in kind (I speak as to my children), be open yourselves.* (2 Cor 6:11-13); *Make room for us [in your hearts]* (2 Cor 7:2).

12<sup>th</sup> A father teaches as much by words as by example: *I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do* (Jn 13:15); *Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps* (1 Pe 2:21).

13<sup>th</sup> A father always trusts, and his trust gives rise to loyalty: *In every way you have shown yourselves to be innocent in the matter. . . . I rejoice, because I have confidence in you in every respect* (2 Co: 7, 11, 16).

14<sup>th</sup> A father prays for his children: *Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me. . . . I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word* (Jn 17:11, 20); *I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you* (Phil 1:3-4); *We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly* (1 Thess 1:2).

15<sup>th</sup> A father teaches his children to pray: *He was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord,*

*teach us to pray” . . . . He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. . . . (Lk 11:1ss).*

## 2) What a good father never does

1<sup>st</sup> A good father doesn’t hate his children: *As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.* (Jn 15:9).

2<sup>nd</sup> A good father doesn’t abandon his children: *I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you* (Jn 14:18).

3<sup>rd</sup> A good father doesn’t scandalize his children: *Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe [in me] to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea* (Mk 9:42).

4<sup>th</sup> A good father doesn’t provoke his children: *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up with the training and instruction of the Lord* (Eph 6:4).

5<sup>th</sup> A good father doesn’t put his own comfort before his vocation and responsibility: *Now I am ready to come to you this third time. And I will not be a burden, for I want not what is yours, but you. Children ought not to save for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? But granted that I myself did not burden you, yet I was crafty and got the better of you by deceit* (2 Cor 12:14-16).

6<sup>th</sup> A good father doesn’t turn a “blind eye” to the sins of his children, but rather corrects vices when he sees them emerge: *I am*

*writing you this not to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children* (1 Cor 4:14).

7<sup>th</sup> A good father isn't scandalized in the face of their child's suffering, but rather educates them in the mystery of pain and of forgiveness: *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?"* (Mt 16:24-26); *Then Peter approaching asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times* (Mt 18:21-22).

8<sup>th</sup> A good father doesn't base himself on human abilities or strategies, but rather his trust is above all in God, from whom all fatherhood derives: *Not that of ourselves we are qualified to take credit for anything as coming from us; rather, our qualification comes from God* (2Cor 3:5).

9<sup>th</sup> A good father doesn't point out the defects of his wife in front of the children, but rather teaches respect by respecting her: *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and banded himself over for her. . . . each one of you should love his wife as himself* (Eph 5:25, 33).

10<sup>th</sup> A good father doesn't abandon his spouse, but rather remains with her, which he does also for the good of the children: *If we are unfaithful he [nonetheless] remains faithful* (2 Tm 2:13).

## 8.

### Fathers, but also children

I end with an important observation. We don't assume too much if we think that a very great number of those who are absent fathers today were and continue to be, at the same time, sons who didn't forgive their own fathers' affective distance or their fathers' abandonment of them. There is a mysterious psychological law which says that we humans tend to reproduce in our lives the vices and defects that we criticize, *without forgiving*, in others. Once I read in a book the following phrase: "I have fallen into all of the vices that I criticized in others." Many men who beat their wives and children are sons of fathers who did the same; many divorced men are children of divorced parents. Many violent and intolerant men are sons of rigid and inflexible fathers. Many alcoholics and drug addicts are sons of alcoholic and drug-addicted fathers. However, the vast majority of these men hated those vices when they saw them in their fathers, and maybe they even swore that, in the future, they would never do the same with their

children; why, then, do they repeat the same mistakes when they reach adulthood, making others suffer what they themselves experienced first-hand? Psychologists would say that, in spite of their desires, this is the only way that they learned to deal with difficult situations: beating, avoiding others, running away, becoming distant; for this reason, even though they might have sworn to themselves that they weren't going to be like their fathers, they ended up as a carbon copy of them. However, there is something more important and profound: not forgiving also has an influence. Often *this* is the most important cause. Only forgiveness can destroy those internal bonds that bring those hated errors in others to be imitated; it's a "law of rebound or bondage." On account of mysterious psychic withdrawals, hate and resentment don't always make people different, but rather often end up making them similar to each other. Those who hate the tyrant often end up being tyrannical; those who are locked into and solidified into hate for their abusers have a high likelihood of becoming abusers themselves. It's not a hereditary problem, but rather a spiritual one: a person imitates another's sins either because they justified them, or because they didn't forgive them. Only forgiveness (which is neither justification nor aversion) destroys this chain. Pay attention, then, those of you who have suffered from their absent fathers, be that physical or affective absence, if you don't want to become an absent father yourself! The fourth commandment is still valid, even for you, and the fathers' sins don't excuse children from loving and forgiving those fathers!

From here it follows that the solution to the problem of absent fathers includes work in delving deeply into the meaning of one's own *filiation*. A person must learn to be a child. Sometimes, this can entail learning to be a child *in spite of the deficiencies of one's parents*. This is possible for the person who lives out their divine filiation, even when their earthly parents (one of them or both) are not, or have not, lived up to the greatness of their mission. God is always Father, and Jesus Christ's mission was to teach us in what way and how God is Father. If we read the Gospel attentively, we will see that God's "fatherhood" is the most recurring theme in Our Lord's preaching (the word "father" appears more than 200 times in the Gospels). The virtue of filial piety (and the gift of the Holy Spirit that perfects it) can be cultivated by meditating upon the divine fatherhood. God can make us good sons and daughters of our parents, in spite of the defects of our earthly parents; this, in turn, is the best school for learning how to be good parents for our children.





## 9.

# Fathers of the soul

As a sort of appendix, I propose for the consideration of those who want to be true fathers (fathers with heart) some paragraphs from a letter that Saint John of Avila wrote to Fray Luis of Granada, speaking to him of the difficult but magnificent work of fatherhood. The great doctor of the Church and apostle of Andalucía speaks of spiritual fatherhood, meaning, that by which sons and daughters are begotten for God by means of preaching and by faith, but both fatherhoods—spiritual and fleshly—shed light on each other. Biological parents won't have difficulty in knowing how to apply these enlightening words to their own mission.

“With great attention and almost smiling to myself I read the words that Your Reverence wrote in your letter, that it seems to be a sweet thing to beget children and bring souls to the knowledge of their Creator; and I replied within myself: *Dulce bellum inexpertis* [war seems to be something sweet to those who haven't experienced it]. I confess that the **begetting** doesn't entail

much work, although it's not entirely free from it, because if this work is well done, the children we are to father by the word should not be children of voice as much as **children of tears**, because, if one weeps for souls and another converts them by preaching, I would not hesitate to call father first the one who won them and brought them to the Lord with pain and birth pangs; such a one is a father before the one who, with opulent and composed words, called them from without.

Those who take on the office of father **will learn to weep** so that the words and divine reply that was given to the mother of Saint Augustine through the mouth of Saint Ambrose might be theirs: "The child of so many tears will not be lost." At the cost of cries and the offering of one's life, God gives children to those who are true fathers, those who not once, but rather many times, offer their lives so that God might give life to their children, just as earthly fathers usually do.

And if this agony is undergone in giving birth, what do you think, father, happens in **raising them**? Will he not consider remaining silent when necessary, so as to help his children even when they complain about every small thing? Will he not be careful to avoid arousing envy by loving one more than another, or by seeming to love one more than the other? He takes care to feed his children even when it means he must take the morsel from his mouth, or has to leave the presence of angelic choirs to lower himself and give his child food. He must always be temperate to avoid making the child feel he loves him less. And even though

sometimes the father's heart might be tormented with a thousand concerns, so that he needs, for his own tranquility, to give free rein to his sadness, and empty himself with tears, when his child comes, he still must play and laugh with him, as if the child was his sole focus. For, who can count all together the temptations, dryness, dangers, deceits, scruples, and other thousands of fantasies that come from everywhere? How the father needs to be **vigilant** so that his child will not follow them! How much **wisdom** he needs to bring the child back once he has fallen for these! **Patience**, so he does not get tired of hearing the same questions over and over again which he has heard and responded to a thousand times, and so that he can explain again what he has already said before! What constant and courageous **praying** he must do to God, begging that his child not die! For, **if he dies**, believe me, father, **no pain can equal this**; neither do I believe that God has allowed another sort of martyrdom in this world as painful as that which takes place in the heart of the true father whose child dies. What will I say to you? This pain does not go away with any earthly consolation, not with seeing that, if some die, others are born, not with saying that which seems to be enough with all other evils: *the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!* (Job 1:21), for, as this is an evil of the soul, a loss as the soul is lost to God and disowned by Him, and a growth of the reign of sin, our opposing band, there is no one who can rightly console these pains. If there is any remedy, it is in forgetting the death of the child; however, this only lasts a little while, because love makes every little thing that we see or hear remind us later on

of death, and so, as a betrayal, we must not cry for what the angels, in their way, weep over, and what the Lord of the Angels would cry over and die for, if it were possible. Indeed, the death of one exceeds in pain the joy of their birth and the good of all the others.

Therefore, he who desires to be a father should have **a gentle heart, a heart of flesh**, so as to be **compassionate** toward his children (which is a martyrdom in itself), and **another heart of iron**, in order to suffer the blows that death gives, in order that these do not demolish the father, or make him leave his task entirely, or faint, or spend some days in which he doesn't understand anything at all but can only cry. These things are not fitting for the business of God, in which one must always be attentive and vigilant, and, even though the heart is pierced by these pains, it must not slacken up or rest; rather, having the desire to cry with some, he must laugh with the others, and not do as Aaron did who, after God had brought death upon two of his sons, and feeling chastised by Moses for not having done his priestly office, said, on account of his sadness, *Had I then eaten of the sin offering today, would it have been pleasing to the Lord?* (Lev 10:19). Here, Father, we are commanded to always seek what God desires, and we must put aside what our hearts want, so that, by not crying for the death of the one, the others will not run the risk of danger on account of our negligence. Such is their skill that, if the children are good, they raise a careful concern in us, and, if they are bad, they give us a profoundly sad sadness. Thus, the heart of a father is

nothing but a continual suspicion, a watching from above, a continual prayer, commending the health of his children to the true Father, having his life hanging in their lives, as Saint Paul said, *For we now live, if you stand firm in the Lord* (1 Thess 3:8).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Saint John of Avila, *Carta 1; Obras completas del Santo Maestro Juan de Ávila*, Madrid (1970), 20-22.



