



Fatherhood: A Source of Life

The Return of the Prodigal Son (1669) by Rembrandt

WE BEGIN THIS REFLECTION with a simple distinction: God as He exists in Himself, in all His majesty and glory and goodness in Heaven and, in contrast, the way God exists in our own understanding and imagination; that is, how God exists within our own limited minds. Now, there is a very great difference between the way God exists in Himself, in His own nature, and the way He exists in our understanding, in our intellects and in our imagination. But I ask you to consider: how well does your understanding of God correspond to the way He actually exists in Himself? How well does your understanding of God correspond to what He has revealed of Himself, especially through His Son Incarnate?

A fertile source of a deformed and distorted image of God can come from our own personal experience. God has revealed Himself to us as a Father

and our first notion of what a father is comes from our earthly fathers. Our age is marked by a real crisis in fatherhood. It may be that our earthly fathers were lacking in many ways. This failure in earthly fatherhood can be a genuine obstacle in coming

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to know our Heavenly Father. Pope Benedict XVI, in various places, expressed a deep concern about how this crisis of fatherhood which marks our age can influence the life of faith. In one place he had the following to say:

“Human fatherhood can give us an inkling of what God is; but where fatherhood no longer exists, where genuine fatherhood is no longer experienced as a phenomenon that goes beyond the biological dimension to embrace a human and intellectual sphere as well, it becomes meaningless to speak of God the Father. Where human fatherhood disappears, it is no longer possible to speak and think of God. It is not God who is dead; what is dead (at

least to a large extent) is the precondition in man that makes it possible for God to live in the world. The crisis of fatherhood that we are experiencing today is a basic aspect of the crisis that threatens mankind as a whole” (The God of Jesus Christ, p. 29).

Those are very strong words which point to the importance of men taking their roles as fathers more seriously, since we are meant to be images of God the Father and to make Him, in a limited way, visible to others. But it also shows us the importance of coming to know the Father as He really is and not to let a false imagination or false conceptions distort our image of God. A true notion of the Father comes especially through the revelation of Jesus Christ who makes the face of the Father visible to us. “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).

To reflect on just one way in which men are called to reflect the great Fatherhood of God and communicate God’s Fatherhood to others, I would like to consider this foundational notion that the father is a source of life. Besides being the obvious source of biological life, a father is much more importantly meant to be the source of the psychological and spiritual life of his sons and daughters. It seems to be a kind of law of our nature that our understanding of ourselves, our self-image, is not something that we create and mold for ourselves. Our self-image, to a large degree, comes to us through the eyes of others. We come to see ourselves the way others see us, especially authority figures like our parents. If our fathers habitually looked on us with a harsh and critical eye, if we perceived that they saw us as burdens, or if they looked on us with disapproval or contempt then we will tend to look on ourselves the same way. Those who have a distorted self-image, who lack a proper sense of self-worth, have a diminished interior life. My own limited

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experience as a priest has shown me that there is a veritable plague of a lack of proper self-worth and self-love in our world. This is, no doubt, one manifestation of the crisis in fatherhood. In order to enjoy an interior fullness of life we have a need of the life-giving, affirming gaze of another, the look

of another who reveals to us our true dignity and the depth of our worth. This is one important role of a good father, to look on his children in a way that reveals to them their true worth. We see here also how important a true image of God the Father is. Through our life of prayer and through the life of faith we can begin to perceive how God gazes on us as precious sons and daughters. The warmth of His gaze

has the power to transform and give new life to the soul.

John Eldridge, who has written some very fine works on the topic of masculinity and fatherhood, often says that a man cannot communicate to himself an inner sense of his manhood, of his masculinity. An adequate sense of manhood can only be **bestowed** on a man by another man. Manhood is not a personal achievement; it is something bestowed and received from a father. This is another manifestation of how a father or a father figure is the source of life. Not infrequently, one will find men who outwardly seem to be very competent and manly, but inside they are tormented by a sense of inadequacy, by a sense that they don’t measure up. Other men, who have had good fathers or father figures in their life, possess a certain inner security and confidence. This sense of inner security and confidence can also be communicated to us in a deeper way by an encounter with God the Father.

Besides being a source of what could be called psychological life, a father is meant to be the source of the spiritual life of his children. I think we can see one manifestation of this if we reflect on the

parable of the Prodigal Son. Imagine that after the son has come to his senses, after he has experienced true repentance of heart, he were to return to his father's house only to find the house empty. Imagine that there is no father there to greet him and speak to him an authoritative word of mercy and forgiveness and restoration. That is an image of a world without fathers; it is an image of a world without priests. Human weakness, human failure, human sinfulness is a regular part of life in our fallen world. It is a part of life which we all experience; no one is exempt. Our experience of our own failures and sins can easily drag us down and discourage us if we lack an authoritative word of mercy and forgiveness and restoration. We need a father who not

only pardons us but who can, with a penetrating gaze, see beyond our failures and into the basic goodness of our hearts and their potential for something great. Again, we need the eyes and heart of another who can affirm and restore us. This is not something we can do for ourselves.

We see that where genuine fatherhood is exercised, life flourishes. Where fatherhood is absent life is greatly diminished. We thank God for those men who have communicated to us something of God the Father's goodness and care and may we, through the revelation of Christ, come to know the true face of the Heavenly Father. ❖