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Father and Child

by

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The following is an address presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, Augusta, Georgia, November 11, 1994. The author is a family physician in Franklin Park, Illinois; a past president of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds; and president of Seton Academy in Villa Park, Illinois, a Montessori school.

I am a family physician, not a researcher, an author or a professor. Therefore my talk today will be of necessity a family physician's talk, not an academic talk. My orientation is towards the practical rather than the theoretical. I find that whatever help I can give my patients in the area of family life comes less from the medical literature than from helping them discover what they already know, or almost know, because it is written in their hearts. I just help them translate it.

The subject "father and child" has received less attention in recent years than the subject "mother and child." For example, much has been written about the bond between mother and infant. And more is being learned about the need for full-time mothering of young children. On the other hand, we know that in those segments of society where family life has deteriorated, where illegitimacy is more prevalent than marriage, where the children of teenaged mothers are raised by their grandmothers (if they are fortunate), that men are marginalized and that alcoholism, drug abuse and crime are rampant. It has also been observed that there may be an association between absent or emotionally distant fathers and difficulties in the achievement by both boys and girls of mature sexual identity.

So fathers do seem to be important, but how? Certainly they are not co-mothers. Most attempts at unisex within the family have been dismal failures. The women's sections of the newspapers are full of lamentations about the demands on "supermoms" in which full-time working women find themselves also responsible for housekeeping and child-rearing. However competent women are in the workplace, men seem to be generally less competent than women around the house.

The roles of men and women, of fathers and mothers, although both important, appear to be different in kind. Lacking conclusive experimental evidence of precisely how the family should be structured, where do we look for insights into the roles of men and women in the family? As a family physician, faced with the immediate problems of the here and now, I need to help my

patients search for the truths of human nature which apply to their situation. This search carries us to history, literature, anthropology (descriptive as well as experimental), nature, revelation, Catholic doctrine, and even to that great source of wisdom, the common sense of lived experience.

Turning first to nature, we find that every species has a characteristic mode of reproduction. Amoebas cleave, plants pollinate, fish spawn, mammals mate. But reproduction is not successful unless the young reach maturity and are able themselves to carry on the propagation of the species. In the human species, the young remain immature for a long time. Raising young human beings to maturity requires a tremendously complex educational process, not only in the skills necessary to earn a living in the modern world, but even more importantly, in how to interact with other human beings, especially in courtship, marriage and child-rearing. Historically, the only successful environment for carrying out this complex, prolonged process of cognitive, affective, social and moral education has been the stable family: the nuclear family supported by an extended family. The characteristic mode of successful reproduction in the human species is the family.

Since the goal of the family, biologically, is the rearing of the young, the biological constitution of both mother and father is oriented to this end. But human beings are not merely animals; they are spiritual animals, i.e., persons. Therefore, marriage and family also meet personal needs. There is a fundamental compatibility between the unitive end of marriage, which is the good of husband and wife, and the procreative end of marriage, which is the preservation of the species. But procreation also has a personal dimension. A particular marriage is not ordered merely to the good of the species, but to the particular good of its own members: mother, father and children, each of whom is a person, each of whom has infinite spiritual value. It is for this reason that marriage, to fulfill both its biological and spiritual purposes, must be exclusive, permanent and open to life. It must, that is, be a community of love: unconditional, committed, indissoluble.

In looking at the complementary roles of husband and wife in the family, then, biological differences are not merely physical, but also reveal truths about the person. We are not neuter souls inhabiting accidentally sexed bodies; we are male or female persons (the only such persons in creation). Just as the woman has a connaturality with the infant, and is especially suited physically, emotionally and psychologically to the care of young children, she also, as a person, finds her fulfillment in this vocation. The man, physically, emotionally and psychologically, is suited to be a protector and provider for his wife and children, and he, too, as a person, is fulfilled in his vocation of fatherhood. (Celibates also are called to be mothers and fathers, though not physically.) Dr. John Billings of Australia points out that Eve was taken not from Adam's head — to rule him — not from his feet — to be his slave — but from his side, to be protected by his arm, and to be his heart's companion. And, I would add, to give him someone to lean on.

Now it is said that in today's world, the specifically masculine traits of physical strength, speed and aggression are unnecessary. Perhaps. Although strenuous physical effort is less often necessary today than in the past, it is sometimes needed. Even if it were not, life remains a battle. All of us here today, for example,

are engaged in a battle for truth. The world remains a dangerous place, morally as well as physically. The father of a family is not only a provider, but also a defender. His work has value not merely because it provides a paycheck, but also because it serves to make a better world, where his children can grow up and eventually take their own places. It is not always enough to bring home the bacon; sometimes a father must kill a pig, or fight a dragon, or give a speech. This is not to say that women have no place in the battle. But because, within the economy of the family, the father is less immediately needed for gestation, birth, nursing and early childrearing, he is more available to serve the family as its representative to the larger society. As Dr. Billings has said: "A woman possesses a certain precedence over a man," because of her capacity for motherhood. The man comes to learn and appreciate his own value as provider and protector of woman and child.

Family Priorities

Again, biology has something to teach us about our calling as human persons. Biologically, the child is the *teleos* of the family — its end, its purpose. Mother and father find their purpose in serving the good of their children. Their love, to be complete, must be sacrificial: it must be ordered, not primarily to their own individual welfare, or even to the good of the other spouse, but primarily to the good of the child. "It is in losing your life that you will find it."

Here I would disagree with those who advise married couples always to put their own relationship first, sacrificing the needs of their children for regular nights out, vacations away from children, etc. It is said that parents will be able to be better mothers or fathers if they meet their own needs first. It seems to me, however, that seeking to meet their children's needs first will ultimately meet the parents' deepest needs best. Happiness flees when it is pursued. It comes as an unexpected reward for doing one's duty. And the first duty of mother and father is the good of their children. Courtship has been described as two people gazing into each other's eyes, and marriage as two people side by side, looking forward, pursuing their life's work together, providing each other love and companionship, not *seeking* happiness *from* each other, but in the end *finding* happiness *with* each other.

The same ordering of priorities applies to the work of both mother and father. When a good husband and father goes out from the home, he does not go seeking fulfillment or adventure for himself. He goes out from the home for the sake of the home, just as the mother stays in the home for the sake of the home. The modern fascination with work and career as the paramount source of human happiness is a fraud and a swindle. Yes, some jobs are more interesting and more satisfying than others, but for the vast majority of both men and women, happiness comes not primarily from work, but from home and family.

The stereotypical father of the 1950's went out to work long hours, provided well for his family in a material way, but participated little in family life. Child-rearing was not a task shared by husband and wife, but became the exclusive duty of the mother — often a woman isolated in a suburban home with little or no adult companionship, either from her husband or from her extended family, sisters, mother, etc. In her idealized single-family home, she had gained all

the modern conveniences, but had lost the social advantages of the rural village or the crowded city neighborhood. It is no wonder that women became unhappy with this stultifying, lonely, unnatural life. Unfortunately, the reaction against this stereotypical situation has not improved women's lot. Many women have grabbed for the wrong ring on the merry-go-round, and have followed men out of the home into the rat race.

And so today the home is empty, the hearth is cold. The head of the family is still rolling around loose, the heart has been transplanted into the workplace, and the members are on life support systems in the day care center. The family is in critical condition.

Where do we go from here? Well, I certainly don't have a perfect plan. I don't even believe in perfect plans in this world — not those devised by me or any other mortal. I don't think anyone can invent a miracle cure for all society's woes, much less impose it on everyone else. I am not a believer in utopian solutions. I believe the answer is to be found, again, written in the human heart. It is for each man and woman to discern his own place in the world and in the family. Truth can never be imposed; it can only be discovered and embraced freely. Perhaps as Catholic doctors we can help people to find this truth.

I spoke earlier of the father's role as provider and protector and as the family's representative to the outside world. That is an important role, but not the only one, perhaps not even the most important one. The father also has a vital role within the home. If he comes home from work, hands over his paycheck, eats his dinner and collapses in front of the T.V., he is a poor excuse for a father. He is no companion to his wife; he is no teacher to his children. The Department of Health and Human Services could do almost as well, and look how families thrive when their only father is Uncle Sam.

What, then, is the role of the father *within* the home? First, he is his wife's companion. He serves his children best by helping his wife to be a good mother. When I said earlier that parents shouldn't sacrifice their children's needs to meet their own, I certainly did not mean that husband and wife shouldn't spend time together. Conversation is the fuel which keeps the fires of love burning. Husband and wife must find time for each other after the more immediate needs of their children have been met.

Fathers can also play an active role in the work of the household. Homemaking may be woman's work, but housekeeping is everyone's. A complementary, not an equal, division of labor works best. Each must try to do *more* than his share. For example, the mother of a young infant may have to get up in the middle of the night to nurse the baby. Perhaps the father can get up to soothe the toddler, get him a drink of water, taking him to the bathroom, or even change the sheets if he has been too slow about making him to the bathroom. The father can also participate in the care of the infant, changing diapers, burping, walking, cooing, laughing, tickling, beginning to woo the child to be his life-long friend.

Nevertheless, the mother's role remains pre-eminent in the early years. Those who have suggested bottle feeding as a way to allow and encourage fathers to play an "equal" role in early child-rearing fail to see that breastfeeding is not

merely a method of nutrition. It is a paradigm for the entire mother-child relationship: nurturing, responsive, present, faithful. The father gets to know the child *in the context* of the mother. It is she who introduces the child to the father. The child learns to relate to the father through the intercession of the mother. (That's why Jesus gave us His Father to be our Father and His mother to be our mother.) We have all seen the delightful game a toddler plays, reaching out from his mother's arms to his father, then immediately reaching back from father to mother. "I need you both," the child seems to say, "but Daddy is not Mommy and Mommy is not Daddy. What a wonderful world this is in which I am loved in a Mommy way by Mommy and in a Daddy way by Daddy. Mommy is my rock, my refuge, my source of peace, tranquility and security. Daddy is excitement, adventure, striving for growth and independence." We are all familiar with the following well-known images: To the child, mother is earth, father is sun; mother is love, father is learning, mother is warmth, father is light.

Children learn to love by absorbing and imitating the love their parents give to them and to each other. A child learns that women are beautiful and meant to be cherished because that's the way Dad looks at Mom. A child learns that men though they are big, loud, scary people, can make you feel good all over, because that's the way Mom reacts to Dad.

"The father is the head of the home; the mother is the heart." This familiar image is similar to St. Paul's images of Christ as the head of the Church and as the bridegroom. Sometimes men fail to understand their role as head. Men often tend to equate authority with power. Those men who accept their responsibility as head of the home (as opposed to those who abdicate it or those who have been deposed) may be tempted to think that their large size and superior strength, their loud voices and aggressive temperaments, are meant to be used to rule their families. On the contrary, those traits are to be used not *against* their wives and children, but against *threats* to their wives and children.

Power is not the same as authority. It is closer to its antithesis. "How many divisions has the Pope?" said Stalin. But who had greater authority, Stalin or the Pope? Authority comes not from strength, but from truth. The authority of the father of a family is like the authority Christ showed the Apostles when he washed their feet: an authority of service. It is like the authority of St. Joseph in the Holy Family, silent Joseph, lower in the order of grace (well he knew) than his wife and child, but given by God the responsibility to provide for them and to protect them.

The head does not rule the body, as a master rules a slave. Our heads do not tell our hearts how to beat or our internal organs how to perform their functions. The responsibility of the head of the family is not primarily to rule, but to understand. Many times I have made decisions for my family which I could defend with unassailable logic — only to discover later that my premises were wrong. Many times my wife had a feeling that we should do things a certain way, a feeling she couldn't fully explain and which I didn't understand — only to discover later that her feeling was right.

The father, like the conscience, must be a good student before he can be a good judge. Particularly in the school of emotions, he must sit at his wife's knee,

learning from her as a humble pupil. Ultimately he may have to choose a course of action for the family; it is his inescapable responsibility. But if he does not first inform himself of the feelings, insights and intuitions of his wife and of the needs of his children, he is likely to make the wrong decision.

My father once told me that a wife and children should obey the father's person, but he should obey their natures. "Obey" comes from "*oboedire*" — to listen to. The man's authority in the family degenerates into mere power if he does not, before he decides, first listen to his wife and children; to their words, to their needs, to their natures. Furthermore, authority can be exercised effectively only if it is accepted by those who are subject to it. Because a wife is person of dignity and worth, she is an equal partner with her husband. His authority is confirmed when she accepts it upon herself, not only at the time of the wedding vows, but each time she defers to his judgment in the course of family life. Like happiness, the mantle of authority falls upon fathers who do not seek it, but who in seeking to love and to serve, find themselves honored and obeyed far far beyond their wishes.

The exercise of authority over children remains more problematic. When we consider the rule of Christian love, we really don't seriously take it to apply to children. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Well, we certainly wouldn't want our children paddling us, or sending us to our rooms for time out, or telling us we can't go out with our friends this weekend. Yet we don't hesitate to rule our children with power, with might rather than right (or, perhaps more commonly, with might *disguised* as right.) No one has more absolute power over another human being than a parent has over a child. With that power, especially if it is not acknowledged, comes the possibility of corruption, of abuse of power, of tyranny.

Now, I am not suggesting permissiveness, that parents abdicate their authority, pretend that children are adults, condescend to them, use pretenses of equality like having them call parents by first names — in general, fail to give them the loving guidance they so desperately need. But I have observed in working with parents that those who are most rigid and severe with their children are often those who are least sure of themselves as parents. Those who are least authoritative are most authoritarian. Perhaps this is why parents of large families, as they gain confidence, often become more relaxed in the discipline of their younger children.

Goals, Discipline and Virtue

Returning to biology, the goal of parenting is not to produce good children, but good adults. The "good child" is marked by docility, the good adult by character. Our goal for our children should be that they become manly men and womanly women. What they need, then, is to develop virtues, good habits, habits of choosing the good freely, because it is good, not because it is imposed upon them. The word "discipline" comes from the word "disciple." A disciple is one who freely chooses to follow the good. Discipline, therefore, is not punishment. Children are not Pavlov's dogs, to be programmed with rewards and punishments. They are persons. They deserve not only to be treated as persons,

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but to *know* that we regard them as persons, that we value them, their intellects, their wills, their feelings, their desires, their needs, their judgments as much as we would have them value ours.

We cannot infuse virtues into our children's souls. We must discern and revere the virtues God has infused into them. And we must provide an environment in which they can further develop their own virtues, an environment of love, security, respect and freedom. Maria Montessori points out that "The child is the father of the man." It is the child who forms himself by his own actions. Parents can provide the physical and moral environment in which this formation can occur, but they cannot make it happen.

As children grow, the role of parents changes from that of care-giver in the early years, to that of confidante and consultant in adolescence, and finally to that of colleague, an adult of equal rank and stature in the world. Our children need to know that our goal is for them to be our equals in every way. If we show them this deference and respect, then perhaps they will become our confidantes and consultants, and eventually our care-givers, when we enter our second childhood.

For even as we help our children to reach their goal of maturity, our own goal in life is to become like them. Jesus' disciples said to him:

Tell us, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Whereupon Jesus called to his side a little child, to whom he gave a place in the midst of them, and said, Believe me, unless you become like little children again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. He is greatest in the kingdom of heaven who will abase himself like this little child. (Mt18)

Does Christ's injunction apply to us precisely in our roles as parents? If we are to become like him, the child is our exemplar. We must learn from him. He is our teacher. We are his students.

After condemning the cities of Corozain, Bethsaida and Capharnaum for their impenitence, Jesus said, "Father, who art Lord of heaven and earth, I give thee praise that thou hast hidden all this from the wise and the prudent, and revealed it to little children. Be it so, Father, since this finds favor in thy sight." (Mt. 11) What has God revealed to little children? According to the context, repentance and forgiveness. Children forgive immediately, even when they do not know they have been wronged. Even when they are unfairly accused, they accept all blame, never imagining that their mother or father could be angry at them unless they were at fault. As fathers we must forgive our children as they forgive us. Dr. John Bergin of New Zeland, quotes Pope John XXIII on bringing up children: "See everything, correct little, forgive much."

Dr. Herbert Ratner, editor of *Child and Family Quarterly*, says children need time and love, love and time. Physicians in particular may be so busy as providers for our families that we neglect our children's need for love and for time. We can be the light of their lives, but only for a very short time. By being content with less, by withdrawing a little from the rat race, by turning away from anxiety, by giving up some of our earning capacity to spend more time with our families, we teach our children the virtue of hope and its perfection, poverty. We teach them that people are more important than things, and that God's providence is more reliable than our own efforts:

See how the birds of the air never sow, or reap, or gather grain into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them; have you not an excellence beyond theirs? . . . Do not fret, then, asking, What are we to eat? or What are we to drink? or How shall we find clothing? It is for the heathen to busy themselves over such things; you have a Father in heaven who knows that you need them all. (Mt. 6)

It is only in being good children of our Father in heaven that we can be good fathers to our children.

God is the Father. All fatherhood comes from Him. His fatherhood of the Son in the Holy Spirit from all eternity is the source of all fatherhood. All human fathers are first sons before they can become fathers. Even Adam was a son of God by adoption, created in grace.

Human fatherhood is bestowed by God the Father. Every child is God's child first, then his father's and mother's. A human man and woman, in an act of love for each other, provide the conditions which are necessary for the creation of a child — but they do not create the child; God does. Even when they violate His law, when they have intercourse outside of marriage, when their act is not an act of love: if a child is created it is God who creates him, and He creates him because He loves him. Even when their act is an act of exploitation, even when it is an act of hatred, brutality, rape; if a child is created, it is God who creates him, and He creates him in love. God is every child's loving Father before his human father is his father. In a sense, we are all, like St. Joseph, merely foster fathers.

In the New Testament God reveals Jesus as His Son: "This is my beloved Son." Jesus, in turn, reveals the Father to us. It is the Son who invites us to call His Father "Our Father." How does the Son portray the Father? With bread and fish and egg in His hand, never a stone or a snake or a scorpion (or a paddle or a belt). "Your heavenly Father knows well what your needs are before you ask Him." (Mt. 7)

The Son teaches us how to talk to the Father: "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done; forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil" (words of dependency, words of a child). Rarely does Jesus become stern or threaten, almost never when speaking of the Father. But He reinforces one phrase of the prayer He taught the Apostles: "Your heavenly Father will forgive you your transgressions if you forgive your fellow men theirs; if you do not forgive them, your heavenly Father will not forgive your transgressions either." (Mt. 6)

Before we can be fathers, we must be sons. We must fly to our Father as did the Prodigal Son: And we must be for our children the kind of father that father was. The parable of the Prodigal Son gives precise, practical instructions on how to discipline both obedient and disobedient children. The disobedient:

When he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and took pity on him; running up he threw his arms round his neck and kissed him [The *father* took the initiative. He did not wait for his son to beg forgiveness.] And when the son said, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee; I am not worthy now to be called thy son, the father [ignoring his son's protests, sorrow and guilt] gave orders to his servants, Bring out the best robe, and clothe him in it; put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. Then bring out the calf that has been fattened, and kill it; let us eat, and make merry; for my son here was dead, and has come to life again; was lost, and is found.

And to the obedient older son, who resented his father's treatment of the younger, the father said,

My son, thou art always at my side, and everything that I have is already thine; but for this merrymaking and rejoicing there was good reason; thy brother here was dead, and has come to life again; was lost, and is found. (Lk. 15)

For both sons: unswerving, unconditional, unshakeable, steadfast love.
In closing, I want to mention St. Paul's prescription for discipline:

You who are fathers, do not rouse your children to resentment, or you will break their spirits. The training, the discipline in which you bring them up must come from the Lord (Eph. 6 & Col. 3)

And what is that discipline which comes from the Lord? Again, St. Paul:

Charity is patient, is kind; charity feels no envy [What will the neighbors think? This child of mine embarrassed me in front of everyone!]; charity is never perverse nor proud, never insolent [Can a father be insolent to his child? How does a child learn to be insolent to his father?]; does not claim its rights, cannot be provoked [children can be expert provocateurs], does not brood over an injury; takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices at the victory of truth [Teach, don't correct, says a Montessori proverb]; sustains, believes, hopes, endures to the last. The time will come when we shall outgrow prophecy, when speaking with tongues shall come to an end, when knowledge will be swept away [along with those feats of adult intellectual virtuosity which we use to win arguments with our children]; we shall never have finished with charity." (I Cor.13)

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