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Doctor, Is There A Father In The Home?

REVEREND JOHN TOMASOVICH

The twist in the title of my talk this afternoon reminds me of another situation with an unusual ending. One day a teenage girl came into church during confession time. It was evident she was extremely nervous, and her prayers went something like this: "Dear Lord, I kissed a boy last night and I'm so ashamed of myself. I'm embarrassed and don't know how to tell this to father in confession. I'm afraid and I'm nervous. What am I to do?" In the meantime, sitting in the confessional was a newly ordained priest who was getting ready to experience his first afternoon of hearing confessions. He was also praying something like this: "Dear Lord, I'm nervous because this is the first time I will hear confessions. Help me not to say the wrong thing or give the wrong advice. Lord, don't let me forget the formula for confession. Don't send any difficult penitents today. Please help me because I am so nervous." Finally the young girl went into the confessional box and was waiting, with fear in her heart, for the slide to open. When father finally did open the slide, she blurted out immediately: "Kiss me father, for I have sinned." To which he replied immediately, "How many times?"

However, this title does indicate that there exists a serious basic conflict of obligations in the life of every dedicated medical man. On one hand, by reason of his profession, he has an obligation to his

patients. Having freely and willingly chosen a medical career, he must dedicate himself to the care and cure of all those who seek his help, who place themselves in his hands and seek him out demanding, time after time. On the other hand, he has an obligation which not only entails the providing of food, clothing and education for them, but, as head of the home, he owes the complete giving of himself, his love, affection and assistance, to his wife together with the caring for and training of his children.

The problem stems from the sad fact that it is difficult to fulfill the obligation of a husband and father adequately, if he is absent from the family a greater part of the day practicing his vocation of healing. Here the conflict lies—How can he fulfill both these equally serious time and self-demanding obligations?

Let us examine some examples of this conflict in practice. A man knows that dedication to the cause of medicine is certainly a vocation. He knows further that this vocation will make many demands on his time and his talents, that he will often have to defer his personal wishes and desires for the good of his patients. But, before he has even finished medical school or internship, he makes another choice of vocation—that of marriage. So, he has assumed further obligations which are even more sacred and solemn, namely: to love and care for

his wife and children and to prepare them for eternity. Both of these obligations are assumed in circumstances where their fulfillment is most difficult. The young medical student must give every minute of his time to prepare himself for the art of medicine, both in theory and in practice. As a resident he is "on call" frequently. In many instances, he will seek out as many added sources of income as possible in order to further support his family. This means his wife is home alone most of the time and her task becomes boring and even bothersome because she has no one to share her thoughts and feelings. When the doctor-father is home, he usually needs his rest or he must be left alone to study and read. This results in strain and tension which aggravates each other's feelings and leads to mutual blame and misunderstandings.

After a man arrives at an extensive practice, his position is in no way improved. He is so busy he is still not home much. His hours are irregular. It is difficult to make family plans and much needed recreation and social life are always in jeopardy of cancellation. This has a tendency to increase bickering which leads the doctor to seek escape in his practice. Now, we have a vicious circle. His colleagues and patients consider him a top man in his field, but his wife is unhappy, his children hardly know him and he spends most of his time either at the office or the hospital or the club.

What is the solution? I don't presume to present you with a sim-

ple answer, for I suspect that there is an analogy between the lives of priests and doctors. I secretly have the opinion that the Church enjoins celibacy on her priest-sons because she knows they would make terrible husbands. Please don't conclude that I think all doctors make poor husbands. Rather, only if the problem is clearly understood and recognized as a problem both by the doctor and his wife, and can be discussed without anger, with patience, understanding and good will, some practical solution can be achieved. You know this because all of you here have wrested with this problem at one time or another.

I think there are two main considerations needed for the reconciling of this two-fold obligation of the doctor and the father. First, he must completely understand his role of father and husband and, second, he must establish a correct sense of values in relation to his profession and his family.

What is the role of the father and husband? Well, the father can be considered a *creator*. The example of all Fatherhood is God, the Creator of His children to whom He continually manifests His loving providence. The mark of a true father is found in the conscious sense of his responsibility for the physical and spiritual well-being of his wife and children and his constant concern and loving solicitude for them. Further, his task is the creation of a Christian home-life for his family. He must decide where the family must live, how he shall provide for it, create the correct atmosphere that shall pervade

the relationships of all those who are bound to his care.

The father can be considered also as a *lover*. St. Thomas gives the best working definition of what love is when he said, "to love is to will the good of the other." True love is not turned inward but is directed to others. The father must realize that he must act and live in such a way that the good and happiness of his wife and his children are his primary concern. This love must be a profound commitment for their good. This love must know no limit. The father will soon discover this as it must open up to the children born of his love for his wife. The child, in his earliest years will know only one thing — whether or not he himself is loved. This knowledge which flows into the baby's consciousness with the very milk it drinks, by the air that it breathes and the way it is handled, is crucial to the infant. We are told by psychologists that the physically and mentally healthy child is the child secure in the love of its parents and this pertains especially to the father. Love must be the motivating force of the husband's authority. His position as ruler of his home must be used always to achieve the family's highest possible good and not just his own good. The man who does not see his authority as essentially a means whereby he serves those under his rule neither knows what authority is nor deserves to have it.

A husband can be considered in the role of *Christ*. In the fifth chapter in St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians we read "the man is the

head to which the woman's body is united, just as Christ is the head of the Church, He, the Savior, on whom the safety of his body depends; and the woman must owe obedience at all points to their husbands as the Church does to Christ." This obedience of the wife is not based upon fear but flows from her relationship with her husband. The husband has a responsibility of guarding and caring for his wife; she is dependent upon him. The ultimate meaning of the wife's obedience and the husband's headship is that the marriage of man and wife images the eternal union of Christ and His Church. Wifely obedience is nothing else but wifely love. A woman who can rely upon her husband is a woman liberated from a man's responsibility and is free to be more fully a wife. Indeed, if a woman does not know this submissiveness then she is unaware of wifely love, remains unfulfilled as a woman and her husband, for want of a wife's love, will remain stunted in his growth as a man. The husband is Christ-like by being unhesitatingly selfless. Remember, the material things of this world are far less important to a woman than the knowledge that she is loved, wanted, needed by her husband. Only in the security of his knowledge can she give totally of herself. The more perfectly a husband identifies the headship of his family with the headship of Christ, the more he strives to protect himself, to pattern himself and his giving after Christ, the more perfectly will his marriage image the union of Christ and His Church.

The father can also be considered as a *priest* and his family can be called "ecclesia domestica" . . . "a family church" to which he ministers. Although you are aware of a sharing in the Priesthood of Christ by reason of baptism and confirmation, this is also true in a particular manner through your sacrament of matrimony. The father is the spiritual leader of his family-community and shares, in common with the priests of the church, the responsibilities of teacher and caretaker of the souls within this community. This ministry of teaching and care is to be manifested not only in words but pre-eminently by attitude and action. At this point, may I suggest a simple and beautiful custom for you, fathers, the custom of giving the parental blessing to your children each night after their evening prayers. This can be done simply by making the sign of the cross on the forehead of each child and saying words to this effect: "I bless you and may God keep you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen." This simple practice certainly will have a double salutary effect, on the father because it will be a constant reminder to fulfill his role ever more perfectly, and, on the children, because it will dignify his image in their own lives. This is certainly a wonderful exercise of the lay priesthood.

The father is also the *breadwinner* of his family. Everyone usually understands this evident aspect of fatherhood. It is my opinion that most doctors sin in this manner more from excess than from neglect.

Maybe it is psychologically resultant from so many years of striving and sacrifice. Nevertheless, it can quite easily happen that the doctor, as a father, can become only the person who pays the bills. While a father is morally bound to provide for his family, to meet their real needs, he must not so exert his talents, to exhaust his powers, to strive for all the unneeded luxuries and, thereby, neglect the spiritual welfare of those to whom he is irrevocably bound. A father must not attribute to money a power it does not have — the power to fill the emptiness created in the human soul when love is absent.

These thoughts on fatherhood, if remembered, certainly will help to ease the tension that exists between the roles of doctor and father.

In the second place, I mentioned above there is a need to set up a right order of values of what comes first in your life. Is there an order of precedence? There certainly is — GOD - FAMILY - MEDICINE. God comes first because He is the ultimate end and goal of the Christian life. The family is second to God. The father will achieve his union with God in relation to how well he fulfills his vocation as father. The vocation of medicine, a vocation within a vocation, then follows as a means of helping him to attain the first two goals. Therefore, the practice of medicine must be a help rather than a hindrance in his orientation to God and to his family. To understand this order of values will not automatically solve this problem in practice, but it will solve this conflict in the mind and this is

important for peace of mind. However, how to solve it in practice? Each one must seek his own solution. For one, it may mean that he may have to cut down on his patient load; for another, he may feel constrained to refer more frequently to younger physicians; for yet another, it may mean less socializing and recreating alone and more family-centered recreation; and for another, it may simply mean developing the courage to say no to many other extraneous commitments.

There is no doubt that there must be a father in the house, medical doctors. In order to rise to a fulfillment of this vocation, you must often reassess the meaning of brotherhood and its importance, and pray for the courage, wisdom and grace to incarnate that meaning in yourself for your family.

This is an address given by Father Thomasovich to the Catholic Physicians Guild of New Orleans at a Brunch following the White Mass last year.

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