

THE ECLIPSE OF FATHERHOOD

Nicholas J. Healy, Jr.

Does a child ever grow up sufficiently to be able to do without his father? Can a father ever grow so old that he has no need of children?

—Paul Claudel

The crisis of fatherhood we are living today is an element, perhaps the most important, threatening man in his humanity. The dissolution of fatherhood and motherhood is linked to the dissolution of our being sons and daughters.

—Joseph Ratzinger

Every age has seen its share of absent fathers. Whether due to illness or the casualties of war, the demands of working far from home or the shameful flight from responsibility, there have always been fatherless homes. The novelty of our situation is not simply the unprecedented number of children being raised in households without fathers. Underlying the sociological data is a profound shift in our culture's understanding of the meaning of fatherhood. In the past, the absence of a father was experienced and understood as a tragic misfortune or loss. Today the absence of a father is considered optional, a "lifestyle choice" that "may actually have a number of advantages."¹ What does it mean to be a father in a society that countenances anonymous sperm donation, *in vitro* fertilization, and embryonic screening for the sake of selective abortion?

At the heart of the crisis of fatherhood is a forgetfulness of origins. To be a father is to participate in the sourcing or coming to be of new life. This is an impossible task for a human being, except in the mode of sonship or representation. As Gabriel Marcel observes, "I can no more give existence to someone else than I can to myself."² The task of learning how to be a human father requires an acknowledgment of one's dependence and thus an openness to the transcendent source of life. In order to be a father, one must first be a son. The contemporary crisis of human fatherhood goes hand in hand with the eclipse of the countenance of the divine Father.³ At the same time, the wounds that result from a broken relationship with one's human father are encompassed by the mercy of God the Father who remains faithful to his creation. "Mercy,"

¹ Gian Panettieri, *The Single Mother's Guide to Raising Remarkable Boys* (Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media,

² Gabriel Marcel, "The Creative Vow as Essence of Fatherhood," in *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope* (New York: Harper, 1962), 120.

³ In an address to students in Palermo, Sicily on March 15, 2000, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger reflected on the link between human fatherhood and the mystery of God: "Human fatherhood gives us an anticipation of who God is. But when this fatherhood does not exist, when it is experienced only as a biological phenomenon, without its human and spiritual dimension, all statements about God the Father are empty. The crisis of fatherhood we are living today is an element, perhaps the most important, threatening man in his humanity. The dissolution of fatherhood and motherhood is linked to the dissolution of our being sons and daughters."

writes John Paul II, “seems particularly necessary for our times.”⁴

My aim in what follows is to reflect on the crisis of fatherhood in light of the mystery of God’s fidelity to creation. The promise of the prophet Malachi – “He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers” (4:6) – is accomplished in a surpassing way in the mystery of Jesus Christ, who reveals the love of the Father. If the contemporary experience of fatherhood is marked by absence and confusion, the hope for a renewed relationship between children and their fathers is grounded in the mercy of God.

I. The Essence of Fatherhood

“I bend my knee before the Father from whom all fatherhood on heaven and on earth is named” (Eph. 3:14). To be a “father” is to be a source or origin. In the deepest sense of the word, “there is but one fatherhood, that of God the Father, the one Creator of the world, ‘of all that is seen and unseen.’”⁵ It is not surprising that many ancient cultures and religions named the ineffable source of all being “father.”⁶ At the same time, a long process was needed “in order to purify the divine title from all anthropomorphic dross.... God’s fatherhood only emerges with decisive clarity when we learn that he is the Father, which we cannot do without the manifestation of the one who alone can claim the title of Son.”⁷

The revelation of God’s fatherhood was prepared by the singular election of Israel. Roch Kereszty describes how Israel’s growing awareness of the fatherhood of God entailed a new understanding of the unity of divine transcendence and immanence:

“Instead of fading away or being transformed into a lesser god, Yahweh draws nearer to his people while at the same time he ‘grows in stature.’ He reveals himself eventually not only as the ‘god above all gods,’ but the only God, the creator of all and the sole master of history. Israel simultaneously experiences his threatening holiness and loving fatherhood. He is both the Holy One of Israel and Israel’s Father. The awareness of his unbearable otherness and that of his faithful and tender, fatherly and motherly love grow together. In fact, it is his holiness that binds him in a faithful and tender love to his son, Israel.... His fatherhood is not based on physical descendance nor solely on the fact of creation, but above all, on the divine initiative of free election by which God chose Israel as his adopted son.”⁸

The election of Israel as the first born son of God (cf. Ex 4:22-23) is ordered to the priestly vocation of Israel to be a blessing to the nations so “that the whole world may share in the dignity of the people of Israel.”⁹

⁴ John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, n. 6.

⁵ Benedict XVI, Celebration of Vespers, Yaoundé, 18 March 2009.

⁶ Cf. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 38-123.

⁷ Jean-Pierre Batut, “Calling Fathers ‘Father’: Usurping the Name of God,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 36 (2009), 295-308.

⁸ R. Kereszty, “God the Father,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26 (1999), 258-77, at 261.

⁹ *Prayer of the Easter Vigil in the Roman Rite*.

HUMANUM, Winter 2012/13, ABSENT FATHERS

The figure of Jesus Christ fulfills this messianic promise by revealing a new image of God together with a new sense of “fatherhood.” The full meaning of God’s fatherhood becomes clear only in light of the mystery of Jesus’ eternal sonship. Let us listen again to Fr Kereszty:

“The one whom the Father gives up for us is not merely a great prophet, not even a lower, intermediary ‘god’ made flesh, but – as the first councils of the Church have clarified – his own eternal, only-begotten Son who is true God from true God and consubstantial with the Father. Only then does the incomprehensible mystery of the Father’s love for us appear in its full depth.”¹⁰

God is Father not only in the sense of being the transcendent source of creation, but he is eternally Father within his own life. From all eternity the Father surrenders himself in begetting a Son who is equally God. The perennial temptation to equate fatherhood with an abstract notion of power or arbitrary authority is addressed and overcome at the root. The omnipotence of the Father, who is “the source and origin of the whole divinity,”¹¹ is expressed as a generous self-communication that lets another be.

To be a father, then, is not simply to be a transcendent source, but to generously communicate the substance of one’s own life in openness to another. As Joseph Ratzinger emphasizes, within the Godhead the Father *is* this very act of self-communication:

“In God, person means relation. Relation, being related, is not something superadded to the person, but it is the person itself. In its nature, the person exists only as relation. Put more concretely, the first person does not generate in the sense that the act of generating a Son is added to the already complete person, but the person is the deed of generating, of giving itself, of streaming itself forth. The person is identical with this act of self-donation.”¹²

In other words, being Father is not an accidental relation that modifies an already existing subject. The personal identity of the divine Father is the act whereby he communicates himself to the Son and Spirit. What the Father communicates is nothing less than the Father’s own being even as he remains distinct Person. “The eternal Father,” writes Hans Urs von Balthasar, “gives his entire Godhead, without holding anything back, to his Son (that is, the Father does not merely give the Son some divine essence distinct from, and excluding the Father’s Person), yet without losing his Godhead in this act of self-surrender.”¹³

In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “by sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ The unsurpassable teaching of John that “God

¹⁰ Kereszty, “God the Father,” 265.

¹¹ Council of Toledo VI (DS, 490).

¹² J. Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17 (1990), 439-454.

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. III, *The Spirit of Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 225.

¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 221.

is love” (1 John 4:8) is the key to the meaning of fatherhood. The essence of fatherhood is love understood as self-surrender or a total gift of self in openness to another

II. The Risk of Human Fatherhood

If it belongs to the nature of fatherhood to be source or origin, an immediate difficulty presents itself. How is it possible for a human being to be a “father”? As a creature who receives the gift of being from God, a human being is precisely not the source or origin of life. Gabriel Marcel explores this issue in light of what he calls the “nothingness” or emptiness of a father’s experience of procreation:

“If, in order to catch a glimpse of what creation can be, we go to the only domain to which we have more or less direct access, that is to say to the realm of art or of thought, we shall be obliged to recognize that to procreate is not in the least to create. In the last analysis what is required of the male is not really an act, it is a gesture, which can be performed in almost total unconsciousness and which, at least in extreme cases, is nothing but a letting go, an emptying of something which is over-full. When we say that in generation the active part belongs to the man, it is only true if we play upon the word active to some extent, giving it the impoverished and vague meaning which it commonly bears in the natural sciences, instead of the full meaning which is associated with it when we are speaking of human action and its special value.... The gesture of procreation can be accomplished under such conditions that the man only has an indistinct recollection of it and is able to wash his hands of all its consequences since they will take place outside him, in another world as it were, a world with which he has no direct communication.”¹⁵

Beginning from the nothingness or poverty of this experience, the question that interests Marcel is the nature of the bond between a father and his children. Guided by the insights of Marcel and José Granados, we can reflect on the significance of this relationship by considering some of the deviations or corruptions of authentic fatherhood.¹⁶

The first and most common corruption takes the form of absence or a lack of involvement in the life of one’s child. The temptation to be absent follows upon what Marcel calls the “nothingness” of man’s experience – his externality with regard to the conception and early development of the child. Here is it helpful to contrast the experience of a father with that of a mother. Granados writes,

“the father is not immediately aware of the fruit his generative action entails. What comes first for him in his experience is a certain lack of involvement, as if the child were alien to him. In fact, regarding time, the relationship of the father

¹⁵ G. Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 102.

¹⁶ The following paragraphs are indebted to the profound reflections of Fr Granados on the relationship between fatherhood and the Sacrament of Holy Orders in “Priesthood: A Sacrament of the Father,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 36 (2009), 186-218.

with the child takes place in the future; regarding space, it happens outside of him. [by contrast]... the orientation toward maternity is embedded in the woman's own corporality, a fact that helps her intuitively realize the connection between the conjugal act and the generation of life. Of course, the link is present also in man's bodiliness, but it is hidden at the outset and discovered only through the mediation of the woman."¹⁷

We will return to this last point below. It is possible for a father to be completely indifferent to his children and uninvolved in their education. Implicit in this attitude is a reduction of paternity to a biological fact without human and spiritual significance. Instead of interpreting the "nothingness" of the experience of generation as a sign of man's dependence and an invitation to self-transcendence through openness to another, the absent father accepts and extends the separation of the biological and the human. As a result, both the meaning of his own fatherhood and the original goodness of human origins are obscured.

The second deviation noted by Marcel and Granados takes the form of a father who desires a child "only because he expects someone to continue his own work. He wants a son to be like himself, molded according to his own will and projects."¹⁸ The father has failed to grasp the irreducible novelty of the child who exists for his or her own sake. In this case, the bond with one's father is experienced as a burden that hinders genuine freedom. A father who instrumentalizes children for the fulfillment of his own desires creates a situation wherein emancipation requires the rejection of fatherhood. The result is tragic both for the children and the father. The illusory idea of freedom as self-grounding autonomy has its roots in the attempt to overcome a false notion of fatherhood.

At the root of both of these corruptions is a failure to grasp the representational nature of human fatherhood. The astonishing capacity to participate in the coming to be of a new human life is grounded in a twofold dependence. Every human father depends on a woman, and man and woman together depend on the generosity of God. "Fatherhood," writes Granados, "implies man's generous openness to another 'I' who, while belonging to the father's existence (while being the father in a certain sense), differs from him through an irreducible novelty, witnessed to by the separation in time and space."¹⁹

The essential task of fatherhood is to communicate life by receiving a child as a gift. In a seminal text in his 1994 "Letter to Families," John Paul II writes:

"When a man and woman in marriage mutually give and receive each other in the unity of one flesh, the logic of the sincere gift of self becomes a part of their life.... The process from conception and growth in the mother's womb to birth makes it possible to create a space within which the new creature can be revealed as a gift: Indeed this is what it is from the very beginning. Could this frail and

¹⁷ Ibid., 188.

¹⁸ Ibid., 189.

¹⁹ Ibid.

HUMANUM, Winter 2012/13, ABSENT FATHERS

helpless being, totally dependent upon its parents and completely entrusted to them, be seen in any other way? The newborn child gives itself to its parents by the very fact of its coming into existence. Its existence is already a gift, the first gift of the Creator to the creature.”²⁰

Children are the supreme gift of marriage and a living reflection of spousal love. But just who is giving what to whom? In their reciprocal exchange of vows, and the consummation of this exchange in spousal union, each spouse simultaneously gives the gift of a child to their beloved and receives a child from their beloved. And yet, as every parent knows or should know, there is a mysterious “excess” at the heart of their giving and receiving – the fruit of their love is not simply their own. The reality of the child, a “third”, cannot be reduced to their agency. The child is not manufactured or produced by the spouses, but received as an undeserved gift. This “excess” or gratuity points to God as the true origin and end of both their giving and receiving and the fruit their reciprocal love.

This opening to God from within the heart of human love sheds light on the astonishing turn in the passage cited above. The child is not only a gift, John Paul II tells us, but he or she gives himself or herself to the parents. The key question is, what could a helpless child possibly give to its parents? There is something profoundly useless about a newly conceived child. In an obvious sense, it cannot *do anything* except reveal what it is – a gift. Now, in order for the child to be able to “give itself” to its parents, it has to exist for its own sake. The child’s existing for its own sake is the core of what it gives to its mother and father; it is the deepest sign of the mysterious “excess” and thus the truth that own giving and receiving is a real participation in the generosity of God.

A father and a mother are called to receive the gift of a child in distinct ways. At first glance, everything seems to be demanded of the woman, with the man’s contribution (and responsibility) reduced to a fleeting moment of pleasure. The conception and development of the child occur within a woman’s body. It is the woman who nourishes the child by creating a space within herself for the existence of a new life. John Paul II observes that while a woman depends on a man for the conception of a child, she knows how to be a mother, as it were, by nature. The dependence of a man on a woman is more significant and enduring: “*he has to learn his own ‘fatherhood’ from the mother.*”²¹ One of the most significant things that he learns is that fatherhood takes time. “To be a father does not simply mean to generate biologically. . . . It also and above all means to educate, to establish bonds or relations with the one generated.”²² The task of education requires time and space. The father and child learn that the bond of fatherhood is not simply a biological fact from the distant past, but a relationship that encompasses all of the vicissitudes of life. In order to communicate the gift of life, it is necessary to pledge or give the whole of one’s life.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, n. 11.

²¹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, n. 18.

²² Massimo Camisasca, “The Father, the Source of Communion: Fatherhood as the Generation of Life,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37 (2010), 539-47, at 539.

HUMANUM, Winter 2012/13, ABSENT FATHERS

The father's "distance" from the conception and development of the child allows the father to initiate the child into a positive sense of his or her otherness from the mother. "What the father contributes," suggests Granados, "is the appearance of a primordial separation in the world of the child.... [The positive sense of distance] allows the child to grow in his encounter with the world and to understand his life as a journey toward transcendence." In the absence of a human father, the meaning of transcendence is obscured.

It is tempting to cover the wounds that result from an absent father or from an abusive father by diminishing the significance of fatherhood. But this forgetfulness of origins leads to a greater loneliness and metaphysical confusion. A more promising path is to reflect more deeply on the hidden Fatherhood of God that undergirds and encompasses every human origin no matter how broken.

The French poet Charles Péguy, whose own father died when he was an infant, continuously meditated on the intersection of human fatherhood and the mystery of God the Father. His poem the *Portal of the Mystery of Hope* begins with the image of a father who is working in the forest and praying for his sick children. The poem moves seamlessly to a reflection on the Fatherhood of God as revealed in the parables of Jesus. The final image of the poem contains an unforgettable reversal. The poet adopts the perspective of God the Father who has sent his Son into the world. Everything has been handed over to Son, and all the Father can do is await the accomplishment of his Son's mission. The Father's hands are, as it were, tied for all eternity. The poem concludes with the Father's homage to the night his Son died.

O beautiful night... you remind me of that night.
And I will remember it eternally.
The ninth hour had sounded...
Everything was finished. Let's not talk about it anymore. It hurts me to think about it.
My son's incredible descent among men.
Into their midst.
When you think of what they made of him.
Those thirty years that he was a carpenter among men.
Those three years that he was a sort of preacher among men.
A priest.
Those three days when he fell victim to men.
Among men.
Those three nights when he was dead in the midst of men.
Dead among the dead.
Through the centuries that he's been a host among men.
This incredible adventure was finished.
The adventure that tied my hands, God, for all eternity....

Now every man has the right to bury his own son.
Every man on earth, if the great misfortune befalls him
Not to have died before his son. And I alone, God

HUMANUM, Winter 2012/13, ABSENT FATHERS

My hands are tied by this adventure,
I alone was unable to bury my son.
It was then, o night, that you arrived...
It was then, o Night that you came and, in a great shroud, you buried
The Centurion and his Romans,
The Virgin and the holy women,
And that mountain, and that valley, upon which the evening was descending,
And my people of Israel and sinners and, with them, he who was dying, he who died for
them.

And the men sent by Joseph of Arimathea who were approaching
Bearing the white shroud.²³

The Father whose “hands are tied” – the Father who at times seems absent from the drama of human history – has involved himself in the most complete and intimate manner conceivable: he has handed over his Son. Everything is at stake for the Father, and henceforth he views creation through the medium of his Son. The supreme dignity of man is the grace of being a child of God.

Nicholas J. Healy is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Culture at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC, an editor of the North American edition of Communio: International Catholic Review, and author of The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Being as Communion (Oxford University Press).

²³ Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 136-137.