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## The Priest As Father

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*The following excerpt is a chapter entitled "Fatherhood" from Massimo Camisasca's **Father: Will There Still Be Priests in Church's Future?**, trans. Joseph Ted Papa (Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, Inc., 2012): 73–80. It is reprinted with permission.*

The Christian people calls priests “father,” a popular expression that I find extremely meaningful. It expresses something that is deeply rooted in our vocation: we are called by God to be mature people, adults who accompany other men and women, whatever their age, to help them grow.

Our society needs fathers. Less and less common is the figure of one who, with authority and a positive, constructive spirit, accompanies his son in facing the battle of life. The fruits of this absence of the father figure are unfortunately seen in the growing insecurity of young people, and in their continual postponement of the end of adolescence. Where there has been no real experience of a relationship with the father, a creative relationship with reality becomes difficult: one endures it, but does not know how to face it. The young person risks assuming extreme positions towards reality, which, depending on individual temperament, could be on the one hand defensiveness, avoidance, diffidence or closedness, or on the other hand aggressiveness or preconceptions.

Insecurity and instability are characteristic of the world of young people today, many of whom see reality as an enemy. They fear going out of themselves. Afraid of what might happen, they insulate themselves, forming little cliques as protection. Virtual relationships via technology are preferred, or, more ominously, they take refuge in self-forgetfulness through drugs or the frantic pursuit of sex.

### **Carnal and spiritual fatherhood**

We must help young people to rediscover their fathers, and help adults to be authoritative, accepting fathers and mothers. This can be assisted by the example of priests and their *spiritual fatherhood*. I use this expression to make it clear that I want to speak here not of carnal

generation but of putative: a fatherhood that takes on a person's education and training, even without a biological relationship. This is the great example offered to us by St. Joseph. Just as the Father entrusted the child Jesus to him, so the lives of our children are entrusted to us by Another. Certainly, a carnal father also generates so as to educate. No one generates merely to bring someone into the world, which would be less than human. Priests are also called to fatherhood: precisely we who, in the Latin Church, bind ourselves before our ordination to the gift of virginity.

Mature, authoritative personalities do not mean perfect personalities, without limitations or blemishes. Put simply, such people are engaged in life, enthusiastic about the grace they have received, and secure, not out of intellectual pride or ideological adherence to some truths, but because they have seriously abandoned themselves to the One who has met them, to save them. The lives of most of the young people whom I led to the priesthood were characterized by the presence of priests who did not remove them from their daily, normal life, but accompanied them in it, showing them how studies, affections, difficulties, and plans for the future were all more true, more beautiful and greater in following Christ. It is precisely within an ordinary life that one understands how extraordinary Jesus is. This is what impresses a young person: to see in a priest, not a specialist in prayer or the liturgy, or a good organizer of games and trips, but a true man who has found in Christ the most authentic development of his intellect and his affections.

The basic characteristic of maturity is faithfulness. *God is faithful* (1 Cor 1:9), and faithfulness is the highest form of the imitation of God. What most strikes a young person is the faithfulness with which an adult helps him to grow.

## **Becoming fathers**

To become fathers, we must first recognize ourselves to be sons, as belonging to someone. Without this experience, we will not ourselves become generative and creative. One cannot be a father, one who generates, if he has no one for a father himself.

For a priest, that father could be the bishop or other superior, a wise priest, a spiritual father or a friend.

In the first place I want to stress the importance of the priest's relationship with his bishop (an analogous discussion could also be had regarding the superior of a religious institute). There is an institutional side to this relationship. We do not choose our bishop—we find him. Aside from any personal qualities he may have, the bishop, objectively, is the sign of Christ and the source of our priesthood. The bishop could also have a charismatic, subjective side, which does not contradict the institutional side, but enriches it. The bishop can be a father, not only because he is the objective source of the ministry we exercise, but also as a guide to our growth.

For some time I have been convinced that the exercise of the bishop's ministry must be thoroughly rethought in light of all this, with a corresponding revision of his priorities. Bishops should go back to living with the seminarians, or they should at least dedicate an important portion of their time to them. Or, like great bishops of the past, they could choose to live a common life with some of their priests. I am thinking here of St. Augustine and St. Charles Borromeo.

The split between the father figure and the authority figure has, and continues to, hurt the Church. To the extent possible, the two figures need to be recombined. The bishop, who in recent decades has often been chosen for his administrative gifts, must return to being a father. Not only by right, but living and conceiving of himself as a father who offers himself for his children, and especially for his priests and seminarians.

Whoever our father may be, through him we enter the school of God the Father. Indeed, all human fatherhood comes from Him (cf. Eph 3:15). Only by discovering the fatherhood of God can we experience the value of every earthly fatherhood, and become fathers ourselves.

Entering the school of the saints, the great men and women who have marked the Church's life, our existence opens to horizons and depths previously unknown to us. Such relationships in no way exclude the other kinds of fatherhood that can be found in the world, and that reach us through literature, figurative art and music. Tradition is a river of fatherhood, coming to us to make us men.

Only if we become sons can we become fathers. This sums up the greatest experience of my mature years. Through Fr. Giussani I lived the experience of sonship. In a certain sense, through him I rediscovered my own father and, even more importantly, he made me a son to my own sons. I have been able to experience how important, and indeed consoling it is, to be able to learn new things from one's own growing children. Now I learn from those whom I gave birth to. My collaborators of today, who were my seminarians of yesterday, are the people who most enrich my life from day to day.

To become fathers and disciples of one's own sons also means to learn how to forgive. The experience of forgiveness enables us to look at the past positively. Only if we forgive the weaknesses of our fathers, can we teach others to become adults. When we are cut off from what came before us, we cannot bring those entrusted to us to fullness.

## **The meaning of spiritual fatherhood**

Fatherhood is the imitation of God. Jesus revealed the definitive word of history: God is Father, and the texture of Being is fatherhood. God gives himself to man, making him a father. Fatherhood thus means to take care of another, since God is the One who generates and does not abandon, who creates and educates.

Carnal fatherhood is a participation in the work of creation, spiritual fatherhood in the work of education. In a fundamental and profound sense, therefore, spiritual fatherhood means education. It is above all a great respect for the presence of God in the other. It is the art of bringing the other to the full stature of his maturity. Christ left this task primarily to the Church, and thus our fatherhood is related to the Church's motherhood. The Church is the womb that generates children at the baptismal font, feeding and sustaining them through the sacraments, catechesis and mutual belonging. In the Church a true daily life develops, which is the generative source of education. We are only servants of the body of Christ. This all reveals a crucial dimension of spiritual fatherhood: the one who exercises it brings his children, not to himself, but to the Church.

This in fact is the real danger of spiritual fatherhood: to attach the person to oneself, emotionally, psychologically or by a sort of spiritual blackmail. When this happens, the spiritual father ends up becoming a kind of buffer between the one entrusted to him and the Church's life.

## **Fathers to human beings**

At some time or another, however, everyone wants or needs advice, an opinion, a consoling word, or help in understanding the implications for his life of what the Church proclaims and proposes to all.

At these times, what should the priest do? Above all he must look to the liturgy, to the word that is said to the people, to the Magisterium addressed to the faithful. He is an intermediary, a bridge. He is like an index finger that points to another.

The people entrusted to us must always be able to recognize that, ultimately, it is not we who speak: it is the Church that speaks. Those we guide must always perceive themselves to be called to participate in a life with others, a life in community.

The priest is the terminus of Christ's mercy, the living sign of his acceptance, of his patience, of his bending down to us like the Good Samaritan.

Before giving a response, the priest must be someone who listens, who accepts, who gives the person a sense of having found their home. He must be someone who proposes the Church's way, never wearying of misunderstandings, fully loving each person's freedom and his time. No assent to what he proposes that is not motivated by a conscious freedom will bear stable and enduring fruit.

To the degree necessary, he should know how to give specific responses that help people move forward in life. When he sees the need, the priest must also admonish and correct, always having in view the good of the person he is dealing with. He is like a wise friend who helps to discover the correction that God himself wants to give, and to recognize the signs of his miracles in the world.

A priest must never yield to compromises regarding doctrine, but at the same time he must be merciful in the face of errors committed. People need both clarity and forgiveness. No mother who has aborted a child would find any consolation in being told that what she did was right. But neither is it enough to say: "you made a mistake." We must add: "but God forgives you." And we must accompany her in experiencing the meaning and implications of these words.

## **Looking at Jesus**

To become a father means to no longer think of one's time and possessions as one's own. We thus leave behind a comfortable notion of life and, imitating Christ, become capable of giving ourselves and what we have received.

The Gospel is full of encounters. Jesus knew how to move among the people. He knew how to listen to them. He knew how to go to the heart of their need, without ignoring needs that were

more superficial. Through the latter, in fact, he would bring the deeper needs to light. Nor did Jesus abandon people, but instead became their companion. All this, however, would not be enough. It could still be merely the mark and result of a good psychological training. More is needed: we must share with others the richness of what has been given to us, and that is not ours. This is why the Lord desired us, bringing us into the light from the emptiness in which we lived. It is why he has given us faith and, finally, why he called us: to be dispensers of his goods or, as he himself says, administrators (cf. 1 Pt 4:10). To be apostles, in love only with him.

Priestly fatherhood is manifest, as with Jesus, above all in the power to forgive sins. People live under the weight of their sins and remorse of their past. Only God's forgiveness can free them. For this reason confession and the confessional are a privileged path of fatherhood.

Fatherhood is also shown in the teaching task entrusted to the priest. To teach means to reveal to men and women the merciful plan regarding their lives. We should prepare ourselves to teach through prayer, silence and study. Prepared to speak, we should also know when it is better to remain silent. And above all remember that we are the bearers of a truth that is not ours, and of which we are only servants.

As a teacher, the priest is not someone who knows and has answers for everything. Rather, he is one who daily learns from his Master. Jesus said: *the Spirit will teach you all things* (Jn 14:26). The priest encounters new problems and new human frontiers in his ongoing dialogue with people, and learns from Jesus how to go with them across these borders.

Our fatherhood finds its summation in the gift of the Eucharist. The celebration of Mass and eucharistic adoration are not marginal expressions of this fatherhood, but its heart. Through the Eucharist, we become ever more sons, and thus ever more fathers.

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