

2012 - Issue Four

The Necessary Wound

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Claudio Risé, *Il Padre: l'assente inaccettabile* (San Paolo, 2007, 6th edition).

“The sign of the father is the ‘wound’: the ‘stroke,’ the blow, effected by the loss” (p. 11). “The event of Golgotha itself can be seen, among its many meanings, as the supreme symbol of this universal, anthropological truth: the wound of the Son makes sense, because it is received ‘in the name of the Father.’” “The Father is bound up with this crucial role: through him the Son receives the ‘wound’ and is thereby *initiated* into the meaning of pain, which means into the *full* meaning of life as such: human existence is in fact not only about gratification, but also about suffering and limitation.”

This is – in few words – the central, simple, and profound idea around which the whole book gravitates. The work of Risé is divided into seven chapters, but we can distinguish in it two main parts: the first part (chs 1-3) is – we would dare to say – an anthropological (1: *The Sign of the Father*; 2: *The Father and God*) and at the same time historical (3: *The Rejection of the Father in Western Modernity*) reflection on the meaning of fatherhood. The second part (chs 4-7) is rather a sort of phenomenology of the disastrous effects of the contemporary collapse of fatherhood in today’s western societies. In this part, strongly based on statistical evidence, the author devotes privileged attention to the US, and in particular to what he calls the “fabric of divorces” – in his opinion one of the main agents of the increasing collapse of the figure of the father in western liberal world (ch. 4). Chapters 5 and 6 are more specifically dedicated to a description of the pathological effects of the “absence of the father” (5: *Pathology of a Fatherless Society*; 7: *The Refusal of Death in the Fatherless Society*). The book ends however with a note of hope, recording the surprising signals of an increasing cry of protest that according to the author comes from the youngest generation. Relying on the results of the research of utterly “lay” authors,[1] the author claims that – paradoxically enough – it is the young generation who demand more and more the “return of the father,” in spite of the opposition of the dominant mentality of liberal societies. Unfortunately the statistics the book provides extend only as far as 2002. It would certainly be interesting to verify how much the past decade confirms (or not) the diagnosis of the author, especially in what concerns the US. However, it is probably more important here to give a short account of the content of the first, foundational part of the book, which is in any case the one that claims a more permanent significance.

Risé, who is a psychoanalyst, obviously approaches the topic from his particular perspective. However, what immediately surprises the reader is his remarkable capacity to integrate the results of his experience and knowledge as a therapist into a far broader vision. What the author in fact does, in this passionate apology for fatherhood, is something more than to point out the disastrous consequences of the “marginalization of the father” – a common theme in the literature devoted to this topic. He dares to face, without claiming to be exhaustive on such a profound issue, the question which is indeed the most fundamental one: “*What is a father?*” Or more precisely: *Why* is the father so irreplaceably important

in the life of any human person? Only in answering *this question*, the author seems to claim, does it become possible to understand the drama in our society and at the same time to enter into a fruitful dialogue with the dominant culture. What the author proposes, in brief, is to “sketch” a “symbolical ontology” of human fatherhood. Nothing more – one would expect, to tell the truth, a deeper development of the argument at many points – but also nothing less.

In the first programmatic chapter, Risé enunciates his main thesis: “The father is the one, who teaches and witnesses that human existence is *not only* about gratification, validation, reassurance, but *also* about loss, lack, toil. The most profound experiences in human existence have their origin and receive their shape through *a loss* (...). Now, the father is the one who hands down the crucial teaching about the meaning of the *wound* that *any loss* inflicts; and this because his primary psychological and symbolical role, in the life of the son/daughter, is to be the one who gives a goal, a *telos*, a perspective; the one who “organizes” the chaotic impulses of the child *in and through the very act of drawing him/her out of the symbiotic relation with the mother*. The father, in other words, is the one who inflicts the *first and therefore most delicate “wound,” from the point of view of the psychological development of the person*: the separation from the mother’s “womb.”

The child lives in a sort of fusion with the mother starting from the moment of conception. Until a certain point, this vital union has to continue. The mother’s caring presence fulfills, of course, all through the child’s infancy, the irreplaceable role of making him/her ever more confident of the unconditional lovability of his/her own self. However, the awareness of the huge significance of this bond should make one all the more aware of the crucial delicacy of the process of the eventual separation of the child from the mother in the person’s life. “If the separation does not happen correctly, the subject is at risk of remaining for his entire life a child who unconsciously cries for the irremediably lost object of his love, the approving gaze of whom he narcissistically seeks in everything he does.

This is why the separation from the mother has always been understood as a central event not only for the person herself, but also for the entire community – as is made clear by the study of *the rites of initiation*, proper to so many different cultures of any place and time” (pp. 11-20). Western society – Risé argues – has decided that rites of initiation are not needed anymore. We want to grow up without wounds, without pain, without experiencing loss. The symbol of the cross – which reminds us of the necessity of pain and separation – has become suspect not by chance, and not only for religious reasons. For the ancient cultures, pain and knowledge go together. There is no authentic wisdom without a painful path of initiation, the agent of which is the father – the one who already passed through, and is therefore reliable, because he “knows.”

Now, what is this wisdom about? The first crucial fruit of the paternal “wound” is *the child’s renunciation of omnipotence* (pp. 21-6). The father, in giving directions and rules sometimes painful to respect, initiates the child into what before, in the fusion-like bliss of the symbiosis with the mother, was unknown: the necessity of the *limit*, as a condition for the shaping of one’s personality, and so for entering into a *higher level of life*. The painful struggle for accepting the father’s rule, far from being a repressive factor, in time liberates the child from anxiety, whereas the absence of a father with the courage to play his role causes anxiety and restlessness. The “spoiled” child, in spite of its apparent arrogance and apparent freedom, is desperately in search of a norm, of a restraining word, to give shape to its chaotic impulses.

Risé’s classification and illustration of this dynamic is rich and impressive: from the loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, to depression, to ADHD. In synthesis: it is “the conscious experience of the

‘irrevocably lost,’ that paradoxically frees the child from anxiety and fear, setting it free from the anxiety of recovering the ‘omnipotent unity’ of mother/child.” The author enters at this point into an insightful dialogue with some of the great archetypes of the western culture: from Aeneas to Icarus, from Jacob to Herod.

In the second foundational chapter, on the father and God, the author goes deeper, claiming that the relationship with the father is particularly related to the development of the child’s religious sense and – more broadly – his or her striving towards transcendence. This is primarily because at the deepest level of one’s “I”, one unmistakably feels the father as the symbol of the Origin, of the Creator: the father has to do with the *beginning*. This quality makes of him, not in spite but because of his *greater distance* in respect to the mother, the most original companion, the great *other* who “wanted me and knows me” (Psalm 138), the first sign of God. Thanks to his reliable presence, the child learns to trust and welcome existence, without being afraid of its indomitable *mysteriousness*, whereas with the mother alone one will more easily develop a neurotic search for mastery and control.

Along with this function, continues the author, the father is the one who promotes the psychological development of the child’s freedom, in spite of the opposite cliché; and this precisely because he gives the child a mission, a task, that transcends the immediate plan driven only by needs and impulses: calling it to a certain responsibility, the father frees the child for transcendence, for the future. If the mother incarnates the past, the secure “paradise lost,” the father calls towards “the new heaven and earth,” an earth that needs the work of the child too, in order to be transformed.

[1] E.g. Doris Lessing (interview in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 15.08.2001); Susan Faludi, *Bastonati: Sul lavoro, in famiglia, dalla societa, Lyra libri* (Como, 2000); Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (Broadway, 2001).

