

Notes and Comments

The Father, a Source of Communion: Fatherhood as the Generation of Life, Freedom, and Love

1. Introduction

Every man desires to become a father, both the man who has a family and the one who does not, at least in a biological sense. No one can give up his own affectivity and his desire to have children. For most men, children are the continuity of their own lives in time. The ancient Greeks and Romans already noted this: when there was as yet no clear certainty in immortality, children represented in a sense their hope in the future.

I have often had to speak of fatherhood to people who bear great responsibilities in the workplace. I discovered that often, a man who owns a business views it as his child. This is true of every kind of work. Through it, we express our capacity to generate, we contribute to the transformation of the world and, to a lesser or greater extent, we remain in history.

To be a father does not simply mean to generate biologically, to bring a new creature into the world. It also and above all means to educate, to establish bonds or relations with the one generated. We will return to this point shortly.

The experiences I have had in these last twenty years, ever since I dedicated myself specifically to the education of young men to the priesthood, have led me to the profound conviction that fatherhood (along with motherhood and being a son or a daughter) is the axis of history and of civilization. For a long time now, however, we have been witnessing a crisis of fatherhood. If we want to find ourselves again, then we must rediscover the experience of fatherhood and of being a son or a daughter.

2. From the French Revolution to 1968

In order to understand the profound roots of this crisis, we must glance at history. The twentieth century, especially the second half of it, bore witness to a radical crisis in the experience of authority. Many scholars, historians, psychologists, and sociologists have analyzed this problem and have identified its two key moments: the French Revolution and the social unrest that culminated in 1968.

Even if history is a continuum and no single event can of itself mark a radical change in its course, it is nonetheless true that a number of events inaugurated or furthered a criticism not only of authoritarianism, but of the very principle of authority.

From the eighteenth century on, this critique of authority grew increasingly pointed. More and more, people

affirmed that a man had to progress in his journey toward the truth not so much by accepting experiences handed down to him by those who preceded him, but by means of a personal search and process of verification.

And yet it was not always so. We find, for example, this comment by Romano Guardini: in the medieval worldview, in which everything was perceived to be in perfect unity, “It is cheap and false to condemn the medieval use of authority as ‘slavery.’ Modern man makes this judgment not merely because he enjoys the discovery of autonomous investigation but because he resents the Middle Ages But authority is needed not only by the childish but also in the life of every man, even the most mature. Integral to the full grandeur of human dignity, authority is not merely the refuge of the weak; its destruction always breeds its burlesque—force.”¹

In our lives, we are always receiving. For example, we depend on the parents from whom we were born, on the cultural context in which we found ourselves in the first years of our existence. We depend on our teachers, but also on those who humbly surround our lives and offer us their services. Without those who have preceded and precede us, we could not live.

The contemporary understanding of the human being urges us to be-

lieve that freedom is the capacity to respond only to ourselves. It is clear that this is a permanent human temptation. At its depths, it is the primordial temptation: I will not serve (cf. Genesis, as well as Jeremiah 2:20). Our age has theorized that this refusal is freedom; it presents non-obedience as the ideal form of life. In reality, we know that this form of life can only lead to slavery. Obedience to oneself becomes servitude to the market, to the power that governs everything (and this above all by means of advertising, which is the greatest form of slavery in our time).

We have only to look sincerely at our lives to realize that there are two fundamental truths of life that we must recover today. The first is that we are not born free. We are born slaves, because Adam’s fault has made us such. We are entangled in sin, we do the evil we do not wish to do, and we become truly free not because of a titanic effort of the will on our part, but only because we are each of us set free.

The second truth is that we realize ourselves in the moment in which we discover that we are dependent: our freedom has to do with the discovery of our dependence. As St. Ambrose says, “How many lords they end up serving, who refuse to serve the one Lord.”²

If it is true that, whether we are aware of this or not, our lives always

¹Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, trans. Elinor C. Briefs (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1998), 26.

²Ambrose, *Epistulae extra collectionem traditae*, XIV, 96.

affirm a dependence, it is also true that we must make the truths that have been handed down to us our own. We need a “crisis,” represented emblematically in each person’s existence by the age of adolescence.

There is a permanent and necessary adolescence also in the lives of peoples. At times it expresses itself with more virulence and force, or even with the energy of revolution. In moments like this, people think they have to begin all over again, that they have to question everything, cancel out completely that which has been. That they have to kill the father.

But usually only a few decades are needed for the same people to realize that their radicalism did not yield good fruit. They turn then, often in the mature years of life, to an understanding that authority and freedom must be reconciled.

The unrest of 1968, along with the movements that developed around it, saw the reemergence of all these problems. Niccola Matteucci writes in an essay, “we rehearse an old, elementary line of reasoning: the more authority diminishes, the more freedom increases . . . This mechanistic way of thinking does not take into account the logical correlation—and for this reason the dialectic—between authority and freedom, in which we cannot define one term without making reference to the other: where there is no authority, there is no freedom, and where there is no freedom, there is no authority either . . . To diminish (or abolish) authority does not necessarily

mean to increase freedom, but only to give room to instinct.”

3. *A challenge and a risk*

We can say that the past forty years of calling into question of the experience of fatherhood have simply highlighted the fact that fatherhood is an absolutely decisive experience, and, like all decisive experiences, it is very difficult to live out because it carries so many and such profound meanings, sentiments, emotions, truths, that it seems to demand an almost divine equilibrium and maturity.

All of world literature, from Homer and Greek tragedy to Dante, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Manzoni, passes through the fruitful drama of this archetypal memory. If the latter is necessary for life, then, even if it is contested or difficult, we cannot but rediscover it.

Fatherhood is at once a challenge and a risk. It is always an attempt, it is continually taken up again, remade, regenerated. It is an encounter of free persons. As we said above, every experience of authority is exposed to the risk of authoritarianism—a risk as comprehensible as the dimension of responsibility, of which it is the mirror image.

Because it is hard to be an authority, the person in such a position can claim to resolve the question by means of commandments or rules, which although always necessary, do not resolve the problem of education. Or—as is very often the case to—

day—the person in authority refuses to educate; he does not meet the challenge, the risk of fatherhood, he is afraid to confront it and the judgment of the other, afraid of making a mistake, and ends by eliminating himself as an authority. The middle path is, as always, the most difficult, but it is also the only path capable of fascinating us, the only human path.

Why is fatherhood so important? What dynamic does it describe in the relationship between a man and things, between a man and other men?

If motherhood is the experience of generating and of being generated, of bringing life into the world gratuitously and, on the part of the child, of a place to which it can always return, a receptive foundation that continues to generate, fatherhood coincides with the experience of being introduced into the world. Fatherhood and motherhood cooperate with one another to constitute the personality of the child; in the child's soul, they generate two poles in permanent tension.

In the last twenty years, I have had the opportunity to get to know well the lives of a few hundred young men. I noticed that many of them had an image of a father that was weak, faded, distant. Above all, a man with whom they had very little relation, little dialogue, whom they hardly knew, with whom they had never played as children. When the father is lacking, when his presence is weak or formalized, the children often have serious problems in their encounter

with reality. Reality frightens them; they don't know how to encounter it, how to face it, they are wounded by every tiny contradiction. They want to run back to their perhaps idealized mothers, to a closed circle of short-term friendships, to dialogue with their computers or their cell phones (important relationships in which the "I" is never called into question), to refuge in drugs, to a complete rejection of oneself in the obsessive experience of a sexuality experienced as death, as the annihilation of the "I."

Today we are aware that the lack of a father figure makes the child insecure and lacking in vigor. Because the child was not spurred on toward life, it has a greater difficulty in expressing itself creatively. A young person without a father does not know how to take on responsibility in the face of everyday choices and regards reality as hostile, as a stage filled with challenges that cost too much psychic, spiritual, and affective energy. Without a father, life is populated by enemies.

Today, the father figure is also called into question through genetic manipulation. When we can choose to have or not to have children, to have only healthy ones, or to have children of one sex rather than the other, to have them independently of sexual relations, outside of any relation between a man and a woman . . . it is clear that the figures of father and mother fade into insignificance. To an ever greater extent, we bracket that which is a natural given: we can only

give something that we receive, accept, and respect. We are not the origin of life.

The absence of the experience of being a son or daughter lies at the root of unhappiness and violence. Without this experience of belonging to someone, it is impossible for us to become generators or to be creative.

Each of us needed and needs to be led by the hand to encounter things, to give them a name, just as God did with Adam at the dawn of the world, even before there was woman.

When I was the vice president of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family, I was visited on several occasions by people in charge of associations of separated fathers. They lamented, with me, that they were not adequately protected by Italian law, but hidden underneath this complaint was a desire to blame the Church for directing too much attention to women and not enough to men. There was an aspect of truth in their cry of alarm. These people helped me to understand the importance of retrieving the masculine figure in our society. And I am working toward this goal, obviously without at all losing sight of the importance of femininity. If we distance ourselves from the latter, it becomes impossible to understand anything of Christianity and of the Church.

4. Beginning to be fathers

In order to become fathers, we have to be schooled by a father. Na-

ture taught us this, making us to be born from a father and a mother. The father teaches us that to live means to go out of ourselves in order to bear our personal and creative contribution, and our responsibility, to the world. "To be a father means above all to be at the service of life and growth," Benedict XVI says, referring to St. Joseph.³

By means of his life, Jesus taught us that fatherhood is the imitation of God the Father. Jesus lived out with the apostles that which he learned from the Father. The gospels document that he went away to pray, to live silence, the place where he learned from the Father, where he rediscovered his relationship with Him, where his Sonship, or being generated, was refreshed and renewed. Analogously, each man can become a father day by day, in the measure in which he learns from his own father and from the different forms of fatherhood that surround him in his life: parents, but also teachers, friends, all those who teach us something, who help us to confront a particular moment of our existence, who open our eyes to that which we had not seen, who kindles new lights in us.

Jesus relived his being the Son of the Father in his relationship with the apostles, and in this way he became a father to them. What he said, the way in which he said it, the manner with which he educated people, all of this

³Benedict XVI, Celebration of Vespers, Yaoundé, 18 March 2009.

he learned from Another. As many exegetes have noted, Jesus never said, "Let us say together, 'Our Father,'" but rather, "Say, 'Our Father'" (cf. Lk 11:2). Living out his Sonship, he became the father of the apostles and for this reason he could speak to the Father in a way that could not be that of the apostles, because he spoke to the Father as his only-begotten Son while they spoke to the Father as adoptive children. Ever since Jesus Christ revealed the definitive word of history, that God is Father and that therefore fatherhood is the warp and weft of Being, the vestige of God in man is the coming-to-be of this fatherhood.

If, then, fatherhood is the imitation of God, it is concretely demonstrated in taking care of the other, because God himself is he who generates and who does not abandon the one generated: "Even if your father and mother abandon you, I will not leave you" (cf. Ps 27:10; Is 49:15).

At this point, let us ask ourselves: what were the fundamental traits of Jesus Christ's relation with people? What made his fatherhood so exceptional?

First of all, his availability, his capacity to listen. To become a father to men means no longer to think of time and goods as one's own, to leave behind a conception of life as a commodity, and to enter into a perception of life as the gift of oneself and of that which one has received. To be a father, one must above all never cease to speak, to dialogue, to question, and

to let oneself be questioned; one must listen in order to get to know the other. A father can never take his knowledge of his son for granted. Children are ever new. For this reason, one has to begin again in each of life's seasons, in infancy, in childhood, in adolescence, but also in maturity. One never finishes entering the life of one's child, and one never finishes learning anew from one's encounter with him.

A father does not educate his children by repeating with the second and third child what he did with the first, but by experiencing and rediscovering everything from the beginning with each one. The person of his child is a provocation in his life that is always new, a provocation to rediscover that which has been given to him.

Second, Jesus teaches us the art of the encounter. We can say that encounters are scattered through all of the gospels. Jesus knew how to approach people. He knew how to go to the heart of their need without canceling out the particular needs motivating them. Through the latter, he shed light on the deeper necessities. Afterward, he did not abandon people, but accompanied them. A father must never give up proposing his own reasons for living and his own values, but he must always offer these in a positive manner, as a path toward happiness that he and his child must verify together. He makes himself present to his children, showing them the reasons that move him and the pathways that lead him to his deci-

sions; in doing so, he involves them in his life. The more they are involved and dependent, the more the paradox is realized: they rise up whole, fully aware, capable of willing, of courage, of initiative, and of accompanying others. In other words, free.

This itinerary of listening and proposing brings us to a truly miraculous possibility: the possibility of becoming disciples of our own children in our maturity, accepting to learn from them and to be generated and integrated by their experience.

We witness this miracle: we can live an eternal youth, rediscovering in our children the liveliness of humanity, its deepest expectations and needs. Genuine fathers become the children of their children.

Likewise, the continuity of the child's relation with his father remains even after the latter's death, living on in a communion sustained by authoritative friendships, people who point him to the right path and who accompany him in traveling it. These friends share his path, allow him to participate in their discoveries, call him back, encourage him, and point out to him the riverbed in which he must remain. Through these indispensable experiences of authority, he continues his relationship with the one who nourishes our lives. Without such experiences, each one of us is like a plant deprived of water and sunlight. With them, a brotherhood arises, which supports us through youth, maturity, and old age.

5. Fatherhood according to the flesh and spiritual fatherhood

From Jesus' experience, as this is related in the gospels, we understand that every father is such insofar as he is called to give something that he has received. This is as true for fathers according to the flesh as for spiritual fathers. The latter are those who cooperate in a child's growth through their example and their lives, leading the child toward its own fulfillment.

Fleshly fatherhood and spiritual fatherhood must never contradict one another. To the contrary, one of the fundamental tasks of the spiritual father is to help the person he is guiding to find his fleshly father again, even in the case in which the latter does not exist. A personality divorced from its natural father is an unstable and problematic personality. Where reconciliation with one's material roots is lacking, there is no possibility for spiritual fruitfulness. If father and mother drove me out of the house or told me that they no longer wanted to see me, I must learn to forgive. Without forgiveness, there is no possibility for fruitfulness. And I can forgive only because I have been helped through the encounter with many fatherhoods, with many teachers.

God chooses to generate each human being through the gifts of other human beings, through their sensibility and their temperament. Here we are dealing with the equilibrium of the educator, his great maturity: through oneself, to point to An-

other. Here lies the entire dynamism of education.

Thus natural and charismatic fatherhoods are not mutually exclusive, but intimately related. In this way every man, insofar as he possesses a reservoir of human richness, can become a father to others. We must thank God for the gifts he gives to each one of us, in the awareness that he distributes them for the edification of all, for the building up of his house—our house in which he dwells, as Claudel affirms in *The Tidings Brought to Mary*.

6. *Accepting the father's limits*

If we think of our parents and grandparents, we can understand all the difficulties they faced, even all the impurities that characterized their work of education, with all its temptations to possess or to give into weariness. When my father was born, his mother died in childbirth and his father sent him to live with an aunt 600 kilometers away when he was only fifteen days old. To take up in a balanced way a relationship with one's children without falling into a disinterested weariness or into the temptation to abandon them implies a great maturity.

When we have a very direct and close relationship with someone, with a friend, with our father, with the passage of time we become ever more conscious of his strong points and his limits; we see better the lights and the shadows of his personality. There can

be periods of time in which these shadows become unbearable to us. But when a father dies or goes away, when a friend goes away, then little by little his limits lose their negative meaning: together with his strong points, they give us a global view of his personality, in which we see that all the aspects of the other form a whole that keeps us from looking at him in a Manichean way, dividing him into positive traits on the one hand and negative traits on the other.

When we reach the age of maturity, we realize that our father was not perfect. He was merely a man. This can be the source of enormous scandal, but it is a crucial point for growth. Only in the measure in which we accept the scandal of imperfection do we understand the greatness of our father, do we enter into the greatness of his humanity. He truly gave himself for us, even in all his limitations. In this way, we can also begin to accept our own limits and to give ourselves to our children. Only when we understand this do we definitively become men. Before this moment, we had been bound to an idol. But in the moment in which we accept what was wrong in our father does our affection for him become truly definitive. This is a decisive passage in each person's journey toward maturity.

7. *The fatherhood of God*

There are two names in the gospels that Jesus explicitly reserves to

himself and to God: “Teacher” and “Father.” And precisely, “Let no one among you be called teacher and father.” This does not mean that a man cannot be a teacher and a father. It means that no one can claim this task for himself. It is given to him by Another. Furthermore, it is the highest imitation and the greatest participation that a man can experience in the life of him who made all things and who sent his Son to save us.

After all, the father’s task is that of standing by his son in order to open his eyes that they may see, his lips that he may give names to things, in order to teach his hands to write and to create, his feet to walk. The father wants to help his child genuinely to encounter both himself and that which is outside him, he wants to make him walk on the earth without forgetting the stars, to help him to understand that desires are not signs of unrealizable expectations that an evil

god has placed in our hearts. They are, rather, the imprint of him who willed us into being from nothing and who does not leave us alone. Thus every form of fatherhood, if it is to remain faithful to its task, must lead to the unique and true, heavenly fatherhood, that of God the Father. Every form of fatherhood has the task of introducing the child to the mystery of Being, of accompanying him into the depths of existence, all the way to the origin of all things. “Speaking to the crowd and to his disciples, Jesus declared, ‘You have only one Father’” (Mt 23:9). There is but one fatherhood, that of God the Father, the one Creator of the world, ‘of all that is seen and unseen.’”⁴—*Translated by Michelle K. Borras.* □

MSGR. MASSIMO CAMISASCA,
F.S.C.B., is the founder and superior of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo.

⁴Benedict XVI, Celebration of Vespers, Yaoundé, 18 March 2009.