

# PRIESTHOOD: A SACRAMENT OF THE FATHER

• José Granados •

“This is the paradox, then, that opens up before the father. With the birth of his child, he receives a new existence: the core of his own identity has been changed; he is now someone different, because his own being extends into another.”



In his play *Le Père humilié* (*The Humiliated Father*), Paul Claudel depicts the suffering of Pope Pius IX during the siege of the Vatican in 1870. The pope, about to be made a prisoner, speaks as a father who is wounded by the hatred of his children. In his dialogue with a humble Franciscan who has just heard his confession, he says: “Will they be any happier when they have no Father? If I am no longer with them, through whom will they be brothers? Will there come among them greater amity and love? . . . 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 his children?”<sup>1</sup> These sentences resound in Claudel’s play against the background of a broader crisis:

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. René Heyer, “Sur le prétendu déclin de la figure paternelle,” *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 77, no. 1 (2003): 75–84; Paul Claudel, *Le Père humilié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1920), 71; English citations are taken from *Three Plays: The Hostage, Crusts, The Humiliation of the Father* (Boston: Luce, 1945), 185–86, with slight modifications.

the play tells the story of Pensée, a young blind woman whose lack of vision symbolizes the darkness of a world without a father. At one point she exclaims: “Father? I have no father! Who are my father or my mother? Give me eyes that I may see them. I’m alone.”<sup>2</sup>

In this manner Claudel poses the question of the spiritual fatherhood of the pope (and, with him, of priesthood in general) in its connection with the disappearance of the paternal figure from society. The play hints toward an intertwining of these two crises.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, we are no longer able to understand who a priest is because we no longer know who a father is, or in what consists his specific role in the family setting and in the education of the children. On the other hand, it is also true that the lack of understanding of priestly fatherhood, of the way the priest makes the countenance of the divine Father present in the world, has contributed to the current eclipse of fatherhood in our society.

This link has, in its turn, important consequences for the life of the priest. A theology of the ministerial priesthood, we will argue, needs to develop a theology of fatherhood. Moreover, the model of fatherhood offers the priest a concrete way of living out his priestly mission in a comprehensive manner, for it allows him to make the connection between his person and his mission, embracing both his personal identity as someone called to communion, and his work in service to the Church.

In the following we will focus, in the first place, on the human experience of fatherhood: who is a father and what is his mystery? We will then move to consider the novelty of Christian fatherhood inaugurated by Christ. In this light we will examine the consequences of our reflections for the elaboration of a theology of the priesthood. Finally, the figure of Paul and his apostolate will provide a concrete backdrop to our reflections.

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Claudel, *Three Plays: The Hostage, Crusts, The Humiliation of the Father*, 175.

<sup>3</sup>On the topic of fatherhood, cf. Werner Schneider, “Alte Väter—Neue Väter—gar keine Väter? Soziologische Anmerkungen zur Krise von Vaterschaft in der Moderne,” *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 22 (1999): 148–64; Paul J. Cordes, *Die verlorenen Väter: Ein Notruf* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002). On the question of priestly identity, cf. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ministry and Life of Priests,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 98 (August–September 1997): 7–18; Gisbert Greshake, *The Meaning of Christian Priesthood* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1989).

1. "You will be the father of many nations" (Gn 17:4):  
*The promise of fatherhood*

What does it mean for someone to become a father? In his work *Homo Viator*, Gabriel Marcel notes that paternity starts with a void of experience:<sup>4</sup> in contrast to the creative act of a poet or an artist, 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 with the child takes place in the future; regarding space, it happens outside of him. The contrast with the woman helps us grasp the point: 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.<sup>5</sup>

In relation to this fact, Marcel poses the following question: what does the desire to have a child mean for a man, a desire which is not immediately given to him in his experience? The particular character of this desire can be explored by studying its corruptions, the deviations of fatherhood. Let us first consider the most typical case, a father's lack of involvement with his child. In this situation the father witnesses to the difference between himself and the son, to the original void of experience that is at the root of his fatherhood. A good example is provided by the figure of Fyodor Pavlovich, the father of the Karamazov brothers, who reached the point even of forgetting his children's existence. It could well be that Dostoyevsky, in his novel, was portraying the drama of the modern world: the three Karamazov brothers represent different responses to the same absence of fatherhood.

It is precisely the distance between man and his child, the fact that the desire for fatherhood is only discovered through mediation in time and space, that allows for this disaffection, which

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Gabriel Marcel, "Creative Vow as Essence of Fatherhood," in *Homo Viator. Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope* (New York: Harper, 1962), 98–124.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Man Between Reproduction and Creation: Theological Questions on the Origin of Human Life," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 16 (1989): 197–211; 206.

is much less common in women. Since this desire for fatherhood is not a given, an immediate datum embedded in man's corporeality, it appears only at a stage of his life in which certain questions have matured. It is discovered at a point when man has experienced enough of life to understand both its greatness and its limitations. *Ars longa, vita brevis*: man perceives that he is engaged in a mission that overcomes him, but which he cannot renounce, for it defines the core of his identity. Fatherhood appears to him as an instance in which this situation becomes evident as well as a way of answering its paradox: through the son his own life extends into the future, overcoming the borders of his limited time.

At this point, however, another danger looms on the horizon of fatherhood: it is that of the man who desires to have a child only because he expects someone to continue his own work. He wants his son to be like himself, molded according to his will and projects. To be sure, this father has grasped something important: the connection between himself and his child that makes of both, in a certain sense, only one being. What he has not understood is that the child cannot be reduced to him; that there will always be an undeniable novelty. This attitude could provoke in the son the desire to rebel, to react against the father's plans for him. There may also arise in the father a fear that the son might turn against him, threatening his possessions and place in life.

These deviations of fatherhood reveal, as their opposite, the true face of the desire to become a father. Fatherhood 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. Thus, the father is able to understand his own life as a place where others can be received and introduced into the mystery of reality so that, as a result, his own existence is enlarged.

This is the paradox, then, that opens up before the father. With the birth of his child, he receives a new existence: the core of his own identity has been changed; he is now someone different, because his own being extends into another. Thus, on the one hand, the call to be responsible for the child, to receive this child as his own, is not external but springs from within his own being: he is defined by this new call that has appeared on his horizon.<sup>6</sup> On the

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris, 1990), 310:

other hand, it is also clear that the son is different from the father, that he cannot be understood merely as a projection of his existence, that he is called to set out on his own journey. This means that the task to which the father is summoned is always beyond the horizon of his own control.

Based on these reflections we can argue that the fact that fatherhood is possible in the life of a man, if taken in all its breadth, changes our vision of the human person, whom we can no longer interpret as an isolated, autonomous subject, for whom relationship were only an extrinsic accident. In fact, instead of starting with a definition of personhood in order to see, in a second step, how the person changes his own self-understanding when he becomes a father, we should also look at the issue from this other perspective: who is man, given that he is able to become a father? How should we view the human person, once we take into account the very possibility of fatherhood? Can fatherhood be understood as a revelation of the structure of being?<sup>7</sup> The latter has been the approach of Emmanuel Lévinas, who wrote that “fecundity is to be set up as an ontological category.” Lévinas elaborates on the meaning of filiality for our vision of personhood and of being itself: “I do not have my child; I am my child. Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other . . . is me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me. In this ‘I am’ being is no longer Eleatic unity. In existing itself there is a multiplicity and a transcendence. In this transcendence the I is not swept away, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence.”<sup>8</sup>

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“Le moi s’affranchi de soi-même dans la paternité sans, pour cela, cesser d’être un moi, car le moi *est* son fils. La réciproque de la paternité—la filialité, la relation père-fils, indique à la fois une relation de rupture et un recours. Rupture, reniement du père, commencement, la filialité accompli et répète, à tout moment, le paradoxe d’une liberté créée”; Eng.: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 278.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 277.

<sup>8</sup>The following is the text’s wider context: “The son is not only my work, like a poem or an object, nor is he my property. Neither the categories of power nor those of knowledge describe my relation with the child. The fecundity of the I is neither a cause nor a domination. I do not have my child; I am my child. Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other . . . is me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me. In this ‘I am’ being is no longer an Eleatic unity. In existing itself there is a multiplicity and a transcendence. In this transcendence the I is not swept away, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son. The

Karol Wojtyła reflected on this link between the father and the son in his work *The Radiation of Fatherhood*. He pointed out that with the advent of fatherhood the word “mine” receives a new meaning. Now the father is able to say “my child,” and this word “my” helps him recover a sense of himself, not through the experience of material possession (as when we say “my car” or “my computer”), but through a relationship of personal mutual belonging. This is the way in which, according to Wojtyła, paternity creates not only a bond between father and child, but also of the father with himself. In this light we understand the words of the main character, Adam, to his child Monica, at one point in the play:

. . . my child. When I first decided to think of you as my child,  
by that very fact I accepted the meaning of the word “mine.”  
What happened? . . .  
Something  
quite simple yet eternal.  
Some words carry weight,  
even small words . . . Such is the word “mine.”  
With this word I accept as my own, but at the same time I give  
myself.<sup>9</sup>

The child, in her turn, addresses the father as she expresses their mutual belonging:

How do I love you, my father  
my strange father, born in my soul,  
Father, you who were born in me to give birth to me.  
I did not know for many years that you had grown so much in me;  
for so long I did not know your face, your warm eyes, the bend  
of your profile—  
until the day I linked the immense longing in my soul  
precisely with you,  
until the day the absence had to become the presence  
it had once been.<sup>10</sup>

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fecundity of the I is its very transcendence. The biological origin of this concept nowise neutralizes the paradox of its meaning, and delineates a structure that goes beyond the biologically empirical” (ibid., 277).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Karol Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 352.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. ibid., 345.

Can we be more specific about the form of mutual belonging of father and child? We just explained how fatherhood allows us to conceive of a radical novelty, that of the birth of the child, which is at the same time in continuity with the father's identity. The German philosopher Hannah Arendt has reflected on this connection: nativity expresses the possibility of a new beginning in human action and, with it, of regeneration and hope.<sup>11</sup> The radical novelty of birth allows man to enlarge his future, to prolong it into the next generation. This fact reveals to us an important dimension of fatherhood: its connection with time, the way it transforms our understanding of temporality. How is this so?

First, from the point of view of fatherhood time cannot be a cycle that repeats itself, like the natural cycle of the seasons. For in the birth of the child the father recognizes a novelty irreducible to the father's past; he sees a new beginning, not deducible from his history. On the other hand, paternity teaches us that time is not only a line in which one generation succeeds another. For the father understands that he lives in the son, that the son has inherited the father's own existence. Thus, within the life of the father another life appears, able to prolong itself beyond the present. In the son, the father continues to live through the passage of a radical novelty, of a new beginning.

Thus, the experience of having a son is linked with the perception of mortality. This connection is not only negative: it is not merely based upon the father's awareness, at the sight of the child, that he will leave his place in the world for someone to succeed him. To the contrary: the experience of paternity opens up a new future for the father, a future that will be his through the son. Thus, the generation of a child entails the promise that death will be overcome. And, again, not only because the species will continue (this is the sense of generation in animals), but also because the father himself, in his concrete individuality, will be alive in his son. It is before the son, it is in the form of his relationship with the son, that the possibility of immortality opens up before the father.<sup>12</sup> Charles

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<sup>11</sup>On the importance of nativity for the meaning of time, cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958); cf. Stephan Martin Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action and Moral Thought in the Light of her Dissertation on St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2008).

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Lévinas, *Totality*, 315; 282: "Without multiplicity and discontinuity—

Péguy has sung the praises of this openness of fatherhood toward the future in *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*. The poet pictures a father who, while working as a woodcutter in the trees, thinks with joy of the time in which he will be no more and his sons will bear his name:

His children will do better than he, of course.  
And the world will go better.  
Later.  
He's not jealous of it.  
On the contrary.  
Nor for having come to the world, as he did, in an ungrateful  
time.  
And to have no doubt prepared for his sons a time that is perhaps  
less ungrateful.  
What madman would be jealous of his sons and of the sons of his  
sons.

Doesn't he work solely for his children.

He thinks tenderly of the time when people will scarcely ever  
think of him except because of his children.  
(If they only think about him occasionally. Rarely.)  
When his name resounds (warmly) in town, it'll be because  
someone is calling his son Marcel or his son Pierre.  
It'll be because someone needs his son Marcel or his son Pierre.  
And is calling them, happy to see them. And is looking for them.  
Because it's they who will rule then and who will bear the  
name.<sup>13</sup>

As Péguy makes clear in his verses, the openness of the father's life and its prolongation in the child points to the paradox of fatherhood. How can my life be continued in the life of another without losing its individuality? Moreover, how can I be responsible for a life that is not mine and is beyond my control? These questions can have an answer only if the father understands his paternity as collaboration with a transcendent source of life, in which lies the

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without fecundity—the I would remain a subject in which every adventure would revert into the adventure of a fate. A being capable of another fate than its own is a fecund being. In paternity, where the I, across the definitiveness of an inevitable death, prolongs itself in the other, time triumphs over old age and fate by its discontinuity.”

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Charles Péguy, *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David C. Schindler (New York: Continuum, 2005), 18.



mystery of the beginning and end of time. As Gabriel Marcel notes, the father generates a child with the consciousness “of participating in a work of life, infinitely beyond him and yet requiring his contribution as an essential element which nothing can replace.” This consciousness, which Marcel associates with a creative wish, implies “the combination of a deep personal humility and an unshaken confidence in life, conceived of not as a natural force but as an unfathomable order, divine in its principle.”<sup>14</sup>

Let us add a further important point. The relationship of the father to the child takes place in the context of his love for his wife. This means that in order to understand fatherhood we need to reflect on the complementarity of man and woman. For the child the mother is the one who is always already there, whose presence can be taken for granted, without any need of further justification. According to Lévinas, the quality of “discretion” is proper to femininity: the presence that is at the same time absence and thus lets us be what we are without abandoning us; the presence that allows simultaneously for solitude. Because of this, it belongs to the woman to teach the child the primordial receptivity of existence, the fact that every human being is always already surrounded by the original gift of creation.<sup>15</sup> However, it is precisely this connection that hides a risk: that of the confusion between the child and the mother, of

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 120–21.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Jean Guitton, *Human Love* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966), 95: “While man is thus essentially act, woman is essentially nature. Her intelligence does not work like that of a man. . . . Instead of disassembling and reassembling an object she would immediately place herself in a central and vital point, in the concrete relation which the object has for her own life. We interpret that in our language by saying that she is intuitive and understands with her heart.” Cf. Julián Marías, *La mujer y su sombra* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1987), 67: “Esa esencial capacidad humana de entrar en sí mismo (el ensimismamiento), que en el hombre tiende a ser un acto, en la mujer tiene un carácter más habitual, estable y seguro: estar en sí misma. Lo que en el hombre es más bien un acto vectorial, en la mujer es una instalación, por eso mismo menos perceptible. La mujer puede estar en sí misma—en lo decisivo, ensimismada—mientras hace innumerables cosas, sobre todo las que afectan a la vida cotidiana, sin que por ello perturbe su estabilidad, su reposo interior.” Cf. Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l’extériorité*, 166: “Et l’Autre dont la présence est discrètement une absence et à partir de laquelle s’accomplit l’accueil hospitalier par excellence qui décrit le champ de l’intimité, est la Femme. La femme est la condition du recueillement, de l’intériorité de la Maison et de l’habitation” (Eng., *Totality and Infinity*, 155).

not distinguishing sufficiently between them.<sup>16</sup> What the father contributes, then, is the appearance of a primordial separation in the world of the child. To be sure, the father is aware of the child's belonging to him, but he sees it as a distance that needs to be covered. This distance allows the child to grow in his encounter with the world and to understand his life as a journey toward transcendence.

There are important implications, again, for the understanding of time. While time tends to be cyclical for the woman, while she is more sensible to the rhythm of nature and more able to inhabit the present, man teaches that time is also a project, that it has a direction and an ultimate meaning beyond itself. The time of fatherhood is more the time of the absolute beginning and the definitive end, the time of distance, able to liberate the cycle of nature toward a goal. The woman lives much more in the present, a present that is not the fleeting instant, but rather a time endowed with a density that makes it close to eternity. Both ways of living out time entail a risk: for the man, that of disintegrating it into many different fragments, unable to achieve continuity; for the woman, that of being trapped in the rhythms of nature, unable to understand life as a journey of growth and toward fulfillment. Thus, both times are complementary and needed for the salvation of human temporality.

Precisely because of the distance between father and child, and of the necessity to break the maternal circle that surrounds the child from the beginning of his life, the image of the father has been linked to the symbol of the wound.<sup>17</sup> At the root of the relationship between father and child, there appears the consciousness of a certain loss, together with the invitation to proceed beyond oneself. A true father can only be someone who has already experienced this wound and is thus able to transmit it to the child: the wound of man's openness to transcendence, which simultaneously hurts and heals because it allows us to grow toward our real destiny. The figure of Aeneas, founder of Rome and father of the Roman people (*pater Aeneas*, as Virgil calls him) represents this loss and this wound. Aeneas is the pious man who reveres his father, his homeland, his

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<sup>16</sup>For an example of an approach that does not take enough care in affirming the individuality of the child in regard to the mother, see Myra J. Hird, "The Corporal Generosity of Maternity," *Body & Society* 13, no. 1 (2007): 1–20.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Claudio Risé, *El padre: el ausente inaceptable* (Madrid, 2006), 20–22.

gods. His education in fatherhood starts with the loss of Troy, his own city, and with the death of his wife; from this loss, experienced concretely in the hardships of his trip, he will become able to generate a new people, to become the father of the Romans. It is the consciousness of this loss, of the need to go beyond the original hospitality of existence without ever losing it, that allows man to perceive the dimension of the future as a transcendent openness of life in search of eternity.

What we have said can help us understand the current crisis of fatherhood. In former times the father had a clear identity, given to him through the link between the family and the workplace. His work on behalf of his family was not separated from family life itself, from the environment in which the child was raised. Therefore, the father was perceived as the bond between the child and his place in society. It is the modern separation between family life and work that has left the father without a clear identity and has provoked the crisis of fatherhood in which we currently live.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the separation between family and work touches precisely this point where the father is called to develop his proper function, thus affecting above all the identity of the father. To be sure, we cannot just return to the former situation, but we need to remember that the solution to the crisis of fatherhood passes through the reforging of this link (in new ways yet to be explored) between the affective life of the family and the family's role in society.

It is against this backdrop of the human experience of paternity that we need to approach the priest's fatherhood. Now, if the priest can be called father, the roots of this name and of this function are to be found in the life and mission of Christ. A new

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. Alexander Mitscherlich, *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft* (Munich, 1963); Risé, *El padre: el ausente inaceptable*; and Schneider, "Alte Väter," 154–55, who differentiates between the traditional father, the partnership father (the father who acts as the child's free-time companion), and what he names "the new father" who tries to find his role by imitating the role of the mother. Schneider sees the core of the problem in what he calls the "Entfamiliarisierung des Mannes": "Bei ihrem mehr oder weniger erfolgreichen oder konflikthaften Leben und Gestalten von 'Familie' befinden sich Männer wie Frauen im Kontext einer Kultur, die Elternschaft auf symbolischer Ebene rhetorisch zwar würdigt, praktisch aber diskriminiert, die das Kind heiligt und gleichzeitig dezentriert (aus allen relevanten gesellschaftlichen Bereichen als zentrale Referenz heraushält), die die Entfamiliarisierung des Mannes betreibt und allein den Frauen das Vereinbarkeitsdilemma aufzwingt" (162).

question, then, appears: that of the relationship between Christ and fatherhood. The attempt to understand Christ's mission in terms of fatherhood does not measure him and his work by a standard that is extrinsic or alien to him. On the contrary, this experience of paternity crystallized in the culture of the Old Testament, which was chosen by Christ himself to present his message. The history of Israel witnesses to the intrinsic connection between a father and his child we have described so far: the life of the father continues in the life of his children, while at the same time the children's existence is anticipated in the father. The person is thus open from within to receive the other and to continue to live in him. In this way, a new sense of history develops, which preserves a corporate continuity among generations.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it is the father who has the task of opening up the ultimate horizon of the child's journey, the horizon of the Covenant with Yahweh.<sup>20</sup> It is the experience of fatherhood that allows human time to become Messianic time. Against this background of the Old Testament's understanding of fatherhood, Christ comes to bring a message of fulfillment. It is to this christological reflection that we now turn.

2. *"To us a child is born, and he will be called Everlasting Father"*  
(Is 9:6): on Christ as father

What is the connection between Christ and the experience of fatherhood? Can we see him as a father in order to illumine the way we refer to priests as fathers? When we try to do so, we immediately run up against an obstacle. The Church summarized her confession of faith in Jesus Christ in the title "Son of God," following upon Christ's self-designation as the Son and his definitive revelation of the Father's face. Because he is the eternal Son, Christ opens up a space for man to find his true vocation: to become also

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. Giuseppe Angelini, *Il figlio: una benedizione, un compito* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1991), 91–156.

<sup>20</sup>The work of Lévinas, to which we have already referred, is inspired by the concepts of the Old Testament. Cf., in this regard, his essay on the relationship between women and Judaism in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

a child of God by participating in Christ's sonship. At this point, we can ask: if the title of Son defines who Christ is, how can we call him a father?

And yet, the title "Father" as applied to Christ was not uncommon in primitive Christianity. Justin Martyr says, for example, that Christ has generated us for God.<sup>21</sup> The letter to Diognetus adds the name "father" to a list of titles that seem to refer to Christ (physician, master).<sup>22</sup> Melito of Sardis says of Christ in his Paschal homily that "inasmuch as he is generated, he is son" and "inasmuch as he generates, he is father."<sup>23</sup>

Let us analyze Melito's last sentence. Does it entail a hidden modalism? Is Melito confusing the first and second persons of the Trinity? The use of the verb "to generate" should not mislead us: the Bishop of Sardis does not refer directly to the theology of the Trinity, but to the economic work of Christ, to his Incarnation and death on a cross.<sup>24</sup> Christ is generated as a son in Bethlehem, through his birth from the virgin;<sup>25</sup> he generates us as a father through his death and resurrection, in which he gives us new life. He is father inasmuch as, by his work of redemption, he has bestowed upon us a new seed of life.

We find the designation of Christ as father also in Irenaeus of Lyons. In his *Adversus haereses* he affirms that the Logos was the "Father of the human race" inasmuch as he mediated the creation of man.<sup>26</sup> This fatherhood, of course, points toward its ultimate origin, God the Father, who fashioned everything through his two hands,

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. *Dialogue with Trypho* 123, 9. Justin also compares Christ to Abraham (*Dialogue with Trypho* 135, 3). As the people of Israel were extracted as a stone from the quarry that is Abraham, so are the Christians extracted from Christ, the stone (cf. Is 51:1–2).

<sup>22</sup>Cf. *Ad Diognetum* 9, 6 (SC 33, 74).

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha*, 9, 63–64 (SC 123, 64).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Gabriel Racle, "A propos du Christ-père dans l'homélie pascale de Méliton de Sardes," *Recherches de science religieuse* 50 (1962): 400–08.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 407: "On peut donc penser qu'il en va de même ici, et que le 'quand il est engendré, il est Fils' concerne l'Incarnation. Nous retrouvons alors la construction habituelle, qui doit provenir des formules liturgiques de confession de foi; Justin parle du Christ qui 'a été engendré, a souffert, est monté au ciel.'"

<sup>26</sup>Cf. *Adversus haereses* IV, 31, 1–3 (SC 100, 792). For a commentary, cf. Antonio Orbe, *Teología de San Ireneo IV* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1996), 431–35.

the Logos and the Spirit. Why is the Logos given here the title “father”? The context in which we find the expression is a commentary on an Old Testament scene, the generation of Lot’s children from his daughters after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Irenaeus sees in this singular birth a type of what happened later at Golgotha: Christ is the father who, through his “sleep” on the cross and the effusion, as a seed, of the Holy Spirit, has generated the Christian people to new life from his two daughters, the Church of Jews and Gentiles. It is, then, through his death and resurrection that the Logos becomes fully our father. Irenaeus sees in the mysteries of Jesus’ life in the flesh the fulfillment of the Logos’ work in Creation.

This vision should be seen in the context of the entire theology of Irenaeus. The background is given by the comparison between Christ and Adam, which occurs frequently in the writings of the Bishop of Lyons. The fatherhood of Christ refers mainly to his Incarnation and life among men, in which he recapitulates the life of Adam, our first father. This link helps us see that the title of father, when applied to Christ, is not just an exotic designation that lies at the margins of the central confession of faith. For behind this title we find a crucial topic of Christology, the theology of the second Adam, represented as the father of a renewed humanity. Inasmuch as the first Adam is the father of the human race, so Christ is also the father, only now in a more perfect, definitive fashion, according to the Pauline contrast between the animal and the spiritual (cf. 1 Cor 15:46–49). In Irenaeus’ view, what Christ transmits to his children is a new principle of life, the seed of the Spirit, able to give new life to man’s existence in the flesh.<sup>27</sup>

We find a further instance of this view in the sixteenth-century Spanish writer Fray Luis de León, who, in his work *On the names of Christ* (*De los nombres de Cristo*) comments on a title given to

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<sup>27</sup>To complete our treatment of Christ as a father in Irenaeus we need to refer to yet another text. The Bishop of Lyons comments on a verse from the Psalm: “instead of your fathers shall be your sons” (Ps 45:16). The scripture can be applied to Christ, because his fathers, the Patriarchs of Israel, have now become Christ’s sons. In this reference to his own fathers according to the flesh, the fatherhood of Christ shows a special power: the capacity to transform the past. Here history goes backwards, by way of a generation that starts at Easter and reaches all the way back to the beginning of the world. Cf. Manuel Aróztegi, *La amistad del Verbo con Abraham según San Ireneo de Lyon*, *Analecta Gregoriana* 294 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2004), 182–83.

Christ by the prophet Isaiah (Is 9:6): “father of the future era” (rendered in some translations by “everlasting father”).<sup>28</sup> For Fray Luis, the central comparison that explains the title is, as in Irenaeus, that between Christ and Adam. While the first man gave birth to the present chain of generations, the last man, Christ, is able to generate the future, eschatological time; while the first father generated us in corruption, the new father opens up the possibility of an immortal life. In other words, Fray Luis confirms this precise point at which the designation of Christ as a father enters into contact with biblical soil: the connection between the first Adam, father of humanity, and the last Adam.

It is this Pauline image, rooted in the Old Testament’s understanding of fatherhood, that allows us to grasp the meaning of Christ’s fatherhood, both in continuity with and as a novelty compared to our own experience of fatherhood. Let us recall what we said in our first section. A father is someone who sees his own existence defined in relationship to another who, while belonging to the father’s identity, grows beyond him, expanding the horizon of the father’s life. This broadening affects especially the temporality of the father: in the child, the father is called to take care of a future that will be his own only in the form of a personal relationship with his child. In this sense, the father will continue living in the child not in a metaphorical but in a real, concrete way.

The experience of fatherhood, however, while opening up man’s life to true hope in the future and thus becoming a way to surmount the barrier of mortality, remains in itself paradoxical. Even as fatherhood takes the form of a reply to the question of death, it seems at once unable to overcome its threshold. For it will always be true that the father must leave the world, making room so that the son inherits the father’s life in fullness. But if the father is to depart, how is he able to assume responsibility for the child’s life? Is not the latter’s existence always threatened beyond the father’s foresight and strength? How can he ensure his child’s future, if his own horizon collapses at the presence of death?

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<sup>28</sup>Fray Luis de León, *Obras I: Nombres de Cristo. La perfecta casada* (Barcelona: Juan Oliveres, 1848), 108–09: “si los fieles, nasciendo de nuevo, comenzamos a ser nuevos hijos, tenemos forzosamente algún nuevo padre, cuya virtud nos engendra: el cual *Padre* es Cristo. Y por esta causa es llamado *Padre del siglo futuro*: porque es el principio original desta generación bienaventurada y segunda.”

We have pointed out that the answer to these questions lies in fatherhood's openness to God's transcendence. Fatherhood opposes the inevitability of death because it is the transcendent ground of man's existence, God the Creator, who instills into the identity of the father a new being, a child, and entrusts it to his care. It is only against this backdrop of transcendence that fatherhood is possible and that it contains a promise of fulfillment. In fact, this dynamism of fatherhood provides the foundation for the Old Testament's vision of time, rooted in God's promise of abundant offspring in the new land. An expression of this dynamism is the hope in the coming of the Messiah: salvation—first temporal, afterwards eschatological—will have the form of a child, born for the fulfillment of time.

And yet, it is not clear how this struggle between the inevitability of the father's death and the truth of the father's remaining in the child will end. How great is the promise God has inscribed in fatherhood? Is it really able to overcome the barrier of mortality? An answer to these questions is given only in the new order of fatherhood inaugurated by Christ, who assumed the dynamism of Adam's fatherhood while transforming it according to a new power. Two elements are crucial in this consideration.

(a) The first refers to Christ's coming into the world from his Father in the singular manner of his virginal conception in Mary. The virginal conception is not just a spectacular, unheard-of miracle, but a sign full of theological significance. It reveals Christ's ultimate mystery, his coming from the Father in a unique manner, able to infuse eschatological novelty into the course of history. In this regard, the absence of a human father is fitting for the meaning of the mystery. Let us remember that every father has the role of mediating the transcendent source and goal of existence to his child. Moreover, the relationship of the father to the child is not only accidental (as if it were merely biological) but touches the deepest core of the person. To have a human father is to depend on him as to what refers to the ultimate horizon of life, to the foundation and destiny of life's journey, God the Father. Therefore, had Jesus come into the world through a human father, his way of relating to God would have been mediated through the series of fathers since Adam, making him dependent on them. To be sure, this dependence on his ancestors is part of what Jesus assumed, but not inasmuch as fatherhood is concerned, that is, his relationship with the absolute beginning and end of life. This is exactly the dimension no one can



mediate to Jesus, for it touches the way he relates to his heavenly Father.<sup>29</sup> There is a difference, however, in the role of the mother, who in embracing the son introduces him into history. This is Mary's role, who in her femininity opens up time for the Son to enter the world and transmits to him the heritage of his ancestors.

In this light we see why, while Paul connected the theme of the second Adam with the end, with the resurrection, the Church fathers soon drew a parallel between the origin of Adam and the origin of Christ, following the synoptic account of the virgin birth. Irenaeus established the comparison between the earth of the beginning (virgin because not yet tilled) from which Adam was formed and the virgin Mary.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Christ's body was formed directly by the Father's hands, in an analogy with Adam's body. The possibility of a new revelation of fatherhood by Christ, indicated by the theme of the second Adam, is placed in the context of Christ's singular coming from his heavenly Father, from whom every family takes its name (cf. Eph 3:15).

(b) From Christ's birth we move now to his death and resurrection, where, as Irenaeus notes, he is constituted as a father at the moment in which he becomes the source of the Spirit: the Spirit is the seed that infuses new life in humanity. The Paschal Mystery can be seen, indeed, in terms of fatherhood. A father, we said, is someone who, by an act of generosity in which he accepts the coming of a new life, receives an enlarged existence through his relationship with the child; the life of the father ceases to be isolated by expanding into another, and in this way acquires a new hope: that of overcoming mortality.

Now, Christ embraced also within his own destiny the destiny of others, those the Father had given him. His existence opened to receive the future of his children, against the backdrop of his utter trust in his heavenly Father. Precisely because he is the Son of God, he will be able to open the fullness of eschatological fulfillment for his children, the future of an embrace of communion with the Father. This openness of the life of Christ toward the life of all men reaches its summit on the cross, precisely where the ultimate barrier of death seems to deny his paternity. By identifying

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<sup>29</sup>Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 50–51.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. *Adversus haereses* III, 21, 10; III, 22, 2–4.

fatherhood with the surrender of his own life, Christ goes to the root of the link between generation and death in order to give a full answer to the paradox of fatherhood. The movement is completed only in the resurrection, where Christ definitively breaks the link that ties fatherhood with mortality, that is, he ensures a communication of life that is able to overcome the threshold of death by bestowing the new gift of the Spirit. The risen Christ reveals in its fullness the extent of the Father's promise, which consists in the fullness of life in his presence.

This overabundance implies that the father no longer needs to disappear in order to make room for the children, and that he can accompany them along the way toward the goal: it is the mystery of Christ's presence in history, as the head of his body.<sup>31</sup> Christ's fatherhood allows him to conquer the whole future, until the end of time, through the life of Christians. Now he has been established as the Lord of history and leads the flux of time onward to its heavenly fulfillment. In light of Christ's fatherhood man can now be fully defined, with Ignatius of Antioch, as someone who is "from the Father" and "toward the Father."<sup>32</sup>

Of course, in order to fulfill the meaning of fatherhood, to reach a point at which the openness of the father toward the child no longer speaks of mortality, human fatherhood needs to be transformed. This transformation takes place through Christ's death and resurrection, and is connected with the virginal form assumed by Christ's paternity. Virginity does not amount to the absence of fatherhood, but to its fulfillment. It means that, in Christ, fatherhood acquires a new dimension. His fatherhood is virginal because he opens up the ultimate future of life by situating his children in the perspective of the *eschaton*, of the goal of human life in communion with God.

Let us note that this fatherhood, which we can call "spiritual" because it communicates the fullness of God's Spirit, while

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<sup>31</sup>To be sure, the paradox of presence and absence does not disappear in Christ's fatherhood. In fact, it is still true that Christ needs to leave in order for new life to come to his children (cf. Jn 16:7). But this absence is a form of his presence, for the Spirit is the communication of Christ's life (Mt 28:20). Christ is not visible on earth, but is present in a hidden eucharistic form. Thus, as a father, he continues to be alive and is able to accompany his children's journey.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Ferdinando Bergamelli, "Dal Padre al Padre. Il Padre come principio e termine di Cristo e del cristiano in Ignazio di Antiochia," in *Studia Patristica* 36 (Louvain: Peeters, 2001), 168–76.

being new with regard to Adam's fatherhood, is not less rooted in man's body. If Christ's self-offering were a disembodied one, his love would be unable to speak the language of fatherhood. For it is in the body that fatherhood is possible; corporeality allows for this openness of the father to the child, for the possibility of this mutual belonging within distance, in which lies the key to fatherhood's mystery. While the body of the mother speaks of the primordial communion with the world in which the child is received, in the father the body tells us of the wound that opens up the horizon, thus allowing the child to mature and grow. Thus, it is in the body that fatherhood is able to speak about the future, about the ultimate goal of human existence. This openness of the body toward establishing a relationship with another, thus opening up a new future, is brought to fulfillment in Christ's action, because he communicates the eschatological future, the final embrace of God the Father.

After having considered Christ's fatherhood, it is now possible to turn to our main topic, the fatherhood of the priest.

### 3. *The priesthood: a sacrament of Christ as father*

We have argued that Christ brings to fulfillment the meaning of fatherhood, while elevating it to an unexpected height. In this light, new horizons open up for understanding the sacrament of priesthood. In order to grasp this perspective we need to start by asking about the essence of priestly ordination. In the New Testament the priest is someone who has received the commission of representing the self-offering of Jesus Christ for the world.<sup>33</sup> St. Paul says, for example, that God has entrusted to him the word of reconciliation and that he acts as an ambassador of Christ (2 Cor 5:19–20). Thomas Aquinas makes frequent reference to this Pauline text to substantiate his claim that the priest acts *in persona Christi*.<sup>34</sup> Of

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. Heinrich Schlier, "Grundelemente des priesterlichen Amtes im Neuen Testament," *Theologie und Philosophie* 44 (1969): 161–80; 166, 175.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Aimé Georges Martimort, "The Value of the Theological Formula *in persona Christi*," in *From "Inter Insigniores" to "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis"*, ed. Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998), 107–18; 110: "The voice of the apostle expresses God's own voice, or rather God speaks the word of reconciliation through the apostle's mouth. Thus clarified by this Pauline perspective, the formula

course, this representation goes well beyond the mere utterance of words, for it affects the whole being of the priest: it takes place in the sacraments and the preaching of the word, as well as in the priest's whole existence; it is understood basically as a service, and is endowed with a ministerial (not merely charismatic) authority.

This acting *in persona Christi* implies a special belonging of the priest to Christ, a singular availability of his person to the person of Jesus. Since the priest makes visible the "for us" of Jesus Christ, the openness of Jesus' life to include in him the life of others, the priest's own existence needs to become open in the way of Christ. In fact, Christ's act of reconciliation consisted in the entire gift of his person to the Father on behalf of his brothers. Here, we are at the roots of the christological definition of the person as a being in relationship; a person becomes oneself precisely in openness to his neighbor and through belonging to him, against the backdrop of a relationship with God the Father.<sup>35</sup>

Can we be more explicit about the determination of the priest's being, of his capacity to represent Christ? After all, every believer is called to be one with Christ in his daily life, to make of his existence a gift for the life of the world. St. Paul's statement, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20), applies to every Christian. And yet, there is in this identification with Christ something unique that belongs to the priestly ministry. The Second Vatican Council has defined the priesthood as a representation of Christ as the head of the Church, that is, inasmuch

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*in persona Christi* means in the first place that the bishops, successors of the apostles, and the priests, their collaborators, are ambassadors of Christ, that they speak in his name." "Whereas the minister of the other sacraments expresses himself by way of intercession [...] the priest proceeds in a historico-narrative manner, a narrative which is action, since the priest completes it with Christ's actions: the breaking and the distribution of communion" (112).

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Ratzinger, "The Ministry and Life of Priests," 11: "The ministry of the word requires that the priest share in the kenosis of Christ, in his 'increasing and decreasing.' The fact that the priest does not speak about himself, but bears the message of another, certainly does not mean that he is not personally involved, but precisely the opposite: it is a giving-away-of-the-self in Christ that takes up the path of his Easter mystery, and leads to a true finding-of-the-self, and communion with him who is the Word of God in person. This Paschal structure of the 'not-self' that turns out to be the 'true self' after all, shows, in the last analysis, that the ministry of the Word reaches beyond all 'functions' to penetrate the priest's very being, and presupposes that the priesthood is a sacrament."

as he is the source of divine life in the sacraments, in the order of the community, in the official proclamation of the Word. In a more precise way, the priest acts *in persona Christi capitis*, in order to transmit to the faithful Christ's gifts.<sup>36</sup> Can we deepen the meaning of this expression?

This language used by the Second Vatican Council—the representation of Christ as the head—belongs to the context of the Pauline theology of Christ's body (cf. Col 1:18; Col 2:18–19; Eph 4:15–16). It is important thus briefly to refer to St. Paul's understanding of this doctrine in order rightly to conceive the priest's identity.<sup>37</sup> Paul speaks of the body of Christ against the backdrop of the Old Testament notion of corporate personality. In this view the image of the body does not refer only to an organic connection of the members, but also expresses the deepest meaning of personal relationships, the fact that many people can belong together. Because man is corporeal, his existence is related to others, open to them, able to participate in their different personal worlds. The human experiences that represent this connection most clearly are those lived out within the family: the union in one flesh of husband and wife, as well as the relationships of fatherhood and motherhood, filiation or fraternity. The preeminence of the family bonds comes from the fact that, because of their rootedness in man's bodiliness, relationship is seen in them from the outset as what it truly is: a constitutive part of personal identity. In this light, the concept of corporate personality found in Scripture is not based on an underdeveloped and primitive understanding of the person, that is, as though man were deprived of individuality, but on a richer vision of the human, with greater emphasis on the openness of the personal world unto others. Corporate personality is rooted in concrete human experiences of relationship and mutual indwelling, as when we say that man and woman become one flesh in their union (cf. Gn 2:23–24), or when a brother says of his brother: he is my own flesh (cf. Gn 37:27).

Now, in the light of corporate personality we understand better why St. Paul links the image of the Church as body with the

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<sup>36</sup>Cf. *Lumen gentium*, 28; *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 2.6.

<sup>37</sup>For a more extended treatment of this point, cf. José Granados, "The Family, the Body, and Communitas Ecclesiology: The Mission of the Family in the Midst of the Church as Communitas," *Anthropotes* 23, no. 2 (2007): 175–214.

union of man and woman in one flesh.<sup>38</sup> Christians are one body not only as the articulated union of many members in one organism, but also according to the nuptial unity of man and woman in one flesh. In other words, here the body is not only an organic body, but a body that expresses man's openness to the world and to his neighbors.

Moreover, at the root of Israel's understanding of corporate personality lies the experience of fatherhood: the children of Abraham were already present in the Patriarch as we were all present in Adam. This relationship is crucial because it links one generation with the next throughout the history of Israel. In the words of H. W. Robinson, it provides a basis for "the extension of the living family to include its ancestors, or, as we should rather say, the extension of the ancestors to include the living members of the family."<sup>39</sup> What is at work here is, again, a vision of fatherhood as the way in which the human being is open from within to his offspring and, in it, to the continuity of time beyond the barrier of death.

These elements allow us better to understand the analogy Paul uses to approach the mystery of the Church: the Church is the body of Christ, who is the head, just as man and woman become one flesh in marriage, with the husband being the head. Through this reference to the head, the nuptial analogy is broadened to contain also the paternal image, because Christ is also the one who generates the Church, the one from whom the Church is born and purified.<sup>40</sup>

This parallel allows us to be more precise regarding the manner in which the priest represents Christ as the head of the Church. The key is the image of Christ as bridegroom and father, as

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<sup>38</sup>Cf. Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser. Ein Kommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1968), *ad locum*.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. H. W. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 27.

<sup>40</sup>In this context, St. Paul interprets his own role as minister as that of presenting the Church to Christ (2 Cor 11:2); in other passages of his letters, as we will see below, he uses the image of fatherhood to summarize his ministry. The fact that the letter to the Ephesians places the whole passage of the relationship between man and woman in a eucharistic context, permits us once more to link the role of Christ as the head of the Church with the ministry of the priest who presides at the Sacrament.

the one from whom life comes into the Church.<sup>41</sup> The priest makes Christ present inasmuch as he is before the Church, bringing her to life. Only in this vis-à-vis of Christ and the Church, represented by the priest before the community, is the wholeness of the Christian mystery preserved. In this way the priest gives witness to the fact that salvation always comes from above, from the distance expressed by fatherhood, and that it can never be produced by the community herself. As a father, he witnesses to the transcendence of God's primordial love, to the origin and goal of the Church's journey. The priest helps grasp what Origen called the order of love, the fact that it is God who loved us first and, as the original source of communion, allowed us to love in return.<sup>42</sup>

We have found, then, a connection between priesthood and fatherhood. The sacrament, by identifying the priest with Christ the head, refers him to Christ's fatherhood, that is, to his work inasmuch as he gives new life to humanity, and makes visible God the Father's original love. The priest, as a father, not only receives Jesus' life and then gives it to others (a transmission that is proper to all Christians); what is specific to the priest is that he transmits life with the originality of Christ himself, the source of grace, through his identification with Christ as the head of the Church, *in persona Christi capitis*.<sup>43</sup>

In order to express the significance of this mission for the life of the priest we can refer to the doctrine of sacramental character. The Church grew in her awareness that some sacraments (baptism, confirmation, holy orders) cannot be repeated, for they leave a mark in the life of the person that affects his very identity. And so, the one who belongs to Christ by baptism is no longer able to delete the effect of baptism in his life, even if he were to turn away from the Lord. The doctrine of sacramental character is based on the eschatological meaning proper to the encounter with Christ; to the fact that Christ is the last and definitive Word of God to man and that in

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<sup>41</sup>Cf. Sara Butler, "The Priest as Sacrament of Christ the Bridegroom," *Worship* 66, no. 6 (1992): 498–517.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. Origen, *In Canticum Canticorum* III, 7 (SC 376, 548–65).

<sup>43</sup>The way the priest represents the community (he acts *in nomine Ecclesiae*, or even, as the medieval expression has it, *in persona Ecclesiae*) is subordinated to this representation of Christ. He represents the community inasmuch as he represents Christ, as the head of the community.

giving us his only Son, there is nothing else the Father could communicate to us.

In light of our vision of the person as relational we can see the sacramental character as a sign of belonging that has to be understood in the light of Christ, who in Scripture is called the imprint (character) of the Father's being (cf. Heb 1:3). Against this backdrop we see that the character imparted in baptism is the definitive fulfillment of the person's openness toward the world, others, and God, an openness that is present in his constitution from the very outset of his journey in existence. This openness here arrives at its definitive, eschatological measure, which is proper to Christ and is realized in the encounter with him. Baptism imprints a character because it is the total communication of divine sonship in a definitive way: it has an eschatological form that cannot be reversed.

Now, if the sacrament of priesthood cannot be repeated either, this is because it shares in the same definitiveness. What is the difference between it and the character received in baptism? In view of our previous considerations we could draw an analogy between the experience of fatherhood and the ontological change that takes place in the priest. Becoming a father, we said, represents a radical transformation of the person, a change that unveils the deep roots of his identity. The life of the man who becomes a father is now enlarged to include the child, for whom he is responsible not as a master who deals with his slave, but as someone entrusted with a gift that, while belonging to his own identity, fully surpasses him. In the relationship with the child, the life of the father opens up toward transcendence: the father is aware of being in collaboration with God, the ultimate ground of existence.

It is a change of this kind, a change analogous to the relationality of the person who becomes a father, that the priestly character represents in the life of the priest. The analogy, we recall, is a christological one: the new fatherhood is a participation in Christ's fatherhood, who has brought the logic of fatherhood to its fulfillment. The permanence of the sacramental character is given by its eschatological meaning, which is already hinted at in the natural experience of fatherhood. What is proper to the father is precisely that he reaches beyond the end of man's journey, that he extends his future in the form of a relationship with his child. In the case of the priest, this openness attains its fulfillment: the life he bestows is such that it has already overcome death, for it is a life that springs from



Christ's resurrected body. The capacity of generating in such a way, into eternity, leaves an indelible character on the being of the person who receives it. In this reading, the character remains forever because it transcends the time of this world to enter into the sphere of God's eternity. Therefore, the priest is identified with Christ precisely as the source of life eternal, whereas as a baptized person he is generated to eternity by Christ. Thus, according to Ratzinger the mystery of the priestly character resides in being a sign of belonging to Christ, because of which the priest can give what does not belong to him, thus becoming a minister of divine gifts. It is in this sense that St. Augustine speaks of the *priestly character* as a *ius dandi*, as a right to give. This is both a certainty of the priest's capacity to transmit grace, even if he is well aware of his sinfulness, and a responsibility to become faithful to the gift entrusted to him in the sacrament.<sup>44</sup>

One consequence of this analogy between priesthood and fatherhood is that the character is not only imprinted in the priest's soul, but also in his corporeality. For we need to recall again that what is spiritual (as in "spiritual fatherhood") does not imply a lack of bodily participation. Fatherhood is intimately connected with man's corporeality; it is the body that makes possible the openness of the father's life toward the child, the mutual belonging of both and the fecund extension of the father's life into the future. Created fatherhood is written in the flesh: an angel is not able to become a father. An important consequence is that the spiritual father transmits to his children only what he has lived in advance in his concrete bodily existence, that is, in his concrete engagement with the world, with others, with God. Spiritual fatherhood requires that the priest participate generously in the life of his brethren by being able to share their joys and bear their sufferings.

This vision of the priesthood as fatherhood helps us to see how ordination gives form to the whole life of the priest. Understood as fatherhood, the priesthood cannot be only an office that the priest carries out during certain times of the day; it is rather a vocation that embraces his whole existence. In fact, for a vocation to be comprehensive of an entire life, it needs to be explained in the context of personal love and rooted in the foundational experiences of the family. For it is in the family that the person understands his

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<sup>44</sup>Cf. Ratzinger, "The Ministry and Life of Priests," 12.

own identity as called to communion, according to what John Paul II called the *genealogy of the person*.<sup>45</sup> The person is someone who has received his existence as a child and learns to give himself to others as a spouse, bearing thus the fruit of fatherhood and motherhood.<sup>46</sup> Understood as fatherhood, the priesthood can be related to an anthropology of communion and takes its place in the web of family relationships.

In this light we can see the priest's celibacy not only as a renunciation that makes him freer to minister to others, but as an affirmation of personal love, as the fulfillment of a language inscribed in the human body from the beginning, the language of fatherhood. It is in fact from this rootedness in the experience of communion that his mission is able to expand to the many and to attain true freedom, not only as an absence of limitations, but as a response to an initial gift of love. In this light the special trait of the priest's virginity can be defined precisely by his fatherhood, which includes also a configuration to Christ as bridegroom of the Church. St. Paul will offer us now a concrete example of this vision.

4. "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel":  
St. Paul's fatherhood

The apostle Paul presented himself in his letters as a father of the believers.<sup>47</sup> The comparison is found already in the letter to the Thessalonians. After describing himself as a "nurse taking care of her children," Paul adds: "we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves . . . . You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behavior to you believers; for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you" (1 Thess 2:7–10).

It is important to highlight the broader context of this passage. St. Paul starts his letter by saying that he preaches the Gospel

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<sup>45</sup>Cf. John Paul II, Letter to Families, *Gratissimam sane*, 9.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Livio Melina, *Per una cultura della famiglia: Il linguaggio dell'amore* (Venice: Marcianum Press, 2006), 14–29.

<sup>47</sup>For the following, cf. Pedro Gutierrez, *La Paternité spirituelle selon Saint Paul*, *Études bibliques* (Paris: Gabalda, 1968).

not only in words, but also “in power and in the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess 1:5). This power and work of the Spirit is not just a set of prodigious miracles: it refers to the concrete manifestation of God’s presence precisely through the apostle’s way of preaching, through his ministry. Paul offers the Thessalonians not only new knowledge, but a word that gives life because it is made flesh in the gift of Paul’s very self (1 Thess 2:8). In other words, the fact that Paul desires to give the community his very self witnesses to the Gospel in which God gave everything to the world and revealed himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is, then, saying to the Thessalonians: our love for you is the concrete sign of God’s paternal love, which is the core of the Christian Gospel.<sup>48</sup> We understand, then, what the sign of God’s power is, the token of proof of the message’s truth: the fatherly attitude of Paul for his disciples inasmuch as it reveals the Father’s love and his manifestation in Jesus.

It is in his letter to the Corinthians that St. Paul passes from the mere comparison with the father to the actual attribution of fatherhood to himself, as an apostle. He says: “I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:14–15). The contrast between the father and the pedagogues (guides in Christ) is illuminating. The pedagogues were not educators (as the modern use of the word would suggest), but slaves in charge of accompanying the children to school. Their role in education referred only to external matters: they taught the children how to behave in the street or at school, how to eat and sit properly.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to these pedagogues Paul holds up his own fatherhood, whose educational role embraces not only the external behavior, but the whole life of the Corinthians, up to its very foundations, precisely because the apostle is, as a father, at the origin of their being. It is in Paul’s fatherhood that the endangered unity of the Corinthians can be protected: he offers the “deep ground” in which this unity is able to recover its roots.

What is the content of this fatherhood? Paul describes it as “becoming a father in Jesus Christ through the Gospel.” The formula is rich and needs to be placed in the context of the entire

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<sup>48</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 90–91, 100.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 126.

Pauline theology. First, to generate (“to become your father”) is not only a metaphor about the benefits conferred by Paul on the Corinthians. It refers, rather, to a new, real generation, to the birth of which Jesus spoke to Nicodemus (Jn 3:5; 1 Jn 3:9),<sup>50</sup> and which bears the strong meaning we find in the gospel of John and other sections of the New Testament. The Christian is a child of God, born in a new way from God the Father through Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection. It is important not to miss the boldness of Paul’s claim: the apostle attributes to himself a singular participation, as a father, in the very event that is at the root of Christian life.

In fact, this generation is said to be *in Christ Jesus*, one of Paul’s typical expressions for referring to the novelty of Christian existence. The use of the preposition “in” means, first of all, personal relationship with the Lord. Paul’s fatherhood is, in fact, rooted in Christ’s. The mission of the apostle is to open up the horizon of this belonging to Christ he himself experienced when he wrote: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).<sup>51</sup> But the preposition “in” also has a local meaning that refers to the believer’s incorporation in Christ, in his Body, the Church. Jesus Christ appears as a space in which Paul receives the capacity to generate the Christians to new life. As we will see later, the fatherhood of the priest is possible only within this space of Christ’s body, the Church.

The second essential dimension of this begetting is the Gospel, the Word of God preached by the apostle, which is the means by which Paul becomes father of the Corinthians. The seed that Paul has sown as a father is the Word of God, whose fruit is a new life in Jesus.<sup>52</sup> The image of the fecundity of this Word is widespread in the Old Testament: God’s Word never returns empty, but always bears an abundance of fruit (see, for example, Is 55:11). It is important to highlight again that the word proclaimed by the apostle

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<sup>50</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 129–32.

<sup>51</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 217: “Ainsi comme l’enfant reçoit de sa mère la forme ‘homme,’ les chrétiens reçoivent de l’Apôtre la forme ‘Christ.’ D’après I Cor XV, 49, ainsi que tous les hommes, par leur nature même, portent l’image d’Adam, les hommes renouvelés portent l’image du Christ . . . .”

<sup>52</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 135: “Étant donné qu’il s’agit d’un engendrement, l’Évangile doit ici tenir la place de la semence par laquelle, d’après la conception des anciens, le père transmet la vie.”

is a word incarnate.<sup>53</sup> To be sure, when Paul says that he has generated the Corinthians through the Gospel he is emphasizing the importance of his preaching. In fact, the apostle has been clear about his not having baptized the Corinthians: if he is their father it is not because of having administered the sacrament of baptism. However, the Gospel through which Paul generates the community is not just a communication of ideas, precisely because the word of Christianity is a word that has taken flesh, an incarnate word, and is thus always endowed with a sacramental character. The word of the Christian Gospel is not only intellectual instruction, but the fullness of God's bodily communication in his Son.

What we just said leads to an important consequence. The word of Paul, in order to be fruitful, needs first to become incarnate in his own life. The apostle is called to become a bearer of the Gospel in his own body if he is to generate new children in Christ Jesus. As a consequence, his word needs to spring forth from his own Christian experience of life; in the advice he offers, the priest communicates a light that has matured within, that has become known to him through his own joy and suffering.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, for this word to become incarnate in the life of each believer, it is necessary that it be uttered in a dialogue of love, in which the priest shares the anxieties and difficulties of the life of each of his children (cf. 2 Cor 11:28), and embraces their trials in the light of his dialogue with God (cf. 2 Cor 12:8–9).

As a confirmation of what we said, we can look at the characteristics of Paul's fatherhood, which he describes in the context of this passage (1 Cor 4:17–21). They are threefold: the apostle is called to teach, to ask the believers to imitate him, to correct them. Here there again appears the importance of the preached word, together with the exhortation to imitate Paul. We understand now why the word is to become incarnate in the life of the father: only thus can he present himself as a model of imitation without falling into presumptuousness. Paul knows that of all sinners

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<sup>53</sup>Cf. Heinrich Schlier, "Grundzüge einer neutestamentlichen Theologie des Wortes Gottes," in *Das Ende der Zeit III* (Freiburg: Herder, 1971).

<sup>54</sup>Cf. Massimo Camisasca, "Called to Be Fathers in the Church," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 31, no. 3 (2004): 496–500; 499: "A good rule is never to invent anything: we can only communicate something that has come out of our own flesh, that we have learned through hard experience. We must not invent answers that we do not have."

he is the foremost (1 Tim 1:15), but that he has been chosen by God's love and empowered with his strength, so that he can present his own existence as a model: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1).

This love that unites Paul to his children is present in the following passage of the second letter to the Corinthians, where the apostle speaks again of fatherhood: "Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you; for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (2 Cor 12:14–15).<sup>55</sup> An essential dimension of Paul's love is revealed here: it is a love that precedes any response on the part of the children, a creative love, which enables the movement of the child toward communion. Fatherhood means above all that Paul is the first to love his children; that he is the source of love for the community he has brought to life. This first love is the root of priestly authority, which is thus understood not in terms of dominion and power, but in the context of the order of love, of a love that is fatherly because it is able to give without expecting a first movement from the other, and in this way participates in Christ's love as the head, and in the original love of God the Father (cf. 1 Jn 4:19). It is the generosity of this fatherly love that is able to move the hearts of the children toward their father: "If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?" (2 Cor 12:15).

In Gal 4:19 we find the use of a similar image: Paul has generated the Galatians to new life. But this time Paul refers to motherhood: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!"<sup>56</sup> Let us recall that both dimensions, fatherhood and motherhood, precisely because they are complementary, do not exclude each other, but are open to mutual participation. The priest shows in his ministry maternal qualities toward his children. This fact reminds us of the importance of the maternal presence of the Church, a presence that protects the priest from the danger of an activism without heart. Because Paul generates "in

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<sup>55</sup>Cf. 2 Cor 6:13: "In return—I speak as to children—widen your hearts also."

<sup>56</sup>On the maternal image of Jesus, cf. André Cabassut, "Une dévotion médiévale peu connue: la dévotion à 'Jesus Notre Mère,'" *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 25 (1949): 234–45.

Christ Jesus,” he generates in his body, the Church, in this presence in which the believer receives his new existence.

At this point we need to highlight the role of Mary in the life of the priest. As a woman, she is able to create the space of relationship in which the life of the priest receives a center and a home. Thus, Mary is a continuous reminder of the primacy of the personal in the priest’s life. In Bernanos’ *Diary of a Country Priest* there is a dialogue between the old curé d’Arcy and the young priest, at a point when the latter undergoes enormous suffering. It is a moment in which the seasoned master offers important advice to his friend in trouble: “‘Go on with your work,’ he said. ‘Keep at the daily things that need doing, till the rest comes. Concentrate. Think of a lad at his homework, trying so hard and his tongue sticking out. That’s how Our Lord would have us be when He gives us up to our own strength. Little things—they don’t look like much, yet they bring peace. Like wild flowers which seem to have no scent, till you get a field full of ‘em.’” After this exhortation to cling to the present by cultivating the patience of small things, the old priest talks about Mary. A dialogue unfolds: “‘And what of our Lady? Do you pray to Our Lady?’ ‘Why, naturally!’ ‘We all say that—but do you pray to her as you should. . . .’”<sup>57</sup> At this point the old priest has only one piece of advice to offer: he speaks of Mary, of her role and her presence as a Mother and as a daughter. It is as if, unable to alleviate the pain of his brother, he were offering him a place to stay and remain, a place from which to suffer in hope, sticking to the density of the present moment: this place is marked by the spiritual presence of Mary.

Let us return to Galatians 4:19. By referring to the formation of Christ in the believers, as a child is formed in the mother’s womb, the apostle hints at the importance of patience in his own mission: the generation is not the work of an instant; it requires a presence that accompanies the life of the believer. The generation to life brought about by the apostle is a continuous one, as Origen says of the Son’s generation from the Father.<sup>58</sup> The spiritual father is the one

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<sup>57</sup>Cf. Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2002), 209.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah IX*, 4 (SC 232, 392–394): “But let us consider who is our Savior: a *reflection of glory*. The *reflection of glory* has not been begotten just once and no longer begotten. But just as the *light* is an agent of *reflection*, in such a way the *reflection of the glory* of God is begotten. Our Savior is the *wisdom of God*. But the *wisdom* is the *reflection of everlasting light*. If then the Savior is always

who stays with, who accompanies his children on the road; his advice does not solve the problems in an instant, but becomes a continuous point of reference during the journey of the disciple. In this fashion the link of fatherhood is kept and renewed throughout the life of both father and children.

Paul also refers to his sufferings in giving birth to his children. At the core of this spiritual generation, which ultimately comes from God the Father, there is pain, analogous to the wound of separation inflicted by each father, a wound that allows the child to move toward the ultimate goal. In the play by Paul Claudel we referred to earlier, the Franciscan priest tells Pope Pius in his moment of desolation and abandonment: "You, too, have a Father, and do You think He will be overjoyed to see You so mournful because He gave You the gift of a poverty like his own? These minutes that to You seem so hard to bear, are yet part of the Year of Grace and of the Season of Good Tidings. Because of the blessings which we cannot bestow, shall we forget those which we have received? What does a man do who has been relieved of all his sins? He sings."<sup>59</sup> The suffering occasioned by the rejection of the father's love by his children does not prevent him from loving: it is precisely in suffering this wound that he discovers the presence of God the Father and is able to become truly fruitful.

This suffering Paul speaks of in the letter to the Galatians can be further explained in the light of the prophetic tradition. The prophets represented the day of Yahweh at the end of time with the image of a woman in labor (cf. also Jn 16:21). Paul's sufferings are, thus, eschatological sufferings. Through his fatherhood, the Christians are generated to a new, definitive time, marked by a fulfilled filial relationship with God.<sup>60</sup> In other words, what the apostle forms in the

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begotten—because of this he also says, *Before all the hills he begets me* (and not, 'Before all the hills he has begotten me,' but, *Before all of the hills he begets me*)—and the Savior is always begotten by the Father, and likewise also if you have the *spirit of adoption*, God always begets you in him according to each work, according to each thought. And may one so begotten always be a begotten son of God in Christ Jesus, to whom is the glory and the power for the ages of ages" (English translation: *Homilies on Jeremiah. Homily on 1 Kings 28*, trans. John Clark Smith [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998], 93).

<sup>59</sup>Cf. Claudel, *Three Plays: The Hostage, Crusts, The Humiliation of the Father*, 188.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Schlier, "Grundelemente," 168: "Es sind eschatologische Leiden, deren Sinn nur dann verstanden wird, wenn man erkennt, dass auch der apostolische



Galatians is the image of the last Adam: his fatherhood is understood in the light of the *eschaton*, of the ultimate word about man's destiny.

At this point we need to come back to this original source that allows the priest to understand his life as an eschatological journey, where "eschatological" is not to be read only as a temporal category, but as referring to what is central and constitutive of man, as the essential, in contrast to the superfluous and obvious. The substantial appears in our temporal existence as the primary origin from which we come and the definitive fulfillment toward which we tend. It is the priest's role to open up the life of the Christians to this horizon, which pervades their whole existence.

"What counts is not from whom we were born, but for whom," says Pensée in Claudel's play. The sentence is pronounced by a young woman in love, who desires to be "for someone," and who feels at once that she is orphan because of the absence of true fatherhood in her life: she has no "from whom."<sup>61</sup> But throughout the play, she is challenged to transform her views: only by knowing the origin is it possible to undertake the journey of love as a true *extasis* outside of ourselves. In other words, the ambiguity of the "for whom" is resolved when we encounter the "from whom." Without this "from" the "for"—the gift of self to the beloved—is self-consuming and ultimately unachievable. Man becomes trapped in a love that enslaves the beloved and lets himself in turn be enslaved by the beloved. To the contrary, in the light of the "from whom," in the light of the Father, the "for whom" is transformed: love becomes possible by being liberated from the trap of its circularity and becoming open to others, toward fruitfulness. By being a mediator of this "from whom," by becoming a father who discloses the origin of love in God's eternity, the priest makes present also the ultimate "for whom" that really frees man and enables him to grow beyond himself, toward perfect communion in the final embrace of the Father. □

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Priesterdienst als Vergegenwärtigung des Leidens Christi ein eschatologischer ist."

<sup>61</sup>Cf. Claudel, *Le Père humilié*, 17.