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notes from the inside

Forging Fathers

BY FR. JOHN P. FLOEDER

“Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (John 14:8). Philip’s request to Jesus reveals the deepest longing of the human heart: to be known and loved and to be brought to the very source of love. Yet many are reluctant, or even hostile, toward expressing and seeking to fulfill this same desire. The depictions of fathers in our culture obscure the deep need for fatherhood. Fathers can be oafs like Homer Simpson or destructive seekers of power like Walter White. More immediately, each of our own fathers have wounded us or not been there for us when and how we needed them. Fatherhood becomes something to be ignored, if not rejected, because it is at best benign and at worst dominance and violence. This undermining of fatherhood has hit the Church and priests particularly hard. The abuse of the vulnerable by Catholic priests, those who we call father, has only deepened the wound. The meaning of both fatherhood and priesthood have been eclipsed.¹ In my own context, I have the task of forming future priests and helping other priest formators learn how to be formators. My role is to help men become fathers and help

spiritual fathers in the art of fathering. How can this be done in this milieu? How can any man be a father?

At the start, fatherhood, biological or spiritual, is something that needs to be learned and grown into. Motherhood is largely innate to women given that they carry the child within them and in their “genius” are receptive and attentive to the person.² For men, fatherhood is “not so much an inevitable natural reality as a cultural and personal achievement.”³ Too often men step into the role of being a father with the attitude that they need to exert their fatherhood on their sons, whether it be “father knows best” or a warped headship. Fatherhood becomes something one has and then is dispensed to others. The reality is much different: “You have one Father—the one in heaven”

(Matt. 23:9). The fullness of fatherhood in any form is only in the Father. We can only participate in it, and that participation must be learned and grow over time.

My greatest failures as a spiritual father have come when I tried too hard to be a father. There were incidents with seminarians where I had to

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JOHN 14:8

give them tough challenges, and many of them were justified, but the way in which I gave them were based in the mindset that I knew what they needed to do, and if they would just do it, everything would be fine. This might be needed with a toddler, but for adult men the way I did it was both disrespectful and not effective. I had to be open to new ways of sharing my fatherly heart and my desire for them to be good priests. This included consulting with my peers about better ways to share difficult feedback. One of the best things I learned was to ask the men, “Can I give you some feedback?” This honored their dignity as a person by not assaulting them with my critiques. It is an appropriation of the care of Jesus: “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6). It also gets them to commit to receive the feedback and be open to it. Until they want to grow and change, they will merely conform. Until I was ready to embrace growth and change, they did not want to hear it.⁴

Living in close quarters in our formation house, the seminarians know I am not perfect. It was only when I could own my mistakes and not try to look good that the men began to receive what guidance and support I could give them. One of the most powerful fatherhood moments was when I was working in the kitchen and snapped at one of the seminarians in my own dad’s voice. Catching myself, I circled back with him and apologized. Later that week when I met with him one-on-one, he shared in tears that his own father would never have apologized. He felt my care for him and the love of the Father in my apology. It is through such encounters that I learned I can only be a father if I am willing to admit my own poverty, learn from my mistakes, and grow into the person of Jesus who reveals the Father: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

Perhaps the most important thing that has helped me learn how to be a father was to stop trying to be a father. Jacques Philippe says it very plainly: “We cannot truly be a father without first being a

son. We must be a son above all in our relationship with God. The spiritual fatherhood that we are trying to develop is not just a human work, one that we can achieve purely by our own efforts. It is more like a grace, something to ask for and to receive, a participation in the ineffable paternity of God.”⁵ I have only grown in my ability to serve seminarians in their formation to the degree that I have embraced my own sonship, the reality that even in my poverty and sinfulness the Father loves me. The Father has patiently been telling me of his love for me for years as the parable of the prodigal son keeps coming to me on my yearly retreats: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31). It is only in allowing myself to receive the love of the Father that I can find myself. The more I receive and live

in that love, the more the Holy Spirit moves my heart to share similar words with the seminarians in my care, like, “You are not too much for God,” “You are not your wounds,” or simply, “I noticed that you did that. Well done. I’m proud of you.” This love I receive as a son then becomes the heart of a spiritual father within me that can love these men into being who they are: “We say a person ‘blossoms’ when undergoing the experience of being loved; that he becomes wholly himself for the

first time; that a ‘new life’ is beginning for him.”⁶

I have had to learn how to be a father through many mistakes, and I ask forgiveness from any along the way who have not seen Jesus and the Father in me. Once I learned to recognize my mistakes as opportunities for growth, I began to learn and enter deeper into my sonship, Jesus, and thus the Father. It is in walking this path myself that I hope to form future priestly fathers and support those who form them. Fathers are forged only in the crucible of divine love. The first person of the Blessed Trinity is the only source of fatherhood. I am not that source. But I can receive his love, be transformed by it, and, in Jesus, be an icon of the Father. You can too.

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LUKE 15:31



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Notes

¹ José Granados, "Priesthood: A Sacrament of the Father," *Communio* 36 (Summer 2009) 187. See also Angelo Cardinal Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 239ff.

² John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* 18, apostolic letter, August 15, 1988, vatican.va.

³ Carter Griffin, *Why Celibacy? Reclaiming the Fatherhood of the Priest* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2019), 105.

⁴ See Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballentine, 2016).

⁵ Jacques Philippe, *Priestly Fatherhood: Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (New York: Scepter, 2021), 63–64.

⁶ Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 174.