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The Eternal Fatherly

by *Leon J. Podles*

European writers since Goethe have been in pursuit of the Eternal Feminine. Faust ends with the lines, “*Das Ewig-Weibliche / Zieht uns hinan*”; that is, “The eternal feminine / draws us forward.” The woman, for these writers, is the vehicle of salvation, because she embodies perfect self-sacrificial love for the male louses (such as Faust and Peer Gynt) who mess up their own lives and the whole world in the narcissistic daze that men tend to wander around in. Catholics have given a Christian flavor to this adulation of the feminine by drawing upon some of the more peculiar devotions to and speculations about Mary. Feminists try to make God feminine. All very interesting, but it has little to do with Christianity or with the realities of society.

Christianity is a religion that adores the Father in the Son through the Spirit of sonship, who transforms believers. This is forgotten by the churches that devote all their effort to women and to expunging masculine references from public worship and forget that a principal source of women’s unhappiness is the failure of men to grow up to be true fathers and patriarchs of their society.

This issue is devoted to fatherhood. The writers consider their own fathers, fatherhood in American society, and the Father from whom all fatherhood takes its name. In my essay, “Missing Fathers of the Church,” I discuss the lack of the precondition for Christian fathers: Christian men. Men fear that Christianity will make them feminine and effeminate, and stay away from it.

Many men fear family life itself. Some men are stuck in the little-boy stage. They don’t want to grow up; they don’t want a wife they have to provide for and protect, but a mother who will take care of them. These little boys can be dangerous. Underclass criminals regard their own children (almost always illegitimate) as competitors for the attention of the mothers. Middle-class men want a life of perpetual adventure and openness; they fear the “C-word,” commitment, because it ends the freedom of perpetual adolescence. Fatherhood is disappearing in Western society: in most cities the majority of

children are illegitimate. Even in such Catholic societies as Quebec, the majority of births are illegitimate.

Children are growing up without fathers. David Blankenhorn (“Fatherhood Uprooted”) and Paul Vitz (“The Father Almighty: Maker of Male & Female”) both discuss the harm this does to children. Boys don’t learn self-control and self-sacrifice; girls are starved for affection and turn to promiscuity in a search for male attention. All they get is sexually transmitted diseases and illegitimate children who grow up without a father, perpetuating the *Teufelskries*, the devil’s circle of father absence.

Divorce, too, deprives children of their fathers. Our writers don’t explore the problem, but divorced mothers often use their children as weapons against their fathers, even the fathers who want to maintain contact with their children. But the best divorce laws in the world cannot undo the harm that divorce does to children. The most striking consequence of divorce and illegitimacy is the widespread sexual abuse of children. Not fathers, but stepfathers and boyfriends are the perpetrators of sexual abuse. A nurse I know worked in an inner-city school. She said that when a boyfriend moved in, he got the mother and all the girls as part of the bargain. These children are unprotected by their natural fathers, who may not even know they exist.

Fathers are missing in our society. God the Father is also beginning to disappear from the churches. John Miller (“Rays of Fatherhood Shining Forth”) sees a reference to fatherhood in the very name of God, Yahweh. Father Patrick Henry Reardon (“Thou Art the Everlasting Son of the Father”) explores the theological meaning of the Father. Our writers do not draw out the underlying assumptions of those who want to add Mother to the name of God. However, it is becoming clearer and clearer that proponents of renaming God do not believe that Christianity is a revealed religion. Judaism and Christianity for them are simply some ways in which humanity has searched for God and given human language to its inchoate perceptions of the divinity, language that can be changed at will to fit new searches.

But Christianity believes that God has revealed himself in the Word and in human language. The name of the Father is revealed. God, even if he never created, is eternally Father because he begets the Son. We are called to become sons in the Son, participating in the eternal life of the Trinity through our reception of the Holy Spirit. A religion that is not centered upon the Father as Father has ceased to be Christian. One important insight that Father Reardon has but does not develop is that we see the Father in the Son: “He who sees me sees the Father.” This transforming vision is at the heart of Eastern Christianity, and its relation to fatherhood needs more thought.

Patriarchalism is the latest curse word in Christianity. Fathers are missing from families, so the churches (with a few honorable exceptions, of which the Roman Catholic Church,

I am sorry to say, is not one) abandon and reject the doctrine of male headship of the family. The doctrine that the father is the head of the family has been taught by more popes than almost any other doctrine, yet John Paul II has maintained a discreet silence on the subject, and every Catholic sermon I have heard has rejected the doctrine. This doctrine calls on men to be lord of their families as Christ is Lord of the Church: sacrificing himself for it, as John Haas explains in his essay, “The Christian Heart of Fatherhood.”

The sacrifice takes many forms. Fathers usually pour out their lives in working for their families, often at jobs they don’t care for, for 50–80 hours a week decade after decade. It is hard being a father. The more a father loves his children, often the more absent he must be from them: by working, by going off to war to protect them, by dying for them.

A father’s job is also the thankless one of introducing the children to the Reality Principle: that actions and omissions have consequences, that we are not the center of the universe, that we must adapt our wishes and desires to objective reality, and that Reality is ultimately God. Our love for God will certainly overflow into the emotions, but the emotions really don’t matter. He is God, and he has created and regenerated us, and he is Lord, and we’d better accept the situation, as Steve Hutchens’s father explained (see “The Craft of Fatherhood”), more by his actions than his words, to his children. But once we accept this situation, an acceptance that is always hard for fallen man, an acceptance that led the Father’s own sinless Son to the Cross, we can say, “Abba, dear Father,” to the Uncreated One, and he will respond, “My son.”

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