

The Bishop's Page
The Bishop and Spiritual Fatherhood
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I would like to focus on the great theme of spiritual fatherhood. The fathers of the Church, especially St. Ignatius of Antioch, the Documents of Vatican II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, and especially *Pastores Gregis* all speak of spiritual fatherhood. The documents do so most especially for bishops. Bishops are to know their priests as sons, brothers, and friends (LG 28). The bishop, 'acting as father, brother and friend to all...will stand beside everyone as the living image of Christ' (PG 4). Priests are to 'exercise the most excellent and necessary office of father and teacher among the People of God' (PO 9).

Fatherless America

While the Sacred Scriptures and Church documents speak so clearly and beautifully about fatherhood, we must recognize as formators of future priests the times in which we live. Over the past forty years we have seen the understanding and concept of fatherhood come under attack both culturally and theologically. David Blankenhorn in his book, *Fatherless America*, addresses the cultural problem and refers to it as one 'of the most urgent' of our times. Many of the young men who are preparing for the priesthood have not experienced being fathered through Christian virtues and thus may not have a good understanding of fatherhood. As bishops and priests we must honestly confront the way our own spiritual fatherhood has been possibly compromised or defined by the spirit of the day. We must examine our lives and ask ourselves am I more a 'spiritual buddy' to the faithful rather than a 'spiritual father'? Have we adopted a false sense of privacy by which we do not confront, discipline or visit with our spiritual children? Do we abandon our spiritual children by defining our call to the priesthood as a 9-5 profession, with an attitude of don't call me after hours? These attitudes prevent us from acting as true spiritual fathers.

Furthermore, another cultural influence present today is the confusion around the truth, dignity and meaning of human sexuality and intimacy. Some of our seminarians, as well as some priests and bishops, are influenced by the secular view of sexuality, which is hedonistic and nihilistic, and completely counter to the intention of God.

To complicate matters further is the fact that some theologians, especially those who have accepted the radical feminist critique in their theological reflections, have rejected God the Father. In essence, though some would argue they have not, I think they have rejected Jesus Christ as man, as the Word made flesh—he who is the very revelation of the Father. The radical feminist critique of the Trinitarian doctrine provides a Gnostic approach to human and spiritual maturation in the Holy Spirit. In recent studies that attend to and develop Pope John Paul II's theology of the body, we can say that in the nuptial understanding of the human body the dignity of man and woman are strengthened when they relate to Jesus Christ. In relating to Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—healing occurs between the two genders (1 Jn 4, 2). A woman is strengthened in her femininity and maternal affections in her relationship with Christ and a man is strengthened in his masculinity and paternal affections in his relationship with Christ.

Understanding Spiritual Fatherhood

Sensitive to these influences of our times, we are to guide young men to a true understanding of spiritual fatherhood, which comes to us primarily from the Gospels and Jesus' relationship to the Father. All four areas of formation need to adequately address fatherhood and how to be the spiritual father the Church calls her priests and bishops to be. If some of the seminarians have never had fathers, or if there are concerns about their relationship with their fathers, this will need to be addressed both on the human and spiritual level, especially if the man is ever to develop a relationship with God the Father. Furthermore, we need to be willing to forthrightly address the area of human sexuality and help seminarians develop a healthy masculinity. As a priest, a man is to be a living sacrament of Christ the

Head, Shepherd, and Bridegroom of the Church. Essential to the living out of that sacrament is a personal relationship with the Father, knowing oneself as son, in Christ.

Learning from the Father

God the Father is the one who best teaches priests and bishops how to be a father. Every priest and bishop interiorly in faith must know how to receive and experience in his heart the eternal love of the Father for him if he is to communicate that love to others. God the Father is the only father who loves each one of us unconditionally and who desires each one of us to be his sons and daughters. The story of the prodigal son (Lk 15) reveals to us this eternal love of the Father, as he patiently waits for his son who is steeped in sin to return to him. Only love leaves one free to reject or accept the other. Take note, too, that the son must follow—surrender to—his interior desire to return to the father in order to receive his love. The Father will never force his love on us. The son returns thinking he will be treated as a servant and instead the father welcomes him as a son. This is an important lesson for all of us.

When we look at the Sacred Scriptures and the life of Jesus we detect many aspects of what it means to be a father. A father has a real love for his children no matter how they may respond to him. A father's deepest desire is for his children to know and experience his love. He desires their well-being and teaches them how to love others by his example. A father must at times correct, admonish and warn for protection sake. A father always speaks the truth with love, even when difficult. A Christian father must know how to teach his children to receive God's love in prayer and to taste and see God at work in everyday life.

We recognize these qualities in the life of Jesus in his preaching, in his teaching, in his healing and deliverance ministry, and especially in his loving relationship with the apostles. He speaks of his love for his apostles, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love' (Jn 15, 9). Jesus calls them friends (Jn 15, 14). He corrects them when he overhears them arguing over who is

the greatest (Lk 9, 46ff). In order to remain faithful to the Father's ways, Jesus strongly rebukes Peter with the words, 'Get behind me Satan' (Mk 8, 33). He prays for Peter personally (Lk 22, 32) and for the well-being of all the apostles and those who will believe in him in the future (Jn 17). Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Our Father (Mt 6, 9ff) and teaches them to go off in quiet prayer by his example. Jesus promises the Advocate who will instruct the apostles in all matters and keep them in the truth (Jn 14, 26; 15, 26). Jesus calls us to trust the Father's sovereign power in his providence for us.

Joseph, the father

Another example of fatherhood, offered by Pope John Paul II in his book, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, is that of St. Joseph:

'For Saint Joseph, life with Jesus was a continuous discovery of his own vocation as a father. He became a father in an extraordinary way, without begetting his son in the flesh. Isn't this, perhaps, an example of the type of fatherhood that is proposed to us, priests and bishops, as a model? Everything I did in the course of my ministry I saw as an expression of this kind of fatherhood—baptizing, hearing confessions, celebrating the Eucharist, preaching, admonishing, encouraging. For me these things were always a way of living out that fatherhood (p. 141).'

Seminarians, priests and bishops would do well to meditate on the chaste generative life of St. Joseph.

During a 30-day Ignatian retreat in which I participated, one of the great graces I received was a prayer, which came about through a conversation with Saint Joseph. During the prayer, he encouraged me to see everything through the eyes of the Father. I received that encouragement in my heart and responded with a 'yes', not knowing the fruit it would bear. A consistent prayer for me throughout the retreat as I entered into prayer, or read scriptures, and one that even continues today is 'Father help me to see all through your eyes and with your heart.'

Throughout the retreat as I surrendered seeing with my eyes, which tended to be

blind and self-seeking, to seeing with the eyes of the Father, I experienced the love of the Father in ways I never thought possible. I experienced the omnipotent and eternal love of the Father, which I came to understand as only a pinhead of the vastness of his love for me.

Through that interior experience, I now know that it is in seeing with the eyes of the Father that I can best be a father for those I serve as bishop—and this came to light for me at the end of the retreat. All through the course of the retreat I did not preach nor was I the main celebrant at any of the Masses. For me as a bishop this was a great sacrifice and one that gave me a deep appreciation for the role of the bishop. We usually celebrated Mass with over 100 seminarians and the other priests and deacons who were participating in the 30-day retreat.

After we finished the retreat I was the main celebrant and preached the homily. During the homily I referred to the seminarians and priests there as ‘my dearest sons’ urging them to deeper desire for union with the heart of the Trinity, with the God who is love (1 Jn 4, 16). Aware of the spiritual fatherhood of bishops, I have used those words in homilies for ordinations and the Chrism Masses with my priests. They are said with love, but I never have realized the possible impact of them.

After the Mass some of the seminarians came up to me and thanked me for referring to them as sons. Through those simple words they sensed the love of the Father. A priest, who was on the 30-day retreat with me, was quietly weeping and asked to speak to me. He came from a diocese that has been rocked by the sexual abuse scandal. He told me how over the last few years he had grown to not trust bishops, to resent them, and he was angry with bishops especially for the way they treated priests. When he had seen me on the first day of the retreat and found out that I was a bishop, he immediately transferred his deep feelings of anger, betrayal and resentment onto me.

He prayed during the retreat, wondering why these feelings were so strongly planted in his heart. Then it struck him, he felt so deeply because in his heart he understood that I represented the spiritual father that had abandoned and

betrayed him. He then went on to say that he experienced healing by watching me during the retreat and then hearing me call the seminarians and priests during the homily 'my dear sons.' He wept with compunction and joy for he experienced the love of a bishop as father. I was overwhelmed, for the Father had responded to my prayer, 'to see all through the eyes of the Father,' in ways unknown to me and healed the wounded heart of a priest. I could only lift up my heart in deep wondrous gratitude to the Father, 'from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named' (Eph 3, 14).

In conclusion, in the Eucharist the bishop, and also priests, learns what it means to be a spiritual father for those entrusted to his care. As he stands in the fullness of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, in the person of Christ the Head, Shepherd, and Bridegroom of the church, he makes himself a total self-gift to Jesus Christ and to the faithful he serves. He offers himself to the Father, through, with, and in Jesus Christ and he lays down his life for his flock. It is all in the surrender, most fully imaged in the Eucharist, that every disciple of Christ, no matter what the calling, discovers what it means to call God Father and to live in intimacy with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

I wish to close with a prayer by Charles de Foucauld. I pray the prayer everyday before the Eucharist. I hope you will come to understand why as you pray from your hearts and make it your own by listening for and receiving the Father's eternal love for you.

*Father, I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you;
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,*

*to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.*