

IN PRAISE OF FATHERS

Daniel A. Lord, S.J.

MAYBE the women are right when, shaking their heads, they say, “This is a man’s world.” But they have to admit that here in this America of ours practically all the credit goes to Mothers.

Now in no sense should I wish to withdraw one least jot or tittle of their credit. Mothers are a glorious race. We love them and rightly grow romantic about them.

But is that any reason that Dads shouldn’t get an occasional break?

If songs are any barometer of nation: emotions. our popular songs tell an amazing story. There are a thousand songs about Mothers. But who ever bothers to sing—much less to write—a song about Dad?

“Mammy!” bleats the blackface tenor, sinking on his knees to reach for his absent (and suddenly remembered) Mother. “I love the dear silver that shines in your hair,” carols the Irish tenor, and the entire nation, Irish and others, takes up the chorus of “Mother Machree.” Song writers are always threatening to speed back to a Mother in Kentucky, in Tennessee, in old New Hampshire, in the Florida Keys, in Dallas, in Bermuda, or in the old-ladies’ home. These bechorused Mothers, silver-haired and pink-cheeked, lean out from dream castles and old shanties in shanty town, from tumble-down huts and ivy-covered cottages.

Let’s Sing a Song of Dads

But try as I would, out of my musical memory for Dads, I could rake only that ancient comic, “The Hat Me Father Wore,” and that masterpiece of mockery, “Everybody Works but Father.” I do recall a song of other days that still recurs at mellow moments; it pays Dad a sort of roundabout compliment by complimenting his taste in girls: “I’d like a girl, just like the girl that married dear old Dad.” But even there it’s Mother, not Father, who takes the bows.

Just to indicate the national difference in attitude, I suggest a simple comparison. We have on one hand the sweet sentimentality of Whistler’s idyllic painting “Mother,” and on the other the strident irony of Clarence Day’s essays and record-breaking comedy, “Life With Father.” There you have it in two frames: Mother, the centre of affectionate nostalgia; Dad, a nice old codger slightly on the funny side.

Even Their Days

When the commercial world—and you can lay a safe wager that it was the commercial world—first thought up Mother’s Day, it handed the American public what, in good American slang, is a natural. To load Mother with flowers, to send her candy and hose, to greet her with perfume was right to the national taste. Wasn’t it inevitable that Western Union should think up Mother’s Day Greeting Number 3679?

“Your hair is silver, Ma, today;

“And I’m the kid that turned it gray.”

So Mother’s Day was washed into the American calendar on a tidal wave of tearful emotion. The mails carried her boxes of candy; the ‘phone companies had a heavy run of long-distance calls for her. The whole spirit of Mother love bloomed like the flowers in the bonnet of her youth.

Inevitably, having hit the “jack pot” with Mother’s Day, the commercial world thought up Father’s Day. If the candy-makers did well with the first, why shouldn’t the cigar makers dump their products on the second? If once a year Mother was flooded with flowers, how about a day for the heart of Dad to be warmed with a blanket of ties and handkerchiefs?

Only it didn’t work that way. When is Father’s Day, anyhow? If the advertisers didn’t mark it carefully on their copy and thrust it under our noses, would we ever think of it or remember it? Mother’s Day sent the nation into a frenzy of phoning and wiring and ordering. On the day supposedly dedicated to them, Dads get hardly an extra postcard from their absent children.

“Improving” the Scriptures

Some years ago, as I recall, a Broadway producer and a playwright combined forces to do a spectacular version of the parable of the prodigal son. If you know anything about the American stage of the last generation, you can guess that those who were responsible for this “spectacle” centred their main interest on the precise way that the son in that far-off land went about his assignment of living riotously. They gave a highly romanticised picture of prodigals wasting their substance—a practice which seems to differ little from one era of history to another.

But when they began to map out the scenes of the young man’s return from the feeding of swine and its human equivalents, they set themselves to improve on the Gospel. Being Americans, they just couldn’t conceive an American audience’s understanding why a prodigal son would return to a Father. That was against the finest traditions of our popular ballads. Sons running back to their Fathers? Ridiculous!

So with that highly eclectic attitude characteristic of dramatists, textual critics, and private interpreters of the Scriptures, they did a notable re-write. They sent the prodigal son home, not to a forgiving Father, but to a doting Mother. In fact, to keep the spirit entirely typical of our better national traditions, they made the Father a stern old parent who, upon his son’s return, flatly refused to give him house room—until, that is, the Mother pleaded the son’s cause in a most touching, tear-jerking scene. Even then the Father had a few stern words for the boy, who crouched against the protective maternal breast. I’m not absolutely sure of this, but I imagine that in the spirit of consistency the dramatists sent the Mother kitchenward to prepare the fatted calf for the banquet. What American prodigal would be properly re-established except over a meal home-cooked by his Mother?

Sounds ridiculous and, to us who love the story of the prodigal son, annoying and irritating. Broadway, with its fingers on the even-then-jittery pulse of the amusement world, felt that the Mother, not the Father, must have the centre of the stage. Father lapsed into his accustomed place as the mild menace in the backstage shadows.

My Belated Tribute

Now this is a little booklet frankly in praise of Fathers. If my reader happens to be a Father, I present the booklet to him with a gesture of high regard and deep appreciation. If my reader should go from the reading of this booklet to say a grateful prayer for or a slightly abashed thank-you to his Father, I shall be fully repayed for my efforts.

Perhaps the very fact that I write this booklet indicates my advancing years. Either I have reached that period of late maturity, when we come to a deep understanding of the splendour of American Fathers, or I have relapsed into that age when Fathers are devotedly loved—the age of childhood—perhaps, alas! my second.

The Two Periods

For a little thought brings us all to the conclusion that during two periods of our lives we most clearly and happily appreciate the Fathers that Our Father in heaven gave us. The first period encompasses that early childhood when Dad is friend and giant protector and model and hero and beau ideal. The second is that time of life when we ourselves have grown old enough to evaluate life’s better gifts and have from the casualness and ingratitude of our own children been impelled to weep a bit over our disregard for our own Dad.

Certainly to the very young Dad is a grand person. Mother is sweet, but Dad is incredibly strong; Mother is gentle, but Dad is wise; Mother is an angel, but Dad is the nearest thing to a genius we’ll ever know.

During that very early period between the dawn of speech and the beginning of brashness, two attitudes may safely be expected of all young Americans: They will stoutly contest that their Mother is beautiful and a wonderful cook; they will vigorously assert in the face of all the neighbourhood youngsters that their Father can lick any Father or combination of Fathers in the block.

Let’s Brag About Dad

Those are happy years for a Father when he knows that, whatever the discouraging facts of the case and the paucity of

his personal attainments, he has in his young son a press agent of soaring imagination, a creator of fairy tales who has converted his Father into the invincible hero, a devout worshipper at the shrine of a paternal demigod.

Not long ago a cartoonist captioned a picture of a young son and his open-mouthed Father somewhat in this way: "Dad, the kids was all braggin' about their fathers; but I told 'em you had a criminal record a mile long, and boy! oh, boy! did they ever shut their traps."

A youngster, during that happy period of idolatry and ignorance, is certain that there is just nothing his Dad doesn't know and absolutely nothing that he can't do. In those days the boy or the girl runs to Dad for all conceivable information: why cows moo, and what makes grass green, and why ducks can fly and chicken's can't, and what's the difference between mushrooms and toadstools, and if they aren't guns then why do they call 'em para-shoots? and "don't you know more than all the teachers in all the schools in the world?"

For a time youngsters almost succeed in conferring on their Dads the omniscience and infallibility in which youngsters so ardently believe. Dads rise to the challenge with an answer for everything. Scientists might be slightly amazed. The experts on "Information, Please" might stupidly disagree. But when that youthful curly head bows in delighted acceptance of any and every answer that Dad offers, it is hard for a Father not to believe at least slightly in himself. Probably even a Delphic oracle would have ceased to quibble and would have become as infallible as a newspaper columnist if the questioner had been a boy or a girl turning on that look of trustful credulity and saying, "But you do know the answer to that, don't you?"

Deflation

Sad is the day when Dad sees doubt rising in bright blue eyes and watches lips curving into a cruel "That's not what teacher says." Alas, that Dad's solution of the mathematics problem should conflict so completely with the answer expected by the Sister in fourth grade. How tragic that Dad's apodictic, if highly imaginative, statistics and explanations should have to be flung up alongside what some stupid textbook or some mere Ph.D. gives as the experiment-proved answer.

Omnipotent

During that happy, trustful early period the child takes it for granted that Dad can do anything and everything. He made that mechanical toy run, didn't he? Well that's just as amazing as if he had constructed the mechanical toy itself. He is fully conversant with all sorts of skillful games. He can teach the boy how to throw a curve and catch a fast pitch without ruining three fingers. He can make a wonderful kite; and though it may not fly, the fault is clearly the child's, not the Father's. He can make a top spin gracefully and demonstrate the proper knuckle grip for shooting marbles.

Dad can replace the wrenched arm on the rough-handled doll and put together again the broken parts of the doll's house. He can not only read out of a fairy-tale book; he can, aided by a few bed sheets filched from Mother's linen cupboard, construct a giant's cave on a rainy afternoon. Let Santa bring a new game; Dad looks casually at some silly printing on the inside cover of the box, and he knows all about how the game is played.

There's a glow that warms the hearts of Fathers as they overhear all argument being stopped by a confident son: "Well, my Dad says that's the way he is, and my Dad knows what he's talking about." The child in those early years is rightfully amazed. For the Father unrolls before him the wonders which, simple as they seem to us in later years, are the complicated discoveries reached through long ages of human struggle: the use of wheel and knife and matches and chalk and letters and numbers, burning glass and mainsprings, athletic skills and accuracy of aim, bow and arrow, the simple trap, running water, gunpowder, the use of steam and gas and electricity. How is the child to know that Dad himself didn't invent all these things? He uses them with such skill and dexterity.

Adoring Eyes

All in all that time is a glorious one for Fathers. The little son and daughter ask no more compelling joy than to sit in

Father's lap while he pulls out of memory's files (and the far greater storehouse of imagination) stories he loved when he was their age.

They are content just to sit near him. They fall asleep more contentedly when they are clinging to his hand. Upon his return home at the end of the day's work they greet him with an enthusiasm never vouchsafed a returning conqueror. They solemnly consider him a blend of Santa Claus, Edison, Alladin, the Grimm brothers, Mark Twain, and the minor prophets.

They bring him their broken fire engines and their first heart problems. They are blissfully happy if he consents to read to them. And they sit, silent adorers, as he creates with their building blocks marvels that would make any architectural school in the world shudder with distaste.

For a brief period he is not only Father and provider but high priest of the family hearth, genius beyond all compare, beneficent providence dispensing lollipops and wisdom, guardian angel and angel of just wrath against their enemies, almanac, "funny paper," repository of the world's choicest knowledge Olympian whose knees are a gentle acropolis.

Too Sweet to Last

Regretfully we recall how short-lived is this period of Fatherly dominance. Soon the Father finds himself sinking into a neglect that amounts almost to oblivion. As a cheque writer his usefulness to his children endures. As the custodian of the keys of the car he is in demand. Otherwise . . .

Might I suggest in a kind of parenthesis, that good natural reasons to encourage a Father to aim at a large family might be found right here? As one of his children grows from the age of adoring into that of bleakly neglecting, another child has just arrived. And when that second adorer has ascended to dull scepticism, a third is ready to take over. Birth control, as anyone can see, has done much to cut short that blissful period during which a Father dominates his children's world.

All too soon does the period of change arrive when the worshipper at the paternal shrine becomes the swift transient who hardly pauses to wave or extend a greeting. And the Father sees the advent of that time with a sinking estimation of himself.

The boys and girls develop that all-engrossing busyness which is characteristic of youth. They have far more things to do than there are minutes in a week for their doing them. They recently heard Gene Krupa, so they spend all their free time practising the drums. They have begun a stamp collection (or any other sort of hobby) that requires concentrated attention. They are so busy playing ball or dolls or Indians or house or Lone Ranger or movie star that the return of Dad at the end of day is in the nature of a bothersome interruption.

Disillusion

Then they discover—first with annoyance, later with amazement, still later with something like disgust—that Dad is not the all-over genius they had supposed. For new idols rise on their horizons, and they hold up Dad's familiar but now shrinking figure for devastating comparisons.

Clearly he cannot play ball as Jo Di-Maggio does. That tune he picks out on the piano is pretty poor stuff compared to what Eddy Duchin coaxes out of a key-board. His best stories sound threadbare, and his wit is remarkably repetitious; Jack Benny or Bob Hope would refuse Dad's repertoire housework in the script of a charity benefit. Even though last autumn he taught them the forward pass, this autumn they realise that he never was invited to a place in the backfield of the Chicago Bears. He has to answer no when they cruelly ask him whether he was ever chosen all-American. Once on a time he taught them to use boxing gloves; and even though he knelt down to box them, he could easily hold them out of range of his chin. Fine! But let's see him climb into the ring and try that cream-puff stuff on the current welterweight champ.

So it comes to pass that they realise, and he realises that they realise, he is not the world's greatest man.

The Dirty Work

To Dad falls the unpleasant assignments. He must remind the children of duties they wanted to forget, of

responsibilities they had carefully shoved back behind the closed doors of the cupboards of their minds, of homework not done, of errands not run for Mother, of toys and sports goods not put away, of household chores that they had hoped everyone would agree to overlook.

Dad's voice takes on a note of menace. "I haven't noticed you doing your home-work this week-end, have I? . What do you mean by getting wretchedly low marks like these? . . . Look here! Aren't you going to be even half decent to your sister? . . . Is that any way for a girl of mine to treat her little brother? . . . I think that kid you brought into the yard Sunday is a little brat, and I don't want to see you dragging him here again. . . . Unless you do the few simple things your Mother asks you to do, don't expect any favours from me. . . . Don't come to table with hands looking as if you'd put in the coal. . . . Are you sulking over your food?"

Poor Dad!

He comes to know Fatherhood as a mighty unpleasant job. It would be sweet and easy to act as a paying teller pouring out quarters and half dollars in a silver tine. It would be sweet to woo his children by admiring everything they do, financing their every caprice, applauding their every act, and repealing all law in order to be rewarded with their grateful smiles.

Instead he is forced into the position of Representative of the Law. He merits their frowns instead of their smiles. He has to put the brake on their fast-flying careers. He seems to be the party of the opposition. And since youthful whim is strong and new free will feels its first rebellious strength, he knows how furiously his children will resent all this.

Second Period: Contempt

Hard as Dad finds this period, he knows it is pleasant compared with the period that follows. Yet almost all American Fathers have to pass along that dreary, repellent way. He finds that he has become the object of his own children's condescension—if not positive contempt.

Since he is probably a typical American Father, generous to his children and most eager for their future success, he has very likely given them an education considerably beyond what he himself had. He makes sure that they finish high school. Probably he sends them on to college. Maybe he has plans for professional careers for them. He lifts them higher and higher with infinite labour on his part.

Then from the heights on which he has laboriously and unselfishly placed them they look down upon him in mild amusement. ill-concealed pity, perhaps something close to contempt.

After all, they know so many things that he never learned. They have gone far ahead of the schooling he got. They will soon be professional men or the wives of professional men, while he—in the contemptuous English phrase—is in trade, working, perhaps, for someone else, just a wage-earner.

Dad's Out-of-Date

They soon come to think of Dad as an old fogey.

When they run across the stern Fathers who glower in the pages of English fiction, they nod their heads in recognition. Yes; they have in their own home a Mr. Barrett of Wimpole Street. They listen to the windiness of Mr. Micawber, and they grin appreciatively. "Not unlike Dad," they think, patronisingly.

No doubt about it, Dad is distinctly out-of-date. He tells jokes that are covered with moss and lichens. He is mystified when at the dinner table they use some current slang, and he tries to cap their colloquialisms with "wisecracks" right out of the happy 'nineties. He can't tell one swing band from another, though everyone "in the know" clearly spots this band as "smooth" and that one as "hot."

When the son comes home with a new suit of carefully unmatched colours, the pants crying out their glad contrast to the coat, Father groans and mutters audibly. "Is the young fool colour-blind?" When the current craze in jewellery hangs about daughter's neck, a string of old door keys, Dad, instead of recognising it as something right out of Hollywood, regards it as something right out of the madhouse.

He announces that Bill's crew haircut reminds him of a Fuller brush. He demands to know why in thunder daughter is eliminating her eyebrows. "Great heavens, girl! you look like a frightened Easter egg." And all the while he fails to realise that her face is modelled on that of the latest star to rise in the screen heaven.

So as he utters these adult inanities and displays his complete ignorance of what is timely and fashionable, son and daughter exchange pitying but tolerant glances. Why must Dad be so Victorian? That was an amusing age, perhaps, quaint and primitive, but certainly no standard for those who live in a world of tomorrow.

Down From Their Heights

There is something like bitter irony in the fact that Dad gives his children opportunities and training he himself never had, lifts them—on his shoulders—above his level, and then is rewarded with the condescension of their downward glance. The son becomes a physician, while Father is manager of a drugstore. Daughter marries a lawyer who in a week earns more than her Father earns in a month. The children are "college bred"; the Father had to quit school when he was half-way through high school. So now he looks up to see them, on the heights he made possible, looking down upon "poor old Dad" and wondering why he never made more of a success of his life.

They can do things he never did, get into clubs he didn't even attempt to crash, spend more on luxuries than he ever spent on necessities. Or, if they don't actually surpass him—as is often the case—they have that arrogance which makes them sure that they could surpass him if they wanted to do it. So "dear old Dad" becomes the characterisation by which they patronise the Father who gave them all they have and made them what they are.

But Is He Old?

Take that adjective old for just a second. Strange that children never get over the conviction that their Father is something which just survived the Civil War. Though the years that separate Father from his children may be twenty-one or even less, though when the child is ten Dad is still in his early thirties, and when the children are in the twenties he is in the mellow forties of a man's highest powers and strengths, they marvel how he manages to get around without the aid of crutches or a wheel chair steered by an attendant.

When eventually they reach that same age or that delightful period of life when we think of ourselves as "young men of fifty," they grow ashamed of that earlier stupid miscalculation which makes infants regard any man of maturity as out of place everywhere except in an armchair before the fire.

Small Sympathy or Understanding

For those long, long years of their youth (and—let's be frank—of their immaturity) children give their Fathers a pretty poor time of it.

The garrulousness of advancing years gets small understanding from chatty youth. The anecdotes that Dad loves to tell seem utterly meandering and pointless compared to the "wisecracks" by which they snap at a laugh. The speed-up of youth is impatient with the slowdown of age.

Dad finds himself by the judgment of his children condemned to a senility that his youthful arteries belie. At a time when his brain is really at its peak, he is in their eyes a fossil. He doesn't always beat his son on the links; but that is because he can't, like the son, get out to practice three afternoons a week—not to mention school holidays. Granted that he finds the rhumba a little intricate, he wistfully wishes that his daughter would let him show her a few of the tricky steps he used to execute when he was making the Castles jealous.

The Period That Lasts

Alas, that these periods of preoccupation, misunderstanding, pity, and contempt should occupy so many long, silly, regretted years!

For there arrives a time in the lives of all men and women born to human parents (a sweeping category) when Dad

comes back into his own. This time he does not receive the unreasoning adoration of childhood. What his children give him, is a mature, sober, grateful tribute that bespeaks their realisation of what Dad has meant in their lives. They may be filled with deep contrition for the short shrift he got from them, the children he loved and deserved. They make a belated admission that Dad was one of the really grand people who influenced their lives, one of the really powerful forces that helped shape their maturity.

For many children this final period of truth and understanding comes too late. Often Dad has gone home to God by the time a sense of values has balanced the children's appreciations. They are grown-up men and women when they acquire those values; and by that time Dad may have been—in the happy Scriptural phrase —gathered to his Fathers.

Perhaps this period comes when the son has himself become a Father and already feels upon his own shoulders the heavy burdens of Fatherhood. From his own experience with his children he grows to appreciate the grace his Father displayed. the strength and uncomplaining generosity that characterised him when he carried similar loads. Or from her experience in Motherhood the daughter comes to know that while to all parents is given joy in full measure, yet responsibility and loads are almost too heavy to be borne. So in delayed apology she smiles upon Dad, the gallant man who shouldered the weight of his Fatherhood in so happy, blithe, courageous a fashion.

Wise Dad

We know now from our own increasing understanding of human characters why he instantly disliked that young fellow we brought home, the fellow whom later on we recognised to be smooth as satin and rotten as Satan.

We know now why he grew furious when the possibility of our marrying that light-weight dawned upon him. When he had cried, angrily, “You’ll not marry that cream puff,” we had dismissed him as an antique trying to play a Victorian heavy.

When we see the circles under our own children's eyes, we understand why he thought late hours bad for us during our adolescent years. He hated to see us robbed of sleep; even more he dreaded our being out when the werewolves of the cities stalk the highways, their jaws slaving for young flesh.

That recurrent stern look in his eye we now know to have been, not anger, but worry. If he set his jaw, the determination back of it was to protect us against ignorant folly, not to thwart us of joy. Sometimes he seemed stingy; but it was not easy for him to hold back the generous allowance that he knew might prove an easy way to buy sin.

When he insisted that we earn good marks, he was no ogre crouched above us, cracking a driver's whip; he was a provident guardian of our future who hoped we'd drain each last ounce of opportunity, since only thus could we build our characters and shape our potentialities to meet and master the future.

Calm, Far-seeing Eyes

His shrewd eyes saw through the fakes and pretences of the young smart alecks who first fascinated us and later showed themselves to be worthless parasites. We didn't fool him with our flimsy pretexts and our glibly rehearsed excuses—even when he pretended to be fooled.

Oh, yes; he was too busy earning a living for us to worry his head much about the factors that distinguished Glen Miller from Benny Goodman. He was old enough to know that slang is merely a sign of sloppy conversation and a substitute for thought. His jokes grew stale as his life went more deeply into serious things—things like getting together enough money so that he could send us to college, or making sure that Mother and the kids had a grand vacation at the lakes, even if he had to stay on the job, vacationless.

Dad Was a Great Man

From the mounting years we look back at Dad and realize what a great man he really was. The fact that he was so often silent did not make him less a shaping influence on our characters. Yes; Mother held the house together. But could she have made it the lovely place it was if Dad had not been generous with his income? There never was a period when

Mother quite lost the affection and love of her children; but never once did Dad begrudge this to her or resent the fact that the children turned from him to her, loving her with a frank affection while giving to him merely the perfunctory kiss, the attention that was hardly more than the wave of a thoughtless hand.

We begin to see Dad through Mother's eyes. And that makes him grow immeasurably in stature. We know him as that incomparable man whom that supreme woman thought worthy out of all the male world to be her husband. Yes; he was the mate that our magnificent Mother had the good taste to love and cling to all the days of her married life.

An Unnoticed Hero

My own Mother died when I was in my early forties. My Father had died a few years before.

When my Mother went home to God, the most natural impulse I've ever known was that of wanting to write her biography. This I did in a fairly lengthy book I called simply, "My Mother." Into it I wrote a story which I hoped would make my readers see in my Mother one of those lovely women who have been to their children their first love and their longest enthusiasm.

Inevitably my Father had to enter the book. He was very important to my Mother. Yet I presented him, as in retrospect he appeared to me, as an entirely secondary character illuminated almost entirely by the light my Mother cast upon him.

I gave him a full chapter. But it turned out to be a chapter in which I presented him from the aspect of what he had meant to my Mother, and what, as I thought, she had made of him.

As far as I could recall, when I came to think about him, I knew my Father rather slightly. He was, you see, the typical American Father: He left the house before we children were well awake, returned in the evening when the important things of the day were all over, sent us off for holidays that he never took time to share with us, and of a Sunday, in the days before he became a Catholic, was busy putting up the screens, fixing the furnace, cutting the lawns, or doing any of the thousand trifles that consume the holidays of a suburban householder.

The Misty Figure

I could recall easily that period when he had been vastly important in my life, the period when I, like most children, crawled onto his knee and coaxed from his willing memory the stories of his own boyhood. His power of narrative must have been vivid. For almost more clearly than I remembered him I could recall his home in New York; his minister Father, whom he always adored; the dog Rover, who became a mythological figure not unlike Paul Bunyan's blue ox; and the beloved invalid brother, whom he had carried on his strong young shoulders through the snows to school.

That happy era was clear in my memory. After that my recollection of him grew confused and blurred. Out of this comes in high light his attitude toward my education and vocation.

When my Mother decided that I should have a college training, he must have tightened his belt an extra notch, worked a little harder, and made that luxury possible for me. My Mother selected old St. Ignatius, on Chicago's west side.

One of his many non-Catholic friends sneered at the college she had chosen for me.

"Why in thunder do you let your boy go to that place? The only things they turn out there are priests and ballplayers."

My Father knew nothing of Catholic education and less of that particular school. But he had high respect for the faultless character of my Mother's taste. So his defence was a joke.

"Well," he said, though he was still a non-Catholic, "if my son makes good at either, that won't be such a bad life."

He Steps Aside

When the hour struck for my decision to enter the Religious life, I went to him (he was a convert of just two years) with the news. Naturally, I was a little afraid of his reply. He had often talked happily of the possibility of his having grandchildren; of my carrying on the family name, of which he was mildly proud; of the happy years we would all share together, my family growing up near Mother and himself. My decision would be a blow, and I wondered rather callously but nonetheless curiously how he'd take it.

He took it with the same self-obliteration he showed all during his life. He wanted to know first what Mother thought. Then he asked quietly if I was sure it was what I wanted. Then he said, simply, “If that is what will make you happy, it’s the thing for you to do. By all means go ahead with it.”

Dear, self-effacing Dad!

Minor Character?

Yet as I say, when I came to write my Mother’s story, my Father dwindled—or so I thought—into a very minor character. He was the man to whom I had given little thought, a careless gesture of casual love, with the result that about him I had only confused, blurred memories.

The book appeared, and immediately to my surprise I began to get the most amazing reactions.

People I’d never met wrote in and demanded to know why I didn’t write a life of my Father.

“We liked him tremendously,” they said. And often, “He made me think of my Dad.”

Strangers who had never met him wrote me that they wished they’d been numbered among his friends. Friends of his who stumbled across the book wrote me with a caressing affection of his virtues, his fine humanity, his gift for friendliness.

I was so surprised that I went back to the book to see what it was that I had written—without my knowing it. Writers, you know, often write under pressure of some inner impulse that they hardly realise exists. They are later puzzled to find what has, unsummoned and unrecognised, slipped out at the end of a pencil.

There I found him in the pages, misty, indistinct, blurred in outline, a poor piece of characterisation, yet the figure of a man who was not only my Dad but the thousands and thousands of unappreciated Fathers who have made possible the homes and lives of America’s lucky children.

From among the many who wrote me about my Father I can recall getting only one letter from a single young person. The writers were, in the main, people a little older than myself, people who had recognised in my rather careless sketch of my Father the Dads they had themselves known, loved a bit, neglected rather badly, and with years come to idealise and dream about.

I knew that they weren’t falling in love with my Father; they were seeing around him the outlines of their own Fathers.

An Unsung Hero

I shall never be able to tell my Father’s story in detail or to carve his literary image in the round. Like the majority of American children, I never came to know my Father well enough for that. Yet from the vantage of the years I now know—like those others who read about him and wrote me because he reminded them of their own Fathers—a little of what he meant to me.

Was he in the end fully as important to me as my Mother was?

Was he, perhaps, in some ways more important to me?

Did his laborious life register itself upon my mind even while I was accepting it ungraciously as my due and complaining in my inner, selfish soul because he did not work harder and earn more?

Did the man who kissed me in the early morning and greeted me with late-evening cheerfulness that belied the tiring work of the day really grave deep in my character a mark that in later years was to make my own not-idle day seem by comparison absolutely leisurely?

Did the idealising that he gave my Mother affect me to the point where I idealised the other daughters of Mary?

Was it his generous love for his home that made me regard with affectionate eagerness all other homes as the centres from which comes all that is best and most lasting and genuine in our civilisation?

Ingratitude

I have had my moments of blushful shame that I took my Father’s gifts with so little of thankfulness. I have felt my

face hot at the memory of the time I sold a story during my college years and bragged that my one yarn had brought me more than his weekly pay envelope contained. (I hit the “jackpot once in those ancient days; his pay envelope was as regular as the seasons.)

My Mother’s financial wizardry was something I could not fail to see; I was blind to the utter trustfulness that made by Father turn over to her his entire weekly salary. He taught me without words how one man can love one woman all the days of his devoted life; monogamy has always seemed to me sweet, simple, and natural. I regard the philanderer with contempt when I recall the oblivion into which my Father consigned all other women but the one he married.

Alas! the day was to come when he would be forced gently to defend my Mother against my youthful selfishness. He atoned for my constant social absences from the house by a complete acquiescence in whatever she might want to do.

My Own Successive Stages

Yes; I went through those three early stages: the age of intense love and adoration; the age of growing aloofness; the age of condescending contempt. But during those teen years, attractive as they must often seem, cannot be rightly expected much wisdom or character discernment in children. I had to grow up, way, way up, before I could pay tribute to “Lucky George,” who willingly put aside his love of gambling rather than risk the family’s security. I had to see much more of life before I could realize the stainless loyalty that turned a husband into a tireless lover and a protective knight.

Exquisite manners do not have enough of the spectacular to blast themselves upon the attention of youth. Only when later I searched my memory and could find no trace of hasty word or unkind speech, no gesture that was not thoughtful, no conduct that could not have been displayed before the most critical guests, no least profanity or slightest vulgarity, no crudeness or roughness, only then did I appreciate the gentleman I was lucky enough to have had as my Father.

Who’s Criticising Now?

Youth constantly complains that age is bitterly critical, refuses to understand the younger generation, and simply will not make allowances. In a way that is true. We oldsters do find noisiness often unnecessary and bad manners usually stupid and the aggressive selfishness of youth frequently trying to peace and calm order.

But what about the critical attitude of youth toward age? What about young people’s smart-alecky contempt for the opinions which, however dated they may seem, have on their side the strength of experience? What about youth’s calm patronage of those to whom the young owe everything and have as yet paid nothing? How about youth’s unwillingness to take a few extra steps in order to accommodate age, to make a few allowances for life-long prejudices, to try a little to understand maturer viewpoints?

His Judgment Was Right

Once, I recall, my Father was invited to be judge at the debate of the high school that was connected with my college. With all the calm arrogance of the college sophomore I was, I sat beside him during the debate. He needed, I took for granted, the judgment of my trained mind. As a favour to him I would plant myself near him to balance for him argument against argument, to interpret for him values in subject treatment and style of presentation.

My cheeks grow red as in memory I see myself leaning over after each speech and delivering for my Father’s benefit my learned opinion. I now humble myself before the man who took that opinion and marked his paper as I indicated. Up to the very end . . .

The last speaker in rebuttal was a brilliant lad. He had the gift (it may later have proved a curse) of fluent gab. He could make a statement sound like an argument, a “wisecrack” ring true as a statistic. So when he rose, he had, since he was the final speaker, all the arguments of his opponents on which to draw a bead. He peppered those arguments with buckshot. With satire and cynicism and ridicule he tore into all the preceding speeches. He gave a brilliant display of fireworks, and they dazzled my young eyes. I admired him as amazingly clever; I laughed at his witticisms; I applauded as he sailed against sound argument with the power of a stiletto tongue.

When he was banged down by the chairman's gavel, I leaned over to my Father and said, in all my cocky assurance: "Wonderful! He demolished our kids, didn't he?"

My Father lifted to me eyes clouded as I'd seldom seen them. Now I know that he hated to hurt me and yet knew he must. He didn't want to disagree with my glib decision, but he saw through the clever faker.

"Whipped cream!" he said, using his favourite term of contempt for things beneath consideration. "A smart tongue and a clever wit that didn't touch a single argument."

I was indignant. In fact, I came close to fury. I felt acutely hurt. "How like the old codgers of his generation!" I thought. "Impressed with dull statistics and plodding facts and missing entirely the charm and brilliancy of a witty, clever, acid-spewing mind!" I turned away in embarrassment. I was ashamed of my Dad.

God forgive me! I know my Father forgave me then and does today. For across the years I know how right his judgment was. He was too wise to be tricked by a fluent tongue and too mature to mistake wit for truth and acid for argument. But it took me long, long years to learn that much. And it has taken me longer years to apologise to God and to my Dad for the stupid vanity and misapprehensions of my youth.

Not Always Thus

We have grown so accustomed to the lavish generosity, the devoted love and service of Fathers that we forget that Fathers have not always been this way toward their homes and children.

We might revert to pagan days or pagan lands. There was an age in Rome when the nurse laid the newborn baby in the arms of the Father while he decided whether or not the child had the right to live. We can see the Chinese Father of very recent date tossing out his girl baby to be picked up by slave dealers—if they found her before she died and the Hindu Fathers who bind their infant sons to baby girls in premature marriage.

The purple-in-the-face, table-pounding Father of English literature is no creation of an author's mind. He existed and ruled the house with an iron hand that did not trouble to wear a velvet glove while he was in the family circle.

Since God and nature made the Father the head of the family, the Father often found it easy enough to presume upon his right in most arbitrary fashion. To him went all the privileges and the delicacies. He was served while the rest waited. The children spoke when he nodded, were silent when he frowned. He was lord and master, and the others were his servants and his serfs.

But what a change came over Fathers when they learned to model themselves on Our Father Who is in heaven! What a difference in the parent who patterned himself on the great Creator of all life and the self-effacing, modest, retiring foster Father of Christ, Joseph of Nazareth!

Meet Some Simple Fathers

I have enjoyed meeting in my travels American Fathers. I have talked at Father-Son dinners and watched fine Catholic Fathers glow with pride as they sat at the side of their young-men sons. I've talked to waiters and taxi drivers and workmen about their sons, and I've seen their eyes light with pride and pleasure as they boasted of their children.

There was the waiter behind the oyster bar in New York, so proud that a son of his had entered the seminary the preceding autumn, so worried that the second lad, for all his opportunities, was making a failure of life.

There's the waiter in the 44th Street district, with a son who finished Fordham (sent through college on the meagre salary and tips of his Dad) and a girl now secretary to an important business executive.

The taxi driver who drove me to the Penn Station talked—under my gentle prodding—of his children. He had a son who was a doctor in upper Manhattan and another son who had finished law and passed the State bar. One daughter was happily married "to a fine young dentist"; another was a teacher in the public-school system.

"Pretty good on a cabman's income," I said.

"Why not? What's a Dad got to live for but his children?" he answered. "I'm proud they're where they are. And they'll never need to worry; I don't expect a penny back from any of them."

Or the young taxi driver who got to talking about his growing family.

“My oldest is sixteen, a mechanical genius, father. He’s learning to be an air-plane mechanic, and he’s good. . . . Two girls, both in school . . . and the wife and I are planning to send ‘em through college. A girl’s safe teaching in a classroom. I don’t like my girls bucking life in the big city.”

“I’m surprised,” I suggested, “that you don’t take the night shift. There’s more money in driving a taxi after six at night, isn’t there?”

“Sure there is. But miss the evenings with my kids? Not on your life! The youngest is nine, and he’s my pal. Believe me, I rush home the minute I get through. No stopping off at a bar. No wasting time I could spend with the kid. You ought to hear him when I come up the stairs. He raises the roof. What a reception! Isn’t easy shoving a cab all over town twelve hours a day. But I forget all about it when I get home at night to the kids. And what kids!”

The great American Father!

Like Unto God

No one can ever take from Mother all that she merits from us. But there are times when Dad seems very like the Almighty Father.

From him comes the gift of life. He is God’s associate creator. And how can we be grateful enough for the thousands and thousands of pure, fine Fathers who have passed on the gift of human life, sound and clean, to their splendid children?

Like God, he is the provider. Our homes are of his making. The food upon our table is of his providing. He has made possible that wonderful thing we know as our way of life. There is no one finer.

Like God, he gets little enough in return. Love from his children is perfunctory and often chilly. Gratitude from them is rare enough in his life. Yet, like God, he is not deterred by this from labour or love or planning. He gives without asking return. He works and is satisfied with the happiness that he provides his children.

May the Father in heaven bless these splendid Fathers on earth.

And may we, who owe them the love and loyalty of a lifetime, give them a little of gratitude during their lifetimes. May they find a place in our grateful prayers. May they know the warmth of our affection. May they realise that we are not unaware of their part in all that we are and do.

May we ask the gracious Father in heaven to be wonderfully generous to the splendid men who are our Catholic Fathers.

Nihil obstat:
FRANCISCUS MOYNIHAN,
Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:
✠ D. MANNIX,
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.
