

WHAT'S BECOME OF FATHER?

By John A. O'Brien, Ph.D., LL.D.

WHAT'S become of father?" This is the question which people are asking with ever-increasing frequency as day by day they see the telltale evidence of the low state to which the Australian father has fallen. Time was when father was the revered head of the household, to whom the children turned for guidance in all important decisions; he was respected for his wisdom and experience and loved for his devotion to his family. No event in the home was complete without his presence.

Now, however, "father" has been supplanted by the saccharine "papa", the namby-pamby "daddy", the palsy-walsy "dad", the futile "pop" and the belittled and rejected "old man". The antics of the crude, inept, well-meaning-but blundering male parent constitute the theme of numerous comic strips, notably, "Bringing Up Father". Much of the current literature on family relations seems to imply that the child's chief, if not his only, parent is the mother, while the father is relegated to the position of a mere breadwinner.

In a current television advertisement a hen-pecked-looking male is about to purchase his favourite brand of cigarettes, when his wife abruptly overrules him. An advertisement in a national magazine depicts a teenage girl tearfully asking, "Please, mother, can't daddy stay upstairs when my date comes?" Fearful that her father was not arrayed in sufficient sartorial splendour to impress her "date", she would consign her male progenitor to the oblivion of the upstairs, if not the attic.

"Our modern culture", point out O. Spurgeon English and Constance J. Foster, "sets woman up as a beautiful powerhouse of sex appeal and dynamic capability, relegating the male to a position of ridicule as an awkward and hapless galoot. He is represented as the creature who buys a certain kind of hat because she 'goes' for the man who wears one. Or he purchases built-up shoes in order to be 'taller than she is' ... In soap operas the male's function is clearly a reflection of the modern woman's appraisal of 'pop' as a simple-minded, easily-bamboozled and fairly expendable oaf."

WHY THIS DOWN-GRADING?

Why has father been subjected to such down-grading? Complex and various are the causes. The enormous and unbroken migration of people from the farm to the city has brought about radical and profound changes in the pattern of family life. On the farm the father was the natural centre of the closely knit life of the family. In the city he leaves early in the morning and is away all day: he has become the harried breadwinner and he is fast becoming a comparative stranger to his children.

Under the pressure of keeping up with the Joneses and even going a bit ahead, he is losing sight of his deeper and more important role as the spiritual head of the family, the sculptor of the personalities and characters of his children and the quickener of their moral and spiritual life. How can he fulfil this primary and paramount obligation, this divinely appointed duty, when he fails to weave himself intimately into their daily lives? Only by so doing will he sense their developmental needs and be a positive and major influence in the shaping of their characters.

The modern father is the victim of a tragedy, as strange as it is ironic. In the very era when he is showering upon his family more provisions, gadgets and creature comforts than ever before in history, he is being shoved increasingly to the fringe of the family life. Engrossed in earning an abundant and even a superabundant living for his family, he is himself failing to live. He is missing out on the things worthwhile: intimate association with his growing children, twining his heart around theirs with the consequent understanding of the hopes and dreams, the heart-aches, the frustrations as well as the triumphs of each. Aren't these the experiences which constitute the distinctive joy and unique glory of fatherhood?

Much of the blame for father's sad plight today rests, however, upon himself: he has not so much been rejected as he has abdicated his throne. Under the pressure of breadwinning he has lost sight of his primary and divinely appointed task of helping to fashion the personalities and characters of his children and of preparing them for citizenship on earth as well

as in heaven. The sound of the almighty pound has blurred the sound of the command of the almighty God: "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he shall not depart from it."

How can a father train his children if he does not spend sufficient time with them, weaving himself each day into their expanding life? What a child craves and needs most of all is the understanding, sympathy and love of his parents. These are the things which give him a sense of security and of being wanted: without them he starves emotionally, withers psychically and develops a fissured personality which will baffle and perplex the psychiatrist in later years.

AN ACT OF KINDNESS

To illustrate, Johnny, an only child, returned from his first day at school, frightened and distressed.

"The kids," he reported, "picked on me at recess."

"What did they actually do to you?" inquired his father.

"They jostled and shoved me all around. It looked as though none of them liked me."

"I'll drive around at recess tomorrow morning," said father, "and meet some of your playmates. I'm sure they meant no harm, that it was simply their way of saying they like you."

When father arrived, he saw what he expected: children playing with the reckless abandon characteristic of six-year-olds suddenly released from the tension of the classroom. Walking over among them he greeted them with a smile and encouraged Johnny to join their game of tag. Johnny did so, and quickly lost his shyness and fear. The father's simple act of kindness got his son started off on the right foot, removed the fear that might have attained crippling proportions and thus spared him its repercussions in later life.

Association with his children in their pre-school years enables the father to establish many close ties. These he can strengthen during the subsequent years by taking an interest in the progress they make in their studies and in their extra-curricular activities. Anything which enters the lives of his offspring, regardless of whether it brings them joy or grief, should be of interest to the father who seeks to be a positive and even major influence in their lives. The earlier that interest starts, the greater will be his influence.

Some wives think they are doing their husbands a favour when they have their pre-school children in bed by the time he arrives from the office. "He will be tired," thinks the wife, "and I'll have things arranged so he can just relax with me at supper." In reality she is helping neither him nor the children.

Writing in *The American Home* magazine, Alice-Rose Barman observes: "The mother who bathes and beds the children every night before Dad gets home so he can be met with a martini instead of a space cadet, and who conscientiously keeps her children away from her husband is cheating everyone concerned. Children need fathers, and husbands need wives in matters trivial and momentous alike."

PERIOD OF CHANGE

During the period from nine to thirteen there is generally a marked increase in the child's growth: the glandular changes often result in temporary emotional instability. The steady, even-tempered child becomes a moody individual, on the verge of tears one moment and a ray of sunshine the next. The father who takes the time to learn the facts of growth will spare himself and his children a great deal of tension, irritation and conflict. Understanding that nature is taking its uneven path to adulthood, he will view the emotional "ups and downs" of his children with calmness and relaxation, and enjoy with them the bitter-sweet experiences which fill childhood with such vivid, fragrant and unforgettable memories.

What a child, groping his uncertain way through this awkward period, needs desperately is the understanding, encouragement and love of his father. Instead of making the child soft or dependent, they will help him to acquire the self-confidence needed to achieve independence.

From the time children begin to speak, they freely unbosom to their parents virtually every thought that comes to their minds. One of these will be the simple question: "Mum, where did I come from?" It will be followed by others which touch on the endowment of sex and its urges, activities and purpose in their expanding lives.

While the mother, who is intimately associated with the children from infancy, will naturally be the recipient of most of these questions, the time will come as they advance towards puberty and then through adolescence when the father should make his distinctive contribution to their growing understanding of this subject. This is true particularly in regard to the boys, though he should also supplement the mother's explanation of this divine endowment to the girls.

It is much better to answer honestly every question which the child asks than to put him off till later. Usually a few sentences will give him all the information he wants and is capable of absorbing at the time. The truth coming from the pure minds of his parents will enable the child to see the beauty of God's plan: it will vaccinate him against the danger of learning the facts of life from foul minds or from companions who lack the understanding and maturity to explain them with due reverence.

The father should be so close to his children, so much a part of their lives, that they will want to come to him with any question troubling their young minds. How natural will it be for the son to turn to the father who has been his guide through the years, when he begins to think of courtship and marriage. How eager will the daughter be to have her father meet her boy friends and to get his opinion on their character and manhood, so valuable and helpful to her in her immaturity.

The father who takes an interest in the activities of his children in school and out, who shows Johnny how to patch the puncture in his bike tyre, who encourages Mary to learn the secrets of mother's culinary art and who rolls up his sleeves and pitches in with the others in washing the dishes, weaves himself deeply into the life of the family and gives them something more precious than gold and diamonds.

The crowning glory of all such activity comes when he kneels with them after the evening meal and recites the Rosary. The example of piety and devotion he thus sets will remain with them for life and will outweigh a ton of merely verbal precepts. The family that prays together, stays together: the tie that binds its members is stronger than steel and only death can sever it.

POWER OF EXAMPLE

Because the Church is so deeply conscious of the power of parental example, she views with apprehension and mis-giving mixed marriages. Why? Largely because the desired example can't be given by both parents. Children are exposed to conflicting examples, and this conflict cuts like a sword into their minds and hearts.

To illustrate. Stephen Hill, a non-Catholic, prides himself on the way he makes the children practice the religion of his Catholic wife. He calls the late sleepers on Sunday and hurries them off to Mass. The years pass quickly. Joe, his eldest son, is twenty-two. Father and son are seated on the porch, reading the Sunday paper. Glancing at his watch, the father says:

"Joe, it's ten minutes to eleven—time to start for Mass." "I'm not going this morning," replies Joe.

"Why," says the astonished father, "haven't I always taught you to practice your religion faithfully and especially to attend Sunday Mass?"

"Yes," replies Joe, "you've told me to go, but you haven't gone yourself. If you don't have to go, I don't have to go either, for I'm a child no longer."

Dumbfounded and speechless, the father perceived that his example was more influential than his verbal precept, and that it was high time for him to make his practice square with his teaching.

Of crucial importance is the example of co-operation and teamwork set by the parents. When they work harmoniously together, each upholding the authority of the other and speaking sincere words of praise and affection for each other, they place before the eyes of their children the pattern of marriage which they admire and to which they later will aspire. Such loyal, devoted and loving cooperation enhances the authority and prestige of each, and shows the children more effectively than many volumes of abstract theorizing how the enterprise of the home can be successfully conducted.

Walking along a street in Florence, Michelangelo saw a large block of Carrara marble which had been hacked upon by an inept sculptor and then discarded. In that shapeless block he perceived the potentialities of a great work of art. He had

it brought to his studio and out of it he carved the world-famous statue of David, the youthful conqueror of Goliath. He transformed that unsightly block of marble into a masterpiece, a thing of beauty that has provoked the admiration of all succeeding generations.

Such is the task which confronts parents. By unremitting patience, care, effort and skill they must help their children develop into something greater than Michelangelo's David: men and women fashioned into the likeness of Christ, adorned with virtues which will gain for them the unending happiness of heaven. In the accomplishment of that supremely important task the father must contribute his share: he can't do this by proxy, for it demands the touch that only he is qualified to bring to it. Well does Shakespeare say:

To you your father should
be as a god;
One that composed your
beauties, yea, and one
To whom you are but as a
form in wax
By him imprinted and with
in his power
To leave the figure or disfigure it.

CONTRASTING EXAMPLES

By precept and even more by example a father goes a long way towards shaping, for good or for bad, the personalities and the characters of his children. This is illustrated by an incident that occurred in a court room in Sydney.

Sentence of death had just been pronounced upon a young man for shooting to death a policeman who caught him in a burglary. The doomed man had lost his mother in early childhood and the father had grossly neglected him. When asked by the judge after the sentencing if he had anything to say, he pointed an accusing finger towards a man sitting dejectedly among the spectators.

"That man," he said, "is my father. He is the real murderer. He made no home for me. He allowed me to roam the streets at night like a thief, while he spent his nights at hotels. He ought to be getting the sentence instead of me."

Stung by the accusing of his son, the father lowered his face in shame as tears of remorse came to his eyes. The words, he realized, were all too true. He had neglected the most fundamental duty which almighty God places upon every father. Now he would have the memory of the accusing words to carry with him to his grave. What a nightmare would be his when those scalding words, burning like a red-hot iron, would re-echo in his ears to drive sleep away and to torture and torment him!

How different is the influence of a good father is shown in the case of one who was left with two young sons by the death of his wife. Though he was only a manual labourer with a meagre income, he managed to keep the home intact, filling as far as possible the roles of both parents. After the evening meal the father read aloud one chapter of the New Testament, then joined with his sons in the recitation of the Rosary. Every Sunday the three knelt side by side at the altar rail where they received their Eucharistic Lord.

After working their way through university, both sons entered the seminary and were ordained priests. Devout, zealous, apostolic, they never wearied of searching for the strayed sheep or of seeking to bring the "other sheep" into the Master's fold. Outstanding among the priests of their diocese, they were living testimonials to the influence of a good father. He gave his children something which money cannot buy: the example of a Christ-like life, understanding, guidance, devotion and love.

ST. THOMAS MORE

A great influence in the life of St. Thomas More, unsurpassed in courage, learning and holiness by any layman of

England in his day, was his father. His teaching, counsel and example fortified the son to stand firm for God, Church and conscience when confronted with the demand to acknowledge the king as “Head of the Church and to renounce all obedience to the Bishop of Rome, as having no more power than any other Bishop.” As Chancellor of England he was burdened with weighty affairs of State, but he took time each day to secure his father’s blessing.

Thrown into the Tower of London for his refusal to take the oath of royal supremacy, the intrepid Chancellor scorned all suggestions of compromise. In his prison cell he wrote a “Treatise on the Passion”, the better to prepare himself for death. “Give me Thy grace, good Lord,” he wrote, “to set the world at naught and to set my mind fast upon Thee.”

It was in defence of Christ’s Church and the papacy that he died as “the King’s good servant, but God’s first.” “These,” remarks his biographer, R. W. Chambers, “were the most weighty words ever spoken upon a scaffold.” His life and his death are eloquent testimonials to the influence of a good father.

Statesmen, sociologists, teachers and clergymen have bewailed the unprecedented extent of juvenile delinquency, filling our reform schools and prisons with youngsters already hardened in criminal habits. It is indeed a sorry picture. But the basic cause of such delinquency is the failure of parents, especially fathers, to do their duty: to guide, direct and instruct them in their moral and religious obligations and to set them the proper example. With rare exceptions, parents must bear a large share of the blame when their children become delinquents and end up in reform schools or prison cells.

The fathers of such delinquents have generally failed to obey the command of the Most High: “Instruct thy son, and he shall refresh thee, and shall give delight to thy soul.” Upon fathers rests the duty of establishing proper discipline in the home: as its head he speaks with authority and children, particularly after reaching puberty, look to him for guidance and direction. No enactment of legislatures can serve as an adequate substitute for the discipline of a well-ordered and religious home.

By giving to his children the sympathy, understanding, kindness and love for which they crave, and which they need so desperately to develop into well-rounded personalities, a father makes a priceless contribution to their unfolding religious life. To them God is their heavenly Father, and the core of their idea of God is that of the father whom they know best. By being a kind and loving father to his children, a father thus makes it easy for them to arrive at the true concept of God, whom St. John defines so aptly in three simple words, “God is love”.

THE DIVINE PLAN

Winning their complete confidence and trust by his honesty and especially by his fidelity to his words and promises, he prepares them for the theological virtue of faith. By responding generously to their appeals for help in all their difficulties and trials, he qualifies them for the virtue of hope. Loving his children with a deep and sincere love, he readies them for the virtue of hope. More than any other creature in the entire universe a father thus serves as an eloquent living Gospel, proclaiming to his offspring the good tidings that God is a father.

“The fatherhood of man,” points out Henry Caffarel, “is the revelation of God’s paternity. A father is the image of the Father. To no other creature has God given so generously of His trust, His power and His likeness. That is why we use the same word father both to address him from whom we have received human life and to invoke God.”

The divine plan for the family clearly specifies the father as the head, exercising authority tempered with understanding and love. “Let women,” says the Apostle Paul, “be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord: because the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church . . . Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ, so also let the wives be subject to their husbands in all things. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered himself up for it.”

That home will be a well-ordered and happy one in which the father shoulders his responsibility as the divinely ordained head and exercises his authority with insight, tact, devotion and love. The teenage daughter in such a family will not wish to have her father relegated to the upstairs when her boy friend calls. On the contrary she will want to display him as the ideal with whom she will measure her suitor to see if she can find in him a modicum of the virtues adorning her father’s character.

By her actions she will say to him, "I am proud of my father, the greatest, best and kindest man I know. He has taught me the nobility of goodness and the beauty of holiness not only by precept but also by example. He is the man who has made the reality of God, my heavenly Father, vivid and real to me. I hope that you measure up to him, for then my worries are over."

HOW DO YOU RATE?

Here is a chance to determine how well you are fulfilling the duties of a father. Take this quiz to determine where you are succeeding and where you are failing, and thus see how much room there is for improvement. It is a practical examination of conscience. (Tick box 1 for Yes: Box 2 for No)

1. When you come home from work, do you generally
 - (a) relate in an irritated manner all the things that went wrong during the day?
 - (b) greet your wife and children affectionately and inquire how things have been with them?
2. Do you criticize your wife in the presence of the children?
3. Do you get angry when a meal is a little late?
4. Do you make it a point to show an affectionate interest in each of your children rather than give the lion's share to one?
5. Do you minimize the job of housekeeping and compare it unfavourably with your own?
6. Do you think that providing financial support for the family is all that should be expected of you?
7. Do you talk over your problems with your wife and encourage her to discuss her problems with you?
8. Do you play with or read to your children because you enjoy doing so, rather than from a sense of duty?
9. When your child inquires about sex, do you
 - (a) feel embarrassed?
 - (b) tell him to wait till he is older?
 - (c) shunt him off to his mother?
 - (d) answer freely, simply and naturally?
10. Have you met your children's teachers?
11. Do your children talk over their problems with you readily?
12. Do you offer occasionally to look after the children so your wife can go away for an evening, a day or even longer?
13. Do you and your wife agree basically on matters of discipline?
14. Do you see that Grace before Meals and Thanksgiving after Meals are said regularly?
15. Do you say the Family Rosary after the evening meal or at some other appropriate time?
16. Do you send your children to a Catholic school, or if there is none, assist your wife in instructing them in their religion?
17. Do you receive Holy Communion with your family, when possible, each Sunday?
18. Do you subscribe to Catholic papers and magazines, read and discuss them with your family?
19. Do you have holy pictures and the crucifix in your home?
20. Do you set your children a good example by being active in at least one of your parish organizations and helping your pastor in every way you can?

Questions 1a, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9a, 9b and 9c should be answered no. The others should be answered yes. A score of 19 out of 24 correct answers is fair, 21 is good; and if you score over that—congratulations! You are a good father.

A FATHER'S PRAYER

O Almighty and Eternal God, my Heavenly Father, in Thy inscrutable providence Thou hast seen fit to honour me with the exalted dignity of fatherhood and to share with Thee the glorious title of Father. Thou hast privileged me, along with

my beloved spouse, to be Thy ambassador in bringing into existence children, made in Thy image and likeness and vivified with immortal souls. Grant, O Eternal Father, that I may be a good father and guard and guide with loving care the innocent souls Thou hast entrusted to my care. Give me the grace, O God of Mercy and Love, to set them an example of virtue and holiness and thus prepare them for an eternal union with Thee in Heaven. This I beg of Thee, O Gracious and Loving Father, in the name of Thy Divine Son, Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Nihil Obstat
P. JONES
Diocesan Censor

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