

Report following the Pontifical Council for the Family's Congress on:

"The Paternity of God and Paternity in the Family"

3 - 5 June 1999

The Pontifical Council for the Family's Congress on fatherhood was held to coincide with the year dedicated to God the Father. In his opening address, Cardinal Trujillo pointed out that perfect fatherhood of a very active kind is found in God. One cannot understand the truth of human fatherhood without looking first at God's perfect fatherhood of which man's is a pale image. This divine image was described and referred back to constantly by the different speakers throughout the Congress.

Sadly, fatherhood, both human and divine, is now under constant attack. Indeed, so closely are the two linked that an attack on one will always result in an attack on the other. These attacks have multiplied in the last thirty years, causing a crisis in faith and in family life. The damage is great but at least by looking at what happens when family life goes wrong one can learn many lessons about true relationships which usually go unnoticed. Speakers at the congress came from a variety of countries but especially from the USA and Europe where family breakdown is so much in evidence. Some were academics, many had practical experience of working with the victims of our social decay.

The Fatherhood of God is a central mystery of our faith. Cardinal Trujillo in his address showed how this mystery was only made known to us by Jesus. It was one of the truths of revelation which most shocked the Jews. In Matthew 11 Jesus praises his Father for "hiding all this from the wise and the prudent, and revealing it to little *children*". There is, of course, an immense difference between Jesus's own invocation of the Father as Son, and ours, but this does not make our filiation any less real.

Cardinal Trujillo went on to look at the three occasions in the New Testament when God the Father is referred to as "Abba" or "Daddy". Two come from St Paul, in Galatians 4 and Romans 8. St Paul talks about the spirit of sonship which fills our hearts with the word "Abba" and releases us from fear and slavery, giving us the confidence and responsibility of true sons. This responsibility includes sharing the Son's glory, but also his suffering. Daddy is one of a child's first words, often pronounced even earlier than Mummy. Just as we play with our earthly fathers, so we are invited to play with our heavenly Father. This does not mean we lose the transcendence of God. We are his sons.

The third occasion when the intimate word "Abba" is used is even more moving. It comes from St Mark, from Gethsemane, when Jesus exclaims "Abba, Daddy. All things are possible to thee; take away this chalice from before me; only as thy will is, not as mine is." Jesus is calling out in his extreme moment of agony with complete trust and confidence in the action of his Father. Later, on the Cross, he surrenders his spirit into the hands of his Father with a

loud cry, a cry of freedom which takes its energy from the action of the Spirit. It is the Spirit which delivers Jesus's spirit to the Father.

No-one is father as God is Father. He is the only perfect model. He is authority, power, fullness, and tenderness. All these qualities should also be represented by paternity in the family. When the human model is impoverished, it becomes difficult to understand God's paternity. Thus, while God's paternity is a model for human paternity, it is best comprehended by loving and appreciating our own fathers. Many of those who portray God as a merciless judge, a puppeteer who enslaves us through religion, have had bad relationships with their own fathers. Cardinal Trujillo mentioned Sartre and Hegel. He also reflected on a visit to Rio when he had met some of the Street Children. Unloved by mother or father, they can become killers. They lose the instinct for self-conservation and have no love for themselves. However, when they are taken in by an institution which gives them the love and framework of a would-be family, they are freed, born again, and have a new vision of reality. Love brings about their total liberation.

Parents are at the root of the person. This need for roots is intrinsic to us and helps us to find our identity. The bond with our biological parents is a permanent one and where it is broken there are deep social costs. Fatherhood begins biologically, but it extends into nurturing and educating the children, just as God continues to be intimately involved with each one of us. At one and the same time the good father should represent both authority and tenderness. It is his job both to teach and to reconcile his children. It is not true that the father punishes and the mother cherishes. The tenderness of the father is different from that of the mother, just as her authority is different.

The absence of paternity is now being felt in many ways:

Fear of life. Men are frightened to father children with the result that population levels are falling, in many parts of the world at a worrying rate.

Lack of time for children. Fathers often do not take the time needed to form their children, and to play with them. They are not helped by employment practices which take them out of the home for long hours and leave them exhausted at the end of the day. Women also are being forced out of the home to work.

Indisciplined children. Many adults no longer have the confidence to teach and correct their children, not realising that correction is a sign of love. Families need to educate their children in all the areas that properly belong to them, and especially that God is good.

Lack of forgiveness and repentance. Having not experienced correction and forgiveness in childhood, people find it increasingly hard to admit when they are wrong, and to forgive others. They may pretend to forgive, but it is often not authentic. They do not realise that forgiveness and reconciliation are moments of joy and freedom. Cardinal Trujillo commented that many people refer to God the Creator and God on the Cross but they do

not talk about the God who forgives. The image of the Prodigal Son actually fronted the conference programme.

I have dealt in some length with Cardinal Trujillo's opening address because he reveals so many fascinating glimpses of our Father God from whom all paternity stems. Other speakers at the Conference also made it clear that it is only by drawing close to the Fatherhood of God that we can come to appreciate the fullness of human paternity as it should be. However, those who do not know the love of a human father find it difficult to know and love the Heavenly Father. Attacks on the fatherhood of man also lead to attacks on the fatherhood of God.

Where do the attacks come from? Mrs Anne Marie Pellettier of France pointed out that true womanhood is based upon a correct relationship with man. However, ever since the Fall, that relationship has been damaged and in societies throughout the world men have misused their positions of authority to do violence to women. In fighting back and trying to do away with the victimisation of their sex, feminists have resorted to two remedies:

- to make women autonomous so that they can manage their lives without men,
- to suppress the God-made differences between the sexes, promoting the idea that the two sexes are interchangeable.

Either philosophy crushes true relations between the sexes, and actually leads to more violence, often of a more radical kind.

In practice, women are not autonomous because they cannot bring up children on their own. It is a fallacy to pretend that they can. Where a child's natural father is absent, mothers bring up their children with the help of their families, if they are lucky; of other men, to whom they may or may not be married; and of the State. **They do not do so on their own and we must be prepared to tell people so.** Speakers from the USA, where some 24 million children are currently being brought up in the absence of their fathers, pointed out that single mothers are dependent on welfare about 70% of the time. Very few children of single mothers will not have received welfare support at some point during their childhood. What is more, welfare dependency becomes entrenched. Ninety per cent of those receiving welfare in the USA are those who do not or did not have fathers at home.

Welfare is enormously expensive. Some 5.4 trillion dollars is spent on public welfare in the States, more than the cost of the two World Wars. However, despite the sums children of single parent families are brought up in poverty. Most will spend about 50% of their childhood below the poverty line (estimated at half the average wage, or \$13,000 p.a. in the USA), compared with only 7% for those with resident fathers. Fatherlessness gives a sevenfold increase to child poverty. This is serious in itself since children brought up in poverty are more likely to suffer bad health, to drop out of school, and to fall into problems requiring treatment, including violence. It is thus that children brought up on welfare so often become welfare dependents themselves.

It is the role of the male to be the main breadwinner for the family. This role, which is now too often belittled and even ridiculed, is part of the dignity of the man to which he has a natural right. Speakers referred back to Genesis where it is clear that God gave the earth into the care of Adam before the creation of Eve. She was specifically created for a different role of like dignity, that of companion and helpmate to man.

Father absence leads to much more of course than only financial mayhem. Professor Tony Anatrella spoke of how quickly family structure breaks up in whole communities once more than 50% of households no longer live in nuclear families. In working with young men, Professor Anatrella has to teach them from scratch what it is to be a husband and father. The media do not help. Other speakers joined him in pointing out the disastrous lack of any good male symbolism on the screen, in our pop culture and in the press. Where men are portrayed, it is not as loyal husbands but as lovers, homosexuals, drops outs, etc. Happy family life does not make interesting drama. There is nothing new in this. Imagine normal life being run on the script of a Verdi opera. However, when boys do not get good role models in the home they are even more influenced by the images projected elsewhere. It is not only the public who are vulnerable to the messages put over in the media. It is also our governments. Politicians courting popularity come under strong media pressure to comply with the demands of minority groups who are often more vocal than the ordinary family.

Thus it is that governments continue to take a schizophrenic attitude to family policy. On the one hand they deplore the rise in violence and costs to the public purse that follow on from the break up of the nuclear family. On the other, they continue to foster a liberal attitude to "private morality" and actually take positive action to usurp the father's role and hasten society's disintegration. The United Nations does not even take account of the paternal function. There are moves afoot in France, for instance, to give step-fathers the rights of natural fathers. This goes against natural justice to both the true fathers and to the children. Fathers watch powerless while others take over their role and their womenfolk choose to rely on the State rather than on them. Out of wedlock pregnancies are by no means mostly accidents. It was pointed out that, in the States, illegitimate children are largely born not to teenagers but to women in their early and late twenties who have chosen motherhood but who do not want to be committed to marriage. This shows a profound crisis in the relations between men and women.

Secular research comes to the same conclusion: it is the institution of marriage and the family that leads to responsibility among men which in turn leads to responsibility among the children. In addition to the child's emotional integrity, his values, skills and culture appear to be moulded to a significant extent by the father. Fathers are necessary to perpetuate our civilisation. If we are to live in a free and non-violent society, where citizens contribute to the common good, we need married fathers who take an interest in their children. Several speakers pointed out that before fathers physically left their families, men especially in the upper classes reneged on all but their financial responsibilities and so in effect were already beginning to abandon their duties. As an important footnote to all this it was said that, where

a father dies rather than leaves or is never present in a family, children often do very well, showing that it is the sense of voluntary abandonment which is so damaging to children.

From looking at what goes wrong when fathers are absent, it is possible to look at the father's role when things are going well. The mother's relationship to the child is more clearly defined because of her biological affinity with her offspring and the mother-child bond remains a crucial one on which the father depends. However, it is becoming obvious that the part played by the natural father, rather than just any man, is also critical to the child's healthy development.

The first thing to be said is that the father's role is different from that of the mother's: he is not just a second mother. Trying to make him share the mother's jobs does not always work and can lead to confusion, whereby the man feels inadequate and performs neither role well. Even in small things mothers and fathers are different: where small children are looked after by their fathers, they often learn to speak much later. Women's constant talk has a purpose. The best bonds are formed between mother and child when they spend a lot of time in each other's company, especially in the early years. However, most fathers since they need to earn the family keep will be away from their families for much of the day and it is interesting that the best parental relations are developed not when they spend the most time with them but when their wives are at home doing so. What is important is that fathers finish their work and spend time dedicated to their children, playing with them, discovering and cultivating their interests, supporting their wives in disciplining them, and being tender towards them. This is much more important than sharing household tasks, though of course a good man will give a hand where it is needed.

The importance of physical play was emphasised. Being picked up and tossed about does not only bring father and child close amid laughter but is important to the security of the child. He learns to enjoy adventure, to play with danger, but from the safety of a controlled environment. The child begins from the earliest years to face the unknown and to learn self-discipline.

The father's physical presence also helps the child to find himself as an individual distinguished from the mother. It is the father who first claims the mother back and separates her from the child. He can do so more satisfactorily than anyone else precisely because of his own physical bond with the child. As the child grows into adolescence he plays an increasingly important role in affirming the individuality and the sexuality of the child. Children without fathers are often ill at ease with their sexuality. It is not a coincidence that homosexuality is so much more prevalent now when family structure has broken down. The father shows his sons what it is to be a man, to face the future with confidence, to make the most of his education and to embark upon a career and so to create and support his own family. He is essential to the good discipline of teenage boys.

What is less well known is how important fathers are to the sound development of daughters. Statistics show that more men abandon families of girls than where there are boys. However, girls can suffer quite as much. Where there is no natural father, they find it difficult to be

confident in their femininity. They too suffer from lack of self-esteem, poor education, and also from eating disorders. Fathers have a much more profound influence than mothers on a girl's future choice of man, even when her father has divorced or gone. The father/daughter relationship appears to be a "dress rehearsal" for a future man. Adolescent girls without fathers are much more likely to be sexually active early, to be promiscuous, to suffer abortion, to take drugs. Without a warm supportive male role model, a girl becomes more fearful of relations with men. A girl can feel that it is not only her mother but her own person and her own sex that has been abandoned if her father leaves home. From this, it is easy for her to feel rejected by other institutions, such as the Church. It is interesting that many of the most rabid feminists and promoters of the welfare state are those women who had poor relations with their own fathers. We are facing here not only personal issues, but bigger political issues within society.

The most important way a man can help his daughter to grow into a self-confident woman is to treat her mother with respect and tenderness; the second most important way is to engage in an active and close relationship with his daughter. Men can often feel at a loss as to how to do this. It is something that we need to foster again, and to encourage proper courtship. Current dating practices are a better training ground for divorce than for marriage.

Man is an out-centred being. Our happiness is dependent upon the reflections of ourselves that we see in others. It is for this reason that our roots are also extremely important to us. The most basic relationship we can have is in giving life. It is a mistake not to want to pass on this gift which we ourselves have received gratuitously, for every person is in debt for the the gift of his own life.

What has gone wrong? Many causes can be pointed at, such as the decline in religious belief and the growth of materialism. It was the Philippine Ambassador to the Holy See who pinpointed contraception as a key factor, saying that it is because of contraception that a father can decide not to perform his role. It is not simply a question of the woman contracepting herself, but the idea of fatherhood and motherhood being contracepted. This has been able to happen because of a weakening in religion which weakens the person throughout. We are living through post-Christian disorders. This is being carried out through international bodies based at the United Nations and it is spread through the media. Once you crush the father's role as breadwinner, he feels redundant and becomes a failed, absent person. He is no longer a tyrant. It is the mother who is being promoted as the person who can play both roles, while the father becomes a second mother. This notion is now common to all rich, developed countries, strongly supported by the media where a confusion of the sexes, crisis of the male identity, inflation of the maternal function, unemployment, and decrease in paternal education are all common problems.

Despite all this, we must take confidence knowing that God does not lose any battles. It is good news that we have to proclaim when we teach the world that man is a child of God.

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