

The Family-3. The Father (First part)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning! Let us resume the series of catecheses on the family. Today we shall take the word “father” as our guide. It is a term dearer than any other to us Christians because it is the name by which Jesus taught us to call God: father. The meaning of this name took on new depth from the very way Jesus used it to turn to God and to manifest his special relationship with Him. The blessed mystery of God’s intimacy, Father, Son and Spirit revealed by Jesus, is the heart of our Christian faith.

“Father” is a term familiar to everyone, a universal word. It indicates a fundamental relationship, the reality of which is as old as human history. Today, however, one has reached the point of claiming that our society is a “society without fathers”. In other words, particularly in Western culture, the father figure would be symbolically absent, faded, removed. At first, this was perceived as a liberation: liberation from the father-master, from the father as the representative of the law that is imposed from without, from the father as the censor of his children’s happiness and the obstacle to the emancipation and autonomy of young people. At times in some homes authoritarianism reigned in the past, in some cases even oppression: parents who treated their children like servants, not respecting their individual needs for growth; fathers who did not help them to start out on their journey with freedom — and it is not easy to bring up a child in freedom —; fathers who did not help them assume their own responsibilities to build their future and that of society.

This, certainly, is not a good approach; but, as often happens, one goes from one extreme to the other. In our day, the problem no longer seems to be the invasive presence of the father so much as his absence, his inaction. Fathers are sometimes so concentrated on themselves and on their work and at times on their career that they even forget about the family. And they leave the little ones and the young ones to themselves. As Bishop of Buenos Aires I sensed the feeling of orphan hood that children are experiencing today, and I often asked fathers if they played with their children, if they had the courage and love to spend time with their kids. And the answer was negative in most cases: “But I can’t, because I have so much work...”. And the father was absent from the little child growing up, he did not play with him, no, he did not waste time with him.

Now, on this common journey of reflection on the family, I would like to say to all Christian communities that we must be more attentive: the absent father figure in the life of little ones and young people causes gaps and wounds that may even be very serious. And, in effect, delinquency among children and adolescents can be largely attributed to this lack, to the shortage of examples and authoritative guidance in their everyday life, a shortage of closeness, a shortage of love from the father. And the feeling of orphan hood that so many young people live with is more profound than we think.

They are orphaned in the family, because the father is often absent, also physically, from the home, but above all because, when they are present, they do not behave like fathers. They do not converse with their children. They do not fulfill their role as educators. They do not set their children a good example with their words, principles, values, those rules of life which they need like bread. The educative quality of the time the father spends raising the child is all the more necessary when he is forced to stay away from home because of work. Sometimes it seems that fathers don’t know what their role in the family is or how to raise their children. So, in doubt, they abstain, they retreat and neglect their responsibilities, perhaps taking refuge in the unlikely relationship as “equals” with their children. It’s true that you have to be a “companion” to your child, but without forgetting that you are the father! If you behave only as a peer to your child, it will do him/her no good.

And we also see this problem in the civil community. The civil community with its institutions has a certain — let’s call it paternal — responsibility towards young people, a responsibility that at times is neglected or poorly exercised. It too often leaves them orphaned and does not offer them a true perspective. Young people are thus deprived of safe paths to follow, of teachers to trust in, of ideals to warm their hearts, of values and of hopes to sustain them daily. They become filled perhaps with idols but their hearts are robbed; they are obliged to dream of amusement and pleasure but they are not given work; they become deluded by the god of money, and they are denied true wealth. And so it would do everyone good, fathers and children, to listen again to the promise that Jesus made to his disciples: “I will not leave you orphans” (cf. Jn 14:18). He is, indeed, the Way to follow, the Teacher to listen to, the Hope that the world can change, that love conquers hatred, that there can be a future of brotherhood and peace for all. One of you might say to me: “But Father, today you were too negative.

You only spoke about the absent father, what happens when fathers are not close to their children.... “It’s true, I wanted to stress this, because next Wednesday I am going to continue this catechesis by highlighting the beauty of fatherhood. That is why I chose to start from the darkness, in order to reach the light. May the Lord help us understand these things better.

The Family - 3. The Father (Second part)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning! Today I would like to develop the second part of my reflection on the figure of the father in the family. Last time I spoke about the danger of “absent” fathers, today I would like to look instead at the positive aspect. Even St Joseph was tempted to leave Mary, when he discovered that she was pregnant; but the Angel of the Lord intervened and revealed to him God’s plan and his mission as foster father; and Joseph, a just man, “took his wife” (Mt 1:24) and became the father of the family of Nazareth.

Every family needs a father. Today we shall reflect on the value of his role, and I would like to begin with a few expressions that we find in the Book of Proverbs, words that a father addresses to his own son, and it reads like this: “My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad. My soul will rejoice when your lips speak what is right” (Pr 23:15-16). Nothing could better express the pride and emotion a father feels when he understands that he has handed down to his child what really matters in life, that is, a wise heart. This father does not say: “I am proud of you because you are the same as me, because you repeat the things I say and do”. No, he does not say anything so simple to him. He says something much more important, which we can understand in this way: “I will be happy every time I see you act with wisdom, and I will be moved every time that I hear you speak with rectitude. This is what I wanted to leave to you, that this one thing become yours: the attitude to feel and act, to speak and judge with wisdom and rectitude. And that you might be like this, I taught you the things you didn’t know, I corrected the errors you didn’t see. I made you feel a profound and at the same time discrete affection, which maybe you did not fully recognize when you were young and unsure. I gave you a testimony of rigour and steadfastness that perhaps you didn’t understand, when you would have liked only complicity and protection. I had first to test myself in the wisdom of my heart, be vigilant of my excesses of sentiment and resentment, in order to carry the weight of the inevitable misunderstandings, to find the right words to make myself understood.” Now, continues the father, “I see that you strive to be this way with your own children, and with everyone, and it moves me. I am happy to be your father”. This is what a wise father, a mature father, says. A father knows all too well what it costs to hand down this heritage: how close, how gentle and how firm to be. But what consolation and what recompense he receives when the children honour this legacy! It is a joy that rewards all the toil, that overcomes every misunderstanding and heals every wound.

The first need, then, is precisely this: that a father be *present* in the family. That he be close to his wife, to share everything, joy and sorrow, hope and hardship. And that he be close to his children as they grow: when they play and when they strive, when they are carefree and when they are distressed, when they are talkative and when they are silent, when they are daring and when they are afraid, when they take a wrong step and when they find their path again; a father who is always present. To say “present” is not to say “controlling”! Fathers who are too controlling cancel out their children, they don’t let them develop.

The Gospel speaks to us about the exemplarity of the Father who is in Heaven — who alone, Jesus says, can be truly called the “good Father” (cf. Mk 10:18). Everyone knows that extraordinary parable of the “prodigal son”, or better yet of the “merciful father”, which we find in the Gospel of Luke in chapter 15 (cf. 15:11-32). What dignity and what tenderness there is in the expectation of that father, who stands at the door of the house waiting for his son to return! Fathers must be patient. Often there is nothing else to do but wait; pray and wait with patience, gentleness, magnanimity and mercy.

A good father *knows how to wait and knows how to forgive* from the depths of his heart. Certainly, he also knows how to correct with firmness: he is not a weak father, submissive and sentimental. The father who *knows how to correct without humiliating* is the one who knows how to protect without sparing himself. Once I heard a father at a meeting on marriage say: “Sometimes I have to strike the children lightly... but never in the face so as not to humiliate them”. How beautiful! He has a sense of dignity. He must punish, but he does it in a just way, and moves on. If then, there is someone who can fully explain the prayer of the “Our Father”, taught by Jesus, it is the one who lives out paternity in the first person. Without the grace that comes from the Father who is in Heaven, fathers lose courage and abandon camp. But children need to find a father waiting for them when they come home after failing. They will do everything not to admit it, not to show it, but they need it; and not to find it opens wounds in them that are difficult to heal.

The Church, our mother, is committed to supporting with all her strength the good and generous presence of fathers in families, for they are the irreplaceable guardians and mediators of faith in goodness, of faith in justice and in God’s protection, like St Joseph.