

## **A Tribute to Fathers**

**By**

**Sr. Joan L. Roccasalvo, C. S. J.**

**June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

From ancient times, men have reflected on the role of fathers and their family relationships. In *Crisis of Manliness* by Walter Newell, he observes that too many boys today are like Telemachus in Homer's *Odyssey*. The young man is determined to find out what has happened to his father who left home to fight in the Trojan War when his son was still an infant. Now a young adult, Telemachus eagerly desires a lifelong relationship with his father. Each year Newell tells his students the story of Telemachus and his father Ulysses.

As the narrative advances, Newell's classroom of boys grows silent because they are, in effect, Telemachus. Part of the dialogue between father and son is given below:

### **Telemachus and Ulysses**

"Sir," said Telemachus, "as regards your question, so long as my father was here it was well with us and with the house, but the gods, in their displeasure, have willed it otherwise and have hidden him away more closely than mortal man was ever yet hidden. . . ."

"And Ulysses said, "I am no god; why should you take me for one? I am your father on whose account you grieve and suffer so much at the hands of lawless men."

As Telemachus spoke, Ulysses kissed his son, and a tear fell from his cheek on to the ground, for he had restrained all tears till now.

But Telemachus could not yet believe that it was his father, and said: "You are not my father. You are some god who is flattering me with vain hopes that I may grieve the more

hereafter. No mortal man could of himself contrive to do as you have been doing and make yourself old and young at a moment's notice, unless a god were with him. A second ago, you were old and all in rags, and now you are like some god come down from heaven." [When Ulysses returned home looking disheveled, he cleaned himself up and changed his clothes to make himself look presentable.]

Ulysses answered, "Telemachus, you ought not to be so immeasurably astonished at my being really here. There is no other Ulysses who will come hereafter. Such as I am, it is I, your father, who after long wandering and much hardship have got home to my own country in the twentieth year. I will tell you the truth, my son." As Ulysses spoke, he sat down, and Telemachus threw his arms about his father and wept.

Like Telemachus, many boys come from broken homes and are forced at a very early age to be their mother's protector from oppressive men. At the same time, they struggle to bring themselves up in a way that would make their absent fathers proud of them.

Fathers come in all different shapes, sizes, and personalities, a fact best seen in father-roles described below.

### **Theodore Roosevelt, the Father ( d 1909)**

Theodore Roosevelt once commented that there was nothing like being a father, not all his successes or his achievements. They paled in the face of fatherhood. "When Mr. Roosevelt had closed the door of his home behind him, the soldier and statesman, the reformer and writer were all shut out, and only the husband and the father entered. His devotion to his wife and children was ideal. To the latter, he was not only a father but also a big, overgrown brother. One of his chief delights was to get down on all-fours in the nursery and play bear with the younger

ones. When the little bears got tired, he sometimes sang old Dutch folksongs for them. Though his voice was never intended for singing, there was a certain quaintness and rough charm about these memories of Holland that greatly delighted the children.”

“Nor was it his own children who commanded his devotion. He was emphatically a friend of children. During his campaign, he was known to catch the eye of a poor little crippled girl in a patched frock, who was making frantic but hopeless efforts to reach him in the outskirts of the crowd, and pushing aside all the rest, make a way for her, to the great amazement of the curled darlings in the front row.” (Anecdote of Earnest Ruse, “Teddy Roosevelt with His Children.”

### **Super-Dads**

We have super-Dads like Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) who exceeds our expectations of fatherhood in the film, “To Kill a Mockingbird.” A widower and defense lawyer with two young and impressionable children, Atticus is devoted to them not only as father but also as a patient teacher. In the television drama, “Blue Bloods,” Frank Reagan, played by Tom Selleck, is the Police Commissioner of the NYPD. Not only is he the beloved patriarch of the Reagan family but he has also earned the respect, admiration, and affection of his officers.

### **War-Heroes**

Despite their disabilities, wounded male veterans still manage to fulfill their roles as loving husbands and fathers. Long and arduous rehabilitation becomes a family project because facing the future alone, especially if it entails living without limbs or sight, is unthinkable. There is nothing more moving than to see young children help their struggling Dads move about their

homes in new and limited modes of living. The actor and activist, Gary Sinise, also a wounded veteran, now assists other wounded veterans in a variety of ways.

### **From “60 Minutes”**

A few years ago, “60 Minutes” featured a heart-warming story of an up-scale family of five that lost almost everything when their well-educated and well-positioned father lost his position and eventually, his home. The family of three pre-teen children and their parents joined the homeless population. Invitations came offering to take one or other of the children. This would have meant splitting up the family while the two parents sought to stabilize their financial situation. The father refused, and his wife wholeheartedly agreed. He was committed to keep the family intact. The situation went from bad to worse. The children continued to go to school but had no permanent living address. Before school, they tidied themselves in public rest rooms and at school, ate breakfast and lunch. At night, the family roughed it.

After several months, the family’s situation somewhat improved. The father delivered pizza; his wife waited on tables. The family now lived in a modest apartment. Soon, the father found a position commensurate with his intellectual accomplishments and work experience. Through their adversity, the father had protected his wife and children and kept the family intact. Staying together through the bad times brought them closer together for the good times together.

### **Hero in High School**

Before my cousin Peter began his career as an architect, he taught at a boys’ technical high school located in the ghetto. His students learned from him the basics of trade, architecture and building construction, drawing, drafting, and reading blueprints, but more importantly, they learned self-discipline and self-respect. One thread linked the boys together: There was no sign

of fathers anywhere in their lives. He became such a role model to the boys that he was eventually appointed as principal of the school. He encouraged the boys, expecting them to fulfill their God-given talents. He taught them responsibility and held them accountable. In turn, they respected, and yes, loved him. My cousin became a hero to those boys because he loved them with a firm yet understanding heart, gave them direction for the future, and often served as *in loco parentis*. To this day, he is the much-loved patriarch of his family.

The worst Friday in the year for the boys was anticipating the upcoming Father's Day. Without their fathers, they were orphans. The boys' mothers were the bread winners; grandmothers raised the children. When a boy was absent from class, in most cases, he was caring for a sick grandmother. Mothers couldn't afford to get sick.

### **Present State of Fatherhood**

Life without fathers is now established as a major social concern. More than 27 million children or four out of ten, live apart from their fathers, and half of them do not see them. In most TV sitcoms, *if* a father is present, he is portrayed as a bumbling, aloof, and unnecessary member of the family.

The high cost of absentee fathers is reflected in school dropouts, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, nefarious behavior against teachers in public schools, and crime and violence in the streets. Father-absence contributes to social problems, emotional dereliction, male aggression, and low academic achievement.

Millions of children have fathers who are physically present but emotionally absent. These numbers have increased with premarital births and a continuing high divorce rate.

Divorce is no longer the main reason that children do not grow up with both of their parents. In recent years, divorce has declined, but single parenthood has increased.

As yet, we do not have firm numbers on those fathers who are addicted to drugs, alcohol, gambling, or pornography. Today there are more idle or unemployed men than at any time since the Great Depression. This is partly due to issues in the work place. If fatherlessness were classified as a disease, it would be an epidemic and a national emergency.

While super-Dads exceed our expectations, derelict fathers debase their exalted vocation. Discussions about women having it all and all at once are a fallacy. Most women cannot conceive children, give birth to them, and raise and support them without the presence of a loving father in the home. It must be said however that single mothers try doing it all the time.

### **The Superfluous Father**

Among the worst offenders of fatherhood come from mass media: it is called “shaming Dads.” Competent fathers, successful in their chosen professions, are made to feel superfluous and foolish because ‘Mom can do it better than Dad; Mom is the strong one in the family.’

Children need a strong father as well as a strong mother. In the evening, though both parents are tired from their day’s work, what a treat it is for children when their fathers read to them. Several wonderful things happen. Children develop their imaginations; they hear a male voice which is steady and less inflected than a woman’s. Above all, an intimate bond is established between child—or, children, if there is more than one—and father. The child feels safe, content, loved and cherished. In this face to face experience, the child’s self-esteem grows which he or she carries into adolescence and young adulthood.

## **Confusion about What Is Male**

Today, what is maleness? What is masculinity? Boys and young men without fathers in their lives tend to identify maleness with aggression, often violently acted out, instead of within an ordered environment.

Boys come into contact with a wide variety of models which they will imitate. There are the machismo models of street gangs, many of whose members have been abandoned by their fathers. Then there are the thirty-something adolescents who refuse to grow up and take responsibility in relationships. Here are some suggestions for boys to grow up as strong men:

1. Respect self. Respect mothers, girls and young women. William J. Bennett writes that “if a man knows how to treat his wife properly, he will know how to raise his children.
2. Learn to tell the truth no matter the cost.
3. Do a job that is well done. This means completing a job and not walking away expecting that another person will finish it.
4. Learn how to express feelings. It is perfectly alright to shed tears. Jesus told others how he felt. When he was invited to a dinner party and was not given the expected Jewish courtesies, he told Simon the host right to his face. He was honest with women. He wept over the death of Lazarus in the presence of his sisters, Martha and Mary. On the cross, he showed compassion to a thief.
5. Real men avoid bad language, despite its wide acceptance in the culture. Cursing, swearing, and other vulgarities coarsen the culture. And, in the name of First Amendment-rights, the rest of us in the public square must put up with verbal pollution.

Every child deserves to be raised by a mother and father (or surrogates) who put them first. The parents' unconditional love is tended to making the lives of their children meaningful. The best clinical statistics show that young adults each with a mom and dad do much better than in other arrangements. Men, women, and children form the indispensable nucleus of society, and since Vatican II, Catholic families have deserved the title, "the Domestic Church"

### **Sacred Scriptures**

In reality, the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) is about a mothering father. Mention of St. Joseph in the New Testament is limited to very few passages, one of which regards the loss of Jesus in the Temple. After chaos, confusion, and turmoil, after a frantic search for him all over, Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem to look for their son. "Three days, they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. . . . When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him: "Why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety" (Luke 3: 41ff). As *the* exemplar of fathers, St. Joseph holds a special place of honor in the Catholic Church as well as in other faith-traditions. In addition to his feasts on March 19<sup>th</sup> and May 1<sup>st</sup>, this illustrious descendent in the patriarchal line of David, this model of artisans, this protector of family life richly deserves to be honored with all fathers on their day. He shouldered the twofold responsibility: loving and protecting Mary, his beloved spouse, and guiding into adulthood the Son of the Most High, the Incarnate Word of God.

But let us never forget that Jesus took his legitimacy as well as the secondary characteristics of his gender from Joseph who taught him how to be human on earth. Even

God's Son had to be taught something that only an earthly father could teach. In his male identity, Jesus was truly the son of Joseph of Nazareth, artisan and father.