

PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL FATHERS *

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The general theme of our National Conference this year is "The Fathers of the Church and Us". The reason we chose this theme as the subject of our conference problematics is not only the sacredness of the Fathers of the Church as such, whose writings are, we would say, the classics of Christianity, but primarily the general *confusion* and *insecurity* created today on account of the daily questioning of all established *values*.

When traditionally established values are questioned, it is natural for one to be disoriented and for the future of the world to lie at risk. And when *orientation* in life is lost, it follows that *anxiety* will prevail in all facets of life. This crisis of modern time is surely supported and aggravated by the formation of contemporary *multicultural societies*, the continually expanding *internationalism* and a way of life that increasingly depends on contemporary technology, which fatally favours *extraversion*. Thus derives an unacceptable levelling not only of persons, but also of ideals, since one's noblest desires are forcibly levelled. It is the very person that sociologists then come, descriptively, to call "unidimensional".

In any case, such *confusion* and *insecurity*, mutually preserved in a really vicious cycle, are experienced by the particular individual, more or less consciously, as *spiritual division*.¹ Especially the young people, born and growing within this new Babylon, experience this problem in an entirely specific form, namely what we call the "identity crisis". But what is the meaning of this curious and often misunderstood term? It simply means that one can no longer know and recognise one's roots, or be "identified" with them, freely and consciously accepting one's psycho-spiritual particularity. Yet "roots" and "identity" are almost equivalent with the notion of "fatherhood". For this reason we could certainly say that contemporary civilisation is primarily characterised by a "crisis of fatherhood". As a rule, one who knows that one has a *father*, feels secure and has stable foundations in life. The sense of home and warmth is the first presupposition of peace. Only the person of nihilistic ideals and the chaotic soul of a Jean-Paul Sartre could posthumously thank his father, whom he never knew, with the pretext that "he never met him in life, even for a minute, to obstruct his way"!

The notion of "father", at least in the Judeochristian tradition, is almost identical with the notion of "authority". When the authority of the father ensures, and at the same time protects, the truth, then all holds valid as "authoritative" and genuine, in which case dispute and insecurity have no place. For this reason it is not by chance that the prayer, which Christ Himself taught us, begins with the words "Our Father in heaven", which is not simply a pietistic *invocation*, but at the same time, and primarily, a *confession* that our father is the highest authority, who is for this precise reason placed in heaven.

After the above, taking the notion of the father as a source and measure of truth, we should not be accused of "anti-feminism" or "sexism".

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It is obvious that a father is not understood without a mother. This is why the ancient Cretans could easily and comfortably call the "Fatherland" also "Motherland". What should therefore be strongly stressed here is the "parental" priority and authority in our life, regardless of whether we examine it in the form of the father or the mother, which form is adopted depending on whether we speak within the historico-social framework of "patriarchy" or of "matriarchy".

Consequently, we may examine the theme of fatherhood from the following two fundamental viewpoints:

(i) Fatherhood as causal relationship of existence, on the one hand, and as a factor of the formation of physisiognomy, on the other.

(ii) Physical and spiritual fatherhood, as antithetical as well as naturally complementary notions.

From these two perspectives, we are called to search in an elementary way the profound mystery of fatherhood, at whose inscrutable nature Christ apparently wanted to hint when he said, what at first sight appeared as hard and unintelligible: "And do not call any one father on earth, for one is your father, in heaven" (Matt. 23:9).

Precisely from this last remark we are directly led to a third relationship and viewpoint, from which we must see our theme. Thus we shall add a third section, (iii), that will examine "spiritual fatherhood and priesthood". In this way, our theme is not simply complemented, but rather wholly completed organically in its structural climax. Let us examine, therefore, in order all the relationships and correlations of the question already presented.

(i) Fatherhood as causal relationship of existence, on the one hand, and as a factor for the formation of physiognomy, on the other.

The father, in our elementary self-consciousness, is not only our *starting-point*, but at the same time the *boundary* and our *limit*. As father he not only symbolises and witnesses absolutely to our limited nature but also pre-judges, to a certain degree, our future development and perfection. Thus we could perhaps say that the father is the constant point in which, almost antipathically, a *centripetal* and a *centrifugal* power meet simultaneously.

As the causal relationship of our existence, the father both binds and defines us in an entirely decisive manner. Of course this happens not primarily from his own initiative, but from a pre-established order in nature, which the faithful cannot but accept as the gift of divine providence. In this way it is obvious that the father *a priori* sets us in our *physiological measures*, so that for reasonable people there may be no margin for boasting and insolence throughout life. On the contrary, looking continually at the fact that natural life started from the concrete and immediate data of another person - the father - people feel primarily a sense of *humility*. But this humility has no relationship at all with any feeling of inferiority or shame. One would say that it is a deep, almost nostalgic, attraction to the pristine clay of our existence, which secures, on the one hand, the indispensable stability and certainty, so that we may co-exist with the other creatures in one *natural solidarity*,

and, on the other hand, it dictates to us *modesty* and *mutual friendship*, so that we may not exceed, in conceit, our measures and become isolated in an "ivory tower". This very vital, and not at all theoretical, relationship with the original clay of our natural existence has been wonderfully preserved by the English term of Latin origin "humility", which, as we know, etymologically comes directly from "humus" (earth).

Thus, while the father as our natural starting-point could superficially be regarded as *limit* and *binding*, that supposedly limits the boundaries of our free activity and growth, in essence it proves to be the radical and virginal principle, and at the same time the *enrichment*, of our person, for which every reasonable and honest person should also feel - parallel to what was said above - a deep sense of *gratitude*. *Humility*, therefore, and *gratitude* are the two principal feelings that directly derive from our basic relationship with the father as the starting-point of our natural existence. It is precisely for this reason that both these feelings play an extremely decisive role in the undisturbed course of our formation as human persons. In any case, we will not have suspected the depth and the extent of these two fundamental feelings, of humility and of gratitude, unless we take into account all that we owe to the father, not only directly, but also indirectly.

In addition to the *direct* elements which we receive as children, initially let us say *without any cost or pain*, with the act of birth - which at some time may cost even the life of the mother - we must surely also add all the benefits which the family environment secures for us absolutely conscientiously and which involve various forms of self-sacrifice by our parents. Here we must include the entire spectrum of benefits: food, nurture, education, social protection and settlement, as well as the fatherly name, which escorts us throughout life with its own validity.

However, there are also the *indirect* elements secured for us by the causal dependence of our existence on the father; these are the traits which, on the basis of the known genetic laws of Mendel, we inherit from the personalities of other ancestors through our parents. This many-sided communication with an undefined and long multitude of ancestors, whom we have never known, in our relationship with the father constitutes the source of a very deep *antinomy*: On the one hand, it is surely a *bond of identity*, since it is only through the father that we acquire all biological and inherent psycho-spiritual elements of our personality. Yet on the other hand, it is also a *factor of otherness*, namely of differentiation from the father, precisely because the bequeathed traits of other ancestors - which exceed the concrete active data of the father's personality - are the ones which in the first place differentiate him from his child. Thus it would not at all be an exaggeration to say that our relationship with the father and the parent in general is not only a binding factor of determination but also a factor of altogether indefinite enrichment and liberation. Now, if to this genetically given *relationship* and, at the same time, *inequality* is also added later the formation of the moral personality of the child, sometimes defined through the freedom of conscience, then we have intimated the dramatic tension that is created between *heredity* and *freedom*.

Of course only the fact that the father *chronologically* and *biologically* precedes the child, gives the former the possibility of influencing the latter, not only *genetically* as the natural cause, but also *morally* as the authority, at least during the years when the conscience is decisively being formed, the so-called "formative years". But in the final analysis, the chromosomes and general presuppositions of our existence have been given by the parent, whereas the *conscientious* use of these presuppositions is our own responsibility.

In any case, this *antinomical moral duality*, with which the already mature person is at some moment faced - which, for lack of caution, may surely lead to a degree of division of personality, if not also of schizophrenia - is balanced rather with success if one considers the following significant distinction.

While, on the one hand, the direct and active *will*, which we express in any of our concrete moral decisions, certainly constitutes our *personal* voice, and therefore our primary responsibility, on the other hand, the kind of somewhat undefined anxiety and doubt, which we have at the same time deeply in our conscience, betrays that within us are included an entire world of forgotten ancestors, who also seek to be justified. And since elementary justice demands that the opinion of the many prevail over the one, the moral command has been so concisely formulated, that one ought to be "master of one's will and servant of one's conscience".²

All the above, which we have tried to expound, admittedly somewhat schematically in reference to the *causal*, on the one hand, and the *moral*, on the other, relationship between father and child, constitute sufficient reasons to render conscious the need to know the father as closely as possible; which leads, as is natural, directly to a deeper and fuller knowledge of ourselves.

(ii) Physical and spiritual fatherhood, as antithetical but also mutually complementary notions

The saying ascribed to Alexander the Great, namely that one owes "life to one's parents, but good life to one's teachers", seems to set - though somewhat simplistically at first sight - the line of demarcation between physical and spiritual fatherhood. First of all, we must recall that already in ancient times, and especially in the East, the relationship between teacher and student was considered almost the same as that between father and child, which is also affirmed by the above comparison of Alexander the Great. Furthermore we must say that these words of the Macedonian Commander appear at first sight truly simplistic, for upon careful observation things are not always so simple or clearly distinct. From experience we know that it is almost impossible to find a father who bequeathed to his child only the good of physical existence, without at the same time teaching with word - and even perhaps more so and more frequently with his silent example throughout life - some fundamental values and truths of life. It seems equally impossible that there was a teacher worthy of the name, who would not have cared at some time for his student, with the interest and affection

of the physical father. Yet the distinction between physical and spiritual fatherhood is also conceptually legitimate, and historically founded. Even in the case where the physical father would by profession be the greatest spiritual man, he would never be able to play the role of a stranger, equal or sometimes inferior, for his physical children. So, reasonably, a first fundamental question is raised: to what is this curious phenomenon due, that undoubtedly constitutes a blatant injustice? One is led to believe that no matter how far we analyse this phenomenon psychologically, only two explanations are probable.

First explanation: that the absolute "familiarisation" created by the family environment with the many daily simple needs or even insignificances - not to mention frictions, bitterness and disappointments - inevitably demythologise the *ideal* character and dissolve the *magic* with which the notion of teacher and spiritual father is expressed also by the proverbial and somewhat humourous remark, that "Even Napoleon the Great was not Great for his valet"! And we say that this truth is *unfortunately* great, because properly and rightly the family daily needs, in which the person is inevitably involved, should render still more wonderful and sacred the grandeur of the spiritual person, who is willingly humbled out of love and a sense of duty. Yet such assessment and appreciation of data can only be made by particularly sensitive natures and is not unfortunately acceptable to the average person.

The second explanation must be regarded as much more persuasive. It concerns the significance of the factor of *free choice*. It constitutes an even greater honour for one's dignity to select freely a stranger as one's teacher and spiritual guide, than to accept slavishly the imposed physical father from the blind need of biological dependence "at home", without even being asked. Now the *choice*, we must say, does not at all lose anything of its value as an act of freedom, unless it should happen to be done, not only by the person interested, but also by the parents or trustees. We are talking about the famous "Elective Affinities" (*Wahlverwandtschaften*) of Goethe's novel, so named.

Whatever other reasons one might imagine, when analysing the phenomenon which we have tried to explain, the undisputed fact remains that physical and spiritual fatherhood do not coincide. Perhaps we must now say that not only do they not coincide, but are also clearly distinguished as antithetical notions, without meaning by this that they are not mutually complementary. An elementary comparison of parallel elements and characteristics in both cases will better clarify the distinction in question. Let us see some of the elements that come to mind in relation to this comparison:

(a) The factor of *breadth*: While the physical father is in reality limited to have only a small number of children, the spiritual father is free to have an infinite number of spiritual children.

(b) The factor of *distance*: While the physical father is obliged to participate with his whole psychosomatic being - and therefore in the most direct and intimate way - in the birth of his physical children, the spiritual father gives birth by word alone, or also by silence, even from unlimited distances.

(c) The factor of *destruction* and *death*: For the physical father it

is inevitable, with the passage of time, that the possibilities of giving birth to new children are reduced, until death finally sets an end to fertility. For the spiritual father, on the contrary, these limitations and biological fetters of nature do not exist. While alive, he gives birth unsparingly, and when dead he continues to give birth undisturbed by the depths of the ages and to the end of the world, with his memory or legend, but especially with his consecrated writings.

(d) The factor of *multiplication*: The essence of physical fatherhood, namely its benefits, when divided among more children are continually being reduced and are finally altogether exhausted. In spiritual fatherhood, precisely the opposite happens. The more the number of spiritual children participating in the spiritual goods, the more these goods are multiplied in the number of the division.

(e) The factor of *bonding*: While the authority of the physical father is mainly based on the physical or legal obligation that the children have to respect the father, the authority of the spiritual father is based on free *persuasion* and inspiring respect, and for this reason it is entirely of a *moral* nature. Proof of this is also the freedom, which the spiritual child permanently preserves, to desert the spiritual father as soon as the latter ceases to inspire confidence and respect.

(f) The factor of *concord* and *solidarity*: The understanding prevails widely that the *bonds of blood* are stronger than all other bonds among people, and that, consequently, relatives by blood are more steadily and more deeply united than any other. Yet it must be remarked that it is the spiritual bonds that mainly endure longer in time and in trials. For the supports of *biology* are by definition of a different quality from those of *conscience*. In any case, the very word "concord", which is something deeper than "agreement", shows that the spirits and the consciences must sound together, in order that this rare good may prevail among people.

By analysing and comparing the two forms of fatherhood, we may possibly discover other interesting and characteristic differences. Yet, even the cases expounded above are sufficient to persuade us of at least two basic points. First, that spiritual fatherhood is certainly of nobler character; it is for this reason that, although it is related so much - especially morphologically - with physical fatherhood, yet it is neither identical nor equal to it. Second, that this difference in character in no way gives us the right to underrate physical fatherhood. On the contrary, after the above analysis, it becomes clearer how substantially complimentary they are to each other. Physical fatherhood offers the "primary source", but also the first basis on which to build spiritual fatherhood. And again, spiritual fatherhood adorns and consecrates the products of physical fatherhood. If spiritual fatherhood is entirely powerless and inconceivable without physical fatherhood, to that extent the latter without the former also remains incomplete and unfinished as human formation.

For this reason we ought, with the same attention and devotion, to honour both forms of fatherhood which finally aim at a common purpose: to *render eternal* on the one hand, and to *render perfect* on the other, the human person as the highest value in the created world.

(iii) Spiritual Fatherhood and Priesthood

We have said, by way of introduction, above that perhaps Christ forbade us to call anyone on earth father in order to hint at the inscrutable depth of the mystery of fatherhood. And He hastened at the same time to give us also the direct reason for this prohibition, namely the *uniqueness of fatherhood*, which strictly speaking must be reserved for the creator God.

Such evaluation of fatherhood, which transcends the created limits of being within the world and literally refers only to the transcendent God, is certainly not a mysticist or merely pietistic explanation. On the contrary, it is a teaching that is perfectly consistent with the most fundamental biblical doctrine - the creation *ex nihilo* of the world - which could not but find even a remote reflection in the human conscience, thus leaving its vivid traces in the primitive structures of the early, and later on of the so-called patriarchal, family.

For this reason, in the earliest family it was entirely natural for the functions of *teacher* and *priest* to coincide in the person of the leader of the family, the father. This historical fact clearly proves that spiritual fatherhood does not always consummate only in the conventional or "established" priesthood, but rather and mainly in a more charismatic *prophetic presence* within the world, which as a rule ought of course to be incarnate in a more persuasive way in the "instituted" priesthood of the time. Now if it does not always attain it, it is at least consoling that it also does not monopolise it.

On the theme of spiritual fatherhood, St Paul seems to be more categorical. He strictly relates it only to the primitive and authentic *evangelisation*, which he assumes in the name of the Lord who sends him out. The authenticity of this evangelism results from the characteristic sufferings for the sake of the Gospel, as St Paul expounds them in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (4:9-13). And it is not accidental that only after this dramatic description does the Apostle Paul, in the direct sequence of his Epistle, dare to appeal to this unique relationship with the Corinthians, saying: "I am not ashamed to write these things to you, but I admonish you as my beloved children. For even if you have countless guides in Christ, yet you have not many fathers; for I have given birth to you in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:14-16).

With this special dimension in the meaning of spiritual fatherhood, as St Paul defines it, it becomes clear that in Christianity the term "spiritual father" cannot be ascribed to any teacher or guide, but has a strictly "Christocentric" character. In other words, it is not enough to teach generally and abstractly "in Christ" or "according to Christ", but one must also be "in the place of Christ".

It was very natural that spiritual fatherhood be restricted from the beginning to the person of the incarnate Logos of God, since He alone is literally "the reflection of the Father's glory" (Heb. 1:3) or, as St Paul says, "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15).

In any case, this exclusiveness of fatherhood served always as the centre of self-conscience for Christ, that made him expect from the faithful a radical disassociation from any other form of fatherhood: "if any

one comes to me and does not hate his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers and sisters, and even his own life, such cannot be my own disciple" (Luke 14:26).

And one of course may justifiably ask: is it necessary that the Christian hate his parents and relatives, or even his own life, in order to follow Christ? Is there no other way, more peaceful and more loving, especially in Christianity, which is regarded as the religion of love par-excellence? How is such a claim reconciled with what St Paul writes in his First Epistle to Timothy (5:8): "Now if one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever". Not only this, but St Paul goes even further, stating that if he was to help his brothers and relatives in the flesh, he would be ready even to become "anathema" for their sake (cf. Rom. 9:3).

After all this, we must say that Christ demands a radical break with our family environment not generally and vaguely, but only when this environment comes into opposition with the Gospel, namely when we have to choose between Christ and our relatives and friends. The Lord says this clearly: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37).

In any case, all this "Christian character" taken in Christianity by the notion of the spiritual father, does not remain loose and vague, but soon becomes localised and restricted in the institutional Priesthood of the Church, and particularly in the Bishop, who is found "in the place and type of Christ".³

In other words, it was considered to be self-evident that the "father" should only be the one who is sent from above, the Apostle and his successor Bishop, who with God's word gives birth to new members within the Church. And by extension, this fatherhood was recognised also in every other priest and/or monk, since they, too, contribute to the same sacred task.

NOTES

- 1 The general climate of confusion and insecurity, of which we speak, has been very characteristically described by Professor G. Mantzaridis, as follows: "The formation of many specialised areas, with independent and sometimes self-conflicting orientations, favours the formation of moral pluralism or even of moral confusion, as that which we live in our times. If one has no point of support beyond society, it is natural to be carried away by this confusion and remain without purpose. Thus, apart from the inner division between will and action, one also faces the external severing of social life". Cf. *Christian Ethics* 3rd edn (Thessalonika (in Greek) 1991) p. 26.
- 2 This moral aphorism belongs to the famous Austrian poet Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach. Cf. Dimitra Markata, "Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach: Die Aphorismen" (Dissertation submitted to the University of Vienna, 1989, p. 117).
- 3 Archbishop Stylianos of Australia, "The Bishop in the Church", in *Voice of Orthodoxy*, May and June 1984.