

Recovery of Ethics by Fatherhood and Motherhood:

BY

The V. Rev. Michel Najim

In contemporary America all the core institutions that once transmitted moral education are in despair. The family has fractured; neighborhoods have disappeared, many schools can barely educate, and even many churches wonder what to teach. America can't have strong virtues without strong spiritual institutions. Thus many Americans are unprepared to recognize any moral authority outside themselves.

We know that because we see many virtuous people who practice virtues as they should, to acquire strength and power against their own sinful and wicked tendencies -- in order, of course, to gain, through these practices, courage to withstand the temptations and seductions of our main enemy: The devil and his advocates i.e., the world and the passions.

Fatherhood/Motherhood is the most effective element for recovery of Ethics. A child born to bad parents or a citizen of a corrupt society had little chance of becoming a virtuous adult. Learning the virtue can be accomplished by following good behavior. Hearing stories of virtuous people and imitating virtuous models: parents, friends, saints and above all Jesus Christ himself. Ethics of virtue cannot be learned alone theoretically. No textbook as such can transform the person into an ethical person. Good character comes from living in communities-family, neighborhood, religious and civic institutions - where virtue is encouraged.

PERSON AND INDIVIDUAL

In everyday language, when we use the term "person" we designate rather more the individual. However, "person" and "individual" are opposite in meaning.' The individual is the denial or neglect of the distinctiveness of the person. Personal distinctiveness is revealed and known only within the framework of direct personal relationship and communion, or of the loving and creative force which distinguishes the person.

What principally concerns us here is that the revelation of God throws light on the fact of human personal distinctiveness and freedom, with all the tragic consequences of that freedom. Many believes that

Morality reveals what human being is in creation, then his adventure of his freedom, as well his redemption. The secular notion of personhood, however, is incomplete, because it does not convey the deep meaning of the distinctiveness of God to his creatures as being children of God. Therefore, I see the issue of recovery of Fatherhood and sonship is essential to understand the relational dimension of Christian Ethics.

RECOVERY OF ETHICS AS THE RESULT OF THE FATHER (MOTHER)-CHILD RELATIONSHIP:

- I. The Unique Nature of the Master-Disciple Relationship in the New Testament
 - A. In the relationship between Christ and His disciples there is always a personal quality -- the person of Jesus Christ is always the exclusive center of the relationship because He is the embodiment of the Teaching itself.
 - B. The disciples were considered not as servants but as beloved friends and children: "...because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father" (John 15:15).
 - C. Discipleship in the Gospels implies a personal attachment between the Son of God and His Apostles, which totally shapes their inner life. There is nothing in the life of the disciple which falls outside this relationship. He was never just a teacher. He is the living Lord of His people and the sole source of Divine wisdom. [*Thus, Christ receives all people as His disciples if they abide in His Word. Just as the sign of a true disciple depends upon his fidelity to his teacher, so the sign par excellence of Christ's disciples is their abiding in His Word (John 8:31).*]
 - D. Consider the significant difference which exists between the Rabbinical teachers and Christ. On the one hand it may be seen in His Person, in His Sonship to the Father, and on the other in His own unique role as father to His disciples. For Christ, the Law and the Scriptures can never be the sole criteria for entering into contact with God. Rather, they confirm His own relationship with the Father.
 - E. By virtue of the unity of His will with that of the Father, Christ is endowed with a teaching which comes from another world: "I preach what the Father has taught Me" (John 8:28).
 - F. The opposition to Christ as Teacher arose from the fact that He did

not receive authority from any teaching body (or, shall we say, *any accrediting body*). According to the prevailing system of teaching in that day in Judaism, a student in the rabbinic tradition was to submit himself completely to his master's authority -- and that in an absolute and servile manner. The rabbinic teachers were making their office the seal of authority. This was, of course, not in the character of the Old Testament teaching tradition. But, by their system all teaching had to take place within the context of an individual pupil's relationship to a teacher and never by an individual's own study. Only one who had studied and served under a recognized Jewish scholar for an extensive period could then himself become a scholar with authority to teach his own tradition. It was the way in which particular teachers developed and defined their doctrines that gave rise to the appearance of schools and circles of teaching grouped around particular Masters.

- G. Although Christ was addressed as "Rabbi" by His disciples (Mark 9:5, 11:21) and by others (John 3:2), He had not passed through a rabbinical school, and therefore was "transgressing" the recognized limits of the prevailing function of a rabbi. But, it is this very difference that gives the disciple-Master relationship a new and unique dimension.
- H. When Christ went up to Jerusalem for the feast, and taught in the temple, the Jews were surprised and puzzled. But Jesus gave an answer based upon His true authority and His work (John 7:15-19).
- I. Jesus did not establish a school like the other schools, but rather revealed that His wisdom was from God. Both Greek pupils and the rabbinic learners bound themselves to their master, seeking to become masters themselves in the future. **But the call of Jesus to His disciples differed in that there was no implication that His disciples would become masters in the same fashion as the rabbinic masters** (Matt. 23:8).
- J. To be a disciple of Christ means to be drawn to Him as Lord and thus, to do the will of God (Matt. 12:46-50). Contrary to the legalistic approach of the rabbis in distinguishing between the worthy and the unworthy, Christ summoned all types of people to discipleship. The duty of a disciple does not lie in transmitting a particular teaching about Jesus, but rather in the fulfillment of his duty to his Lord -- and in dwelling in the Word and the Spirit.
- K. In the New Testament, "learning" refers directly to the will of God. Jesus Himself is the central point of reference as the One in whom the will of God is revealed to mankind. "Learning" is no longer an intellectual

process of acquiring knowledge about Christ, but involves total acceptance of Christ Himself. Only then is the old existence left behind and a new life of discipleship in Christ begun.

II. Discipleship as the Result of the Father (mother)-child Interaction

A. When Jesus says "I say" to you, it is clear that He is identifying Himself directly as the Son of His Father. Being a "Son," His teaching is different from that of the scribes and all other teachers. As "the Son" He is the Absolute Teacher.

B. Just as the eternal Wisdom of the Father is given to the Son in the unique Father-Son relationship of the Godhead, so it is passed on from the Son to His disciples. The relationship of God the Father to His Son seeks to manifest itself in the distribution of the Divine Wisdom to humankind. It is the gift of the Father which the Son distributes. This is illustrated when, after Peter's confession of faith, Christ said to him: "It was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:17).

C. The sole source of everything which comes from Christ is the fellowship with the Father, from whom He draws His authority as a teacher -- a relationship involving a mutual dynamic of knowledge. Thus, the Son, in His teaching and ministry, fulfills on the Cross the truth of Fatherhood -- the dominant character of His teaching. On the Cross Jesus aims to unite all mankind with the Father.

D. The use of the word "Father" places the disciple in a position of response and issues a demand for service and love. This is a relationship in which the truth of Fatherhood or Motherhood is established. The central theme of Christ's teaching on Fatherhood or Motherhood is the Kingdom of God. And in the true reality of Fatherhood/Motherhood is found our entry into the mystery of God. In contrast, the pretense of the Jews, that they serve one Father, was set forth to refute the charge that they are illegitimate. Christ accuses the Jews of having the devil as their father, because they are unable to become true disciples of God the Father (John 8:43-44).

E. The child learns all that is decisive from his father or mother, following and imitating him. Thus, the knowledge of God the Father is the fruit and consummation of the whole process of redemption. The Truth of Fatherhood/Motherhood is the revelation of the Son -- and only through Him is it a truth for the disciples.

- F. There is no reference in the Bible to a general sonship of humanity to God by nature as a state of being. There is, however, no radical rejection of the idea of universal fatherhood/motherhood. The stress is rather on the personal Father of Christ, who always speaks of "My Father."
- G. The whole event of salvation is anchored in the most intimate union between Father/Mother and Child. Mutual knowledge is an unconditioned characteristic of the union between Father/Motherhood and Child. This is also the presupposition behind the commission and sending of the Son into the world.
- H. The conflict of the Jews with Jesus concerning the truth of the Father arose because He claims God as His own Father (John 5:18). The conflict resulted from His knowledge of the Father -- and His self-identity in the Father, which the Jews could not understand.
- I. The Jews sought to identify Christ as a mere man by placing Him in the house of His earthly father (John 6:29) -- in order to invalidate the distinctiveness of the mission.
- J. We have seen how the relationship between the Father and the Son in its sharing of divine knowledge is transmitted into the world in the person of Christ. Thus, He Himself can be called "Father," who beyond His participation in the creation of the world and of man accomplished, through His incarnation and His redemptive work, the re-creation and spiritual rebirth of man.
- III. The Pedagogy of Apostolic Teaching: Based on Fatherhood or Motherhood.
- A. The foundation of the significance which the Church gave to the personality and work of the spiritual father may be traced within the epistles of St. Paul. In Romans 4:1-8, the Apostle begins by speaking of the Jewish view that Abraham is the father of the race -- by way of illustrating that the decisive role of Abraham is not found in blood-relationship but rather in being the spiritual ancestor of all nations. Thus, Abraham is not only a model or prototype, but also a spiritual father from whom all are descended. Furthermore, the fatherhood of Abraham is derived from his faith in God as the Father of us all.
- B. In his instruction and teaching to neophytes, St. Paul often makes

use of the metaphor of fatherhood. Indeed, he refers expressly to birth:

"I am saying all this not just to make you ashamed, but to bring you, as my dearest children, to your senses. You might have thousands of guardians in Christ, but not more than one father, and it was I who begot you in Christ Jesus by preaching the Good News" (1 Cor. 4:14-17).

C. In his epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul speaks of the conversion process, whereby birth through Christ gives knowledge of God as contrasted to the ignorance and slavery of paganism. He reminds them that "once you were ignorant of God, and enslaved to gods who are not really gods at all" (Gal. 4:8).

D. For the Christians in Galatia, the knowledge of God comes through the transformation given in true discipleship to their father-teacher, St. Paul (Gal. 4:19).

E. This birth involves not only the relationship between St. Paul and the congregations of Galatia and Corinth, but is accomplished and completed by the economy of Jesus Christ, through the Good News -- the Gospel. St. Paul is not flattering himself with the word "father," but is seeking to describe the relationship between the teacher who brought them to God and those to whom he thus gave birth. The Apostle is revered as a "father" by the Christians because it is through him that they have received the faith.

F. In his teaching to the Thessalonians, St. Paul describes the transmission of the Gospel in filial terms:

"Like a mother feeding and looking after her own children....as a father treats his children, teaching you what was right" (1 Thess. 2:8-12).

G. Similarly, the cry "Abba" which is found in Galatians 4:8 refers to the working of the spirit of sonship as contrasted with the cry of a servant to his master.

H. St. Peter, in his epistles, stresses the leading role of the Spirit in the making of a true sonship. This grace is the gift of the Father/Mother acting through the Holy Spirit. Salvation lies in sonship by grace through the Spirit.

"Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in great mercy has given us a new birth as his sons" (1 Peter 1:3).

I. Fatherhood/Motherhood calls for a human response to the Divine calling, leading through the word of the Gospel to our rebirth.

IV. The Patristic Methodology of Master-Pupil Instruction

A. The Church has designated certain of the Fathers or Mothers as Teachers. And in the very use of the term "Father or Mother," she joined two functions:

1. The function of the shepherd, who regenerates and gives birth to the faithful.

2. The function of the Teacher, who possesses a special gift in articulating the faith.

B. As a "Teacher," a father/mother has a special responsibility in teaching and interpreting the righteousness of God, and in confronting the great issues and crises of the Church. The Church recognizes the difference which exists between the innumerable fathers mothers and the few who are strong and vivid Teachers.

C. In the early eras of the Church this methodology of instruction was prevalent and held great honor. An example may be found in the dialogue of judgment between the proconsul of Asia Minor and the deacon Papilas. When asked by the proconsul if he had children, Papilas answered that he had many. Because some pagans who were present interpreted his answer as a reference to children according to Christian faith and not to real ones, the proconsul blamed him and accused him of being a liar. Papilas replied proudly that if the proconsul wished, he could at that very time discover that in every district and city, "I have children according to Christ" (Martyrium of Carpos 32).

D. The Patristic methodology of instruction centers on the father/mother-child relationship. This basic relationship is described by St. Irenaeus:

"For when any person has been taught from the mouth of another, he is termed the son of him who instructs him, and the latter is his Father" (Adver. Her. XLI, 2).

Clement of Alexandria speaks similarly of this relationship:

"And everyone who is instructed, is in respect of subjection the son of his instructor" (Stromata, Book I, 1).

- E. The term "father" was thus given to the ordained ministers of the Church in reference to their function as instructors in the faith. In the fourth century, the title, "father/mother," also began to be used to designate a monastic instructor. It was in this usage that the significance and authority of the desert Fathers spread into the Church as a whole. During the Triodological debate, the term "father/mother," became the title of those great individuals who formulated in their writings the principles of the Faith, and taught the people the doctrine. This is what St. Basil meant when he spoke of the need to preserve the teaching as formulated by the Fathers and in the Tradition (Epistle 140, 2).
- F. The Fathers/Mothers are thus those persons in whom the witness is encountered and in whom the authentic method of discipleship to Christ is found. The true content of the Christian Faith is not an intellectual doctrine, but rather a living body of truth which is transmitted and re-enacted from generation to generation, from Father/Mother to child, as a divine inheritance given directly from God. Every pupil receives instruction in the tradition from God Himself. The Pupil accepts the teaching of his Father/Mother as it comes from God and as the means by which the power of Divine Grace is transferred. The method of transmission always remains the Word of God.
- G. Spiritual birth, like natural birth, has three stages: conception, pregnancy, and birth itself. Every spiritual aspirant, according to St. Simeon the New Theologian, conceives Christ as an embryo, through heaving and keeping the words of his Father. Birth itself entails the pangs of childbirth -- just as the pupil must suffer, the teacher also goes through birth pangs because of the ignorance and illiteracy of his students. Spiritual freedom is acquired only through this process.
- H. The true teacher does not condemn his students to a lifelong period of childhood, but helps them to grow up and mature into adulthood. Fatherhood/Motherhood does not carry any contradiction to the value of fraternity, brotherhood and equality. St. John Chrysostom, in his treatise, "On the Priesthood," makes a distinction between bodily Fathers and Mothers and spiritual Fathers and Mothers. The bodily Father/Mother is the person who gives his sons physical life, while the spiritual Father/Mother gives his sons birth to eternal life. The bodily Father/Mother cannot deliver our bodies from sickness or death, whereas the spiritual Father/Mother knows how to diagnose and cure the body

from all disease and from death.

I. As a natural father/Mother brings up and educates his son over the period of a whole lifetime so, in a higher degree, the spiritual Father/Mother nurtures with the knowledge of God a son who is not born of human flesh. A teacher can be called "Father/Mother" only in the sense that he is in the image of the Father above.

J. St. John Chrysostom, in his commentary on St. Matthew (who quotes the words of the Lord against the calling of others "fathers" and "teachers" on earth, Matthew 23:8-12), stresses the idea:

"And again call not "father" -- not that they should not call, but that they may know whom they ought to call father/mother, in the highest sense. For like as the master is not a master principally, so neither is the Father. For he is cause of all, both of the masters and of the Fathers." (Homily LXXII, 3).

K. Thus, all the Fathers of the Church emphasize that the Father/Mother is one and the teacher is one who is in heaven, but that the image of Fatherhood/Motherhood can be acquired and exercised on earth through Divine Synergy, and through the Father of our spirits (Hebrews 12:9).

The Application of the Notion of Fatherhood or Motherhood to Ethics.

L. In order to give Ethics its proper Christian identity and authentic meaning, and to avoid the perplexity and impasse of pure academism, we must give witness to the evangelical and patristic basis of the Father(or Mother)-disciple relationship.

M. Sin is in itself the rejection of the Divine adoption given to humanity. Sin, through this rejection, leads to an absolute individualism, while the grace of Divine cooperation creates an open and collective communion. Fatherhood or Motherhood involve in themselves a sacrifice, since the father or the mother gives his/her very life to the child -- and die to themselves.

N. We must therefore seek the following goals in Ethics:

1. We must overcome the limited and limiting notion that our educational process involves simply a person-to-person level of instruction. We must seek to discover the true Father(or mother)-child dimension of education.

2. We must recognize that this Father(mother)-Son relationship not only gives personal freedom but also presents the Son with an opportunity for a living encounter with God.
3. We must work to enable our way of teaching morality to generate and enrich a stagnant and sterile world with the fertility of the Divine Love. This sacred task centers on the creation of a new level of relationship between persons.
4. We must establish master-disciple relationships based on the Father/Mother-Child relationship which do not reduce religion to mere instructions, to ordinances and laws, nor to a mechanical and stereotyped relationship, as if God is simply an all-powerful observer demanding execution of His commandments.