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Fathers: Making known God's faithfulness to their children (Is 38:19)

The surprise winner of this year's Best Picture Oscar was veteran South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's social satire *Parasite*, the first foreign language film to win the award. Set in the capital Seoul, it chronicles the comedic and underhand attempts of the Kim family to find work in the home of the wealthy Park family, who live in a cavernous mansion high above the city. The contrast drawn between the two families lies at the core of the ensuing drama: the poor but united Kims, and the economically rich Parks - the epitome of privileged detachment. The role of the fathers is particularly crucial to this dynamic. World-weary, unemployed Kim Ki-taek, patriarch and 'man without a plan' may not seem like a model father, but he nonetheless clearly loves and is loved by his wife and children, as is made clear in the scene where the family finds work folding pizza boxes in their cramped basement apartment, teasing and joking together. Park Dong-ik, by contrast, struggles to be at home due to working long hours as a successful software entrepreneur, and therefore remains detached from his teenage daughter and hyperactive young son, in a house whose vastness speaks of the family's emotional distance.

The film clearly stuck a chord with a worldwide audience. Among its many themes, the film echoes the fears of those who fret that the societal pressures on family life and the debilitating effect of emotional distance between parents (especially fathers) and children are having an effect on human growth in the young. Spiritual writer Richard Rohr traces the roots of such disconnect to the industrial revolution, where the patient passing on of skills from father to sons was replaced by migrations and work patterns which removed fathers from such immediate and influential relationships with their children. Exacerbated in the intervening centuries, he perceives a great father hunger in many men, with a consequent search for approval and acceptance, in many cultures including our own in North America and Western Europe¹.

This is a problem for a religion where God is called Father, and where all prayer is an outworking of a basic cry of the heart to one we call Dad. As is well known, when Jesus spoke of God, he used the

unconventional and original Aramaic word *Abba*. One feature of the originality of naming God in this way lies in naming God at all. Jews refused to speak the name of God, replacing the Tetragrammaton YHWH with the euphemism Adonai, an injunction extended to Catholics by Pope Benedict XVI in 2008. To know a person's name is to know their core, and to gain power over them, which none can presume with the almighty God of Israel. To name this God 'Dad' is truly daring, yet it represents, "The cry used by Jesus in the moment of his supreme earthly confidence in God."² Following the Lord's example, St Paul sums up all prayer as that of adopted children who cry out in the Spirit from the heart in the same words as Jesus (Gal 4: 6), placing our trust in the Father who will give us much more than any earthly father (Lk 11: 9-13). The child-father relationship, so humanly significant as to be irreplaceable, is to be the blueprint of the Christian's loving and personal relationship with God.

If the image of a father is being weakened in Western societies, then catechetics as an affective process, in which the young are initiated into the life of God the Father in the domestic church will inevitably be weakened too. Indeed, contemporary empirical evidence points in this direction, indicating that belief in the God just described - the God of the scriptures - is in decline, even among self-declared religious people. A 2018 Pew Survey discovered that 68% of self-declared US Catholics 'Believe in God as described in the Bible', as opposed to 'Believe in other higher power or spiritual force' (which was affirmed by 28% of self-declared Catholics)³. The figures roughly correlate to findings of a separate 2019 Pew survey, which showed that 64% of self-declared US Catholics are 'absolutely certain' that God exists, and 27% are 'fairly certain'⁴. Where respondents are 'absolutely certain' that God exists, they are almost three times as likely to consider religion important in their life, and more than twice as likely to attend religious services and to pray at least daily, than those who are 'fairly certain'⁵.

There appears to be an urgent need to rediscover the God who is revealed as Father in the scriptures - a personal God rather than an impersonal force – in order to open the way for many Catholics to embrace a relationship with the Lord, nourishing that relationship through prayer and liturgy.

Clearly our relationships with our own fathers will have a significant bearing on the image of God which we develop, the relationship we have with God, and the way we pray. In my own case, this insight came to the fore forcefully during the month-long Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius which I undertook in Wales in 2015. During the First Week of the Exercises, and quite unexpectedly, I came to realise that two exceptionally strong memories of my own father had crystallised as my image of God. The first was of us attending a soccer match when I was around 9 or 10 years old. There was a terrifying crush outside the turnstiles giving entry to the stadium, and my Dad pushed his hands against the bricks of the stadium walls, levering a space for me with his body, and saving me from the press of the crowd. The second was a memory of our pet dog Terry, who was always very nervous and wary due to having been mistreated as a puppy, when he was a farm dog. The only time Terry relaxed was on the regular occasions when he would climb on my Dad's knee and lie on his back across my Dad's lap with paws in the air, vulnerably opening his stomach to be petted. These images, of God as stronghold and as tender and trustworthy parent, had clearly lodged subconsciously in my psyche and had come to powerfully symbolise my image of God the Father. These uncovered memories also proved a source of comfort and healing when my Dad died of cancer in September 2016.

Other pieces of evidence indicate that I am not alone. A recent major study indicates that the role of father, as well as providing a deep psychological modelling of God's fatherhood, also has a direct impact on the growth of children's religiously in believing families. In a major Longitudinal Survey of Generations, Vern Bengtson and colleagues studied 3,500 respondents from 357 three- and four-generation families in California. They found that the impact of paternal religiosity upon their children was significantly more important than maternal religiosity, although this was a little less

marked in Catholics than in Evangelicals and Mainline Protestants. In addition, the research findings indicated that the quality of emotional closeness between fathers and children was the crucial factor beyond paternal example or encouragement alone⁶ The importance of paternal influence for their Catholic children's faith formation has also been underlined in studies by Lori Baker-Sperry⁷ in the US, and Stephen Bullivant⁸ in the UK.

Despite the empirical evidence, and the central importance of the biblical image of God as Father, some difficulty attaches to promoting the role of father in the life of the Church and in catechetical thinking. Society is rightly sensitive to the patriarchal structures and attitudes of the past, and the limitations they placed on the autonomy and development of women. A result can be that people are shy to explore what is unique and valuable in masculinity and fatherhood. What is more, teachers, priests and catechists in the school and parish setting will be well aware that many children will not be living with both parents, and in that situation they will be more likely to live with their mother than their father. Laudable sensitivity to children's circumstances can lead to a feminisation of language which can become normative, e.g. when a school principal or class teacher routinely says to the class 'take this home to your Mum', or 'your Mum can help you with your homework'. I have become increasingly aware of this in the various schools in which I have ministered. Over time such sensitivity is likely to lead to an erosion and marginalisation of the figure of the father in the public sphere and in the minds of the pupils.

Given all that has been said above, it would appear critical to articulate a vision of fatherhood, to encourage fathers in their role, and to promote the scriptural image of a personal, loving God whom Jesus called Father. The time may be ripe for this. Western societies are becoming more understanding of the need to carve out male-only spaces (male-only charity races, men's mental health charities and support groups etc), which are no longer as likely to be viewed as exclusionary or patriarchal. In religious terms, Pope Francis has given a lead, with his focus on St Joseph as a role model of fatherhood for the Church: choosing the saint's emblem for his coat of arms, dedicating the

sermon at his inauguration Mass to him, and inserting St Joseph's name into every Eucharistic prayer. Beyond this instance of *lex orandi, lex credendi*, how else might such a vision be achieved?

A first simple step might be a question of language: all those concerned with formation can intentionally promote fatherhood in word and action. It may seem insensitive to children who don't live with both parents to speak routinely of Mum and Dad in the school classroom or assembly hall, but erasing 'Dad' from the lexicon seems excessive and counter-productive. A child may have a Dad they live with, or who lives in another house, or he may even have died, but children can have a warm relationship with their father in myriad ways: shared custody, frequent or infrequent visits, or in terms of memories, stories and prayers. They may also have step-fathers or foster fathers who have assumed that role for them. A routine acknowledgement of the presence of men in the family household or households by school and parish staff need not be viewed as insensitive or overly idealistic, but rather as a fundamental equality.

A second step might be to simply make fathers aware of the crucial role they play in their children's upbringing, faith development and formation of their image of God. How many fathers are aware of the crucial role they play, and how many would be surprised to hear that it is even more important than the mother's influence? How many realise that the affective catechesis called for by the Church so clearly involves the warm, positive relationship they establish with their children? Fathers could be encouraged and empowered by their families and parishes to, for example, pray more frequently with their children, or include stories of the saints in bedtime stories. Awareness among fathers of the importance of their example could open up new energy and creativity. Above all, the findings clearly underline to fathers that they have a unique, in fact irreplaceable role in their children's faith formation which cannot readily be delegated to the children's mother, wider family, parish or school. This is made clear by Bullivant, who draws on Heinrich's theory of Credibility Enhancing Displays (CREDS) - first developed to explain evolutionary behaviour among early humans - and applied to paternal example. Doing something difficult or costly increases the plausibility in the eyes

of those who observe it: children and teenagers seeing their father spending time or effort on their faith increases its credibility.⁹ I once asked the former principal of a Catholic primary school what advice she would give to parents of children preparing for First Reconciliation. She said the parent should go to church with their child, take them to the door of the confessional, open it, point at the kneeler and say, 'I kneel there'. Example is key. What has been said does not just apply to believing fathers: the role of non-religious fathers is also important, not just for their child's development, but also to their developing image of God as Father.

As a third step, we should recognise that some children don't know their father, and there are others whose relationship with their father is strained or even abusive, or where the father is not a positive role model. The place of grandfathers as role models could become increasingly important in this regard. Bengtson's study quoted above noted a strong and increasing influence of grandparents, as well as that of fathers, on young people's faith development. Several contemporary factors favour greater intergenerational influence: the longevity of grandparents, the increased contact facilitated by cohabitation or technology, and the increased care-giving when both parents are working¹⁰. Grandfathers would no doubt be as surprised and encouraged as fathers to hear of their influence, and empowered to assume such a key role. Catholic schools and parishes could also intentionally seek to provide male role models: by encouraging parish clergy to be involved with young people, hosting groups for boys (and girls) such as Scouts or youth clubs, where leaders can be role models, and seeking to inspire a teaching vocation among young male Catholics. The title of the former, 'Father' is both a privilege and solemn responsibility to model, and not distort or sully, the image of fatherhood in the eyes of the young, aware that, "The title of Father is the first, the chief, the highest, the most potent, the most persuasive, the most honourable of all the titles of a priest."¹¹

A final step could take its inspiration from two priests, Richard Rohr and David Neuhaus. In *Wild Man to Wise Man*, Rohr calls on fathers to reclaim their priesthood around the family table. Arguing

that man have been emasculated as they have delegated much of their spiritual fatherhood to the ordained, he views the rediscovery of ritual and prayer in family life as the key to the future of the Church.¹² In similar vein Neuhaus, who grew up Jewish, reminds readers that the history of Judaism in the wake of the destruction of the Temple in 70CE saw religious life gravitate to the synagogue and family table. He suggests that Catholics can learn much from Jewish family celebrations in which the father presides, recalling God's deeds and naming God's blessings in an atmosphere of celebration.¹³ Such a rediscovery could also revitalise the Church by returning it to its liturgical roots in the family home.

In these and other creative ways formulated by catechists and clergy, mothers, fathers and grandfathers, the paternal face of the God of Jesus Christ can shine forth more clearly in our days, as "fathers make known God's faithfulness to their children" (Is 38: 19).

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¹ Richard Rohr, *From Wild Man to Wise Man: Reflections on Male Spirituality*. (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2005), 96-97.

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to the Romans*, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), 853.

³ Pew Research Center for Religion in Public Life, *When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?* <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/> (2018).

⁴ Pew Research Center for Religion in Public Life, *Religious Landscape Study: Belief in God*. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-god/> (2019).

⁵ Importance of religion in one's life ('absolutely certain' = 74% very important; 'fairly certain' = 27% very important); Attendance at religious services ('absolutely certain' = 49% weekly attendance; 'fairly certain' = 20% weekly attendance); Frequency of prayer ('absolutely certain' = 74% at least daily; 'fairly certain' = 34% at least daily).

⁶ Vern L. Bengtson, Norella Putney and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations*. (New York: Oxford, 2013), 78.

⁷ Lori Baker-Sperry, "Passing on the Faith: the Father's Role in Religious Transmission," *Sociological Focus* 34, no 2., (2001), SPECIAL ISSUE: RELIGION IN AMERICA, 185-198.

⁸ Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus. Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*. (Oxford: OUP, 2019), 107-109.

⁹ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 102-109.

¹⁰ Bengtson, Putney, & Harris (2013), 100-119.

¹¹ Henry Edward Cardinal Manning, *The Eternal Priesthood*. (London: Burns and Oates, 1884), 29

¹² Richard Rohr, *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of St Francis in an Age of Anxiety*. (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2011), 64.

¹³ David Neuhaus, "Learning from our Jewish Neighbours". *The Tablet*, April 18, 2020, 10.