

FATHERHOOD

By Jim Seghers

Father's Day is the traditional celebration honoring our dads. My father died of cancer in 1992. He was a small man in stature - about nine inches shorter than me, but he was a giant in faith and integrity. In that respect I would be honored to one day reach his height. One of my most memorable experiences with my dad occurred in 1992, shortly before he died. We were driving to Our Lady of the Lake parish where he was privileged to serve as a deacon. On the way there he reflected on his life. He said, "Son, the greatest blessing in my life after the love of the Mother of God has been the love of your mother." As the tears streamed down my face I thought, "This is his legacy to me, the love of my heavenly mother and the love of my biological mother."

This Father's Day my son Robert and I joined our Kepha brothers on a weekend camping retreat. Kepha (Aramaic for "rock") is an organization of fathers and their sons, "the brotherhood of the iron will." Now that Robert is away at college in Kansas this was our first weekend retreat in two years. At these retreats we pray hard and play hard. The fellowship is infectious between the dads and boys. The youngest boys were six and the oldest was twenty-three. I know of no other organization that brings a dad and his son(s) together like Kepha. In addition the relationships formed between the other dads and boys lasts a lifetime. For more information check out: <http://www.kepharocks.org>.

The Kepha retreat afforded me the opportunity to reflect on fatherhood. I was reminded of an uplifting visit a twelve years past with Sister Louissette. Sister Louissette was a black woman who spent over fifty years in religious life. She was a very impressive woman. I was curious about her background. "Sister," I asked, "was your family Catholic?" "Yes," she answered. When I learned that she had many siblings I inquired, "Sister, have all your brothers and sisters remained faithful to their Catholic faith." She answered, "Why, of course!"

Her surprised tone implied that my question was foolish. This captured my curiosity. Pressing forward, I learned that all her nephews and nieces were also faithful to their faith. Now I was surprised. I knew enough about the history of New Orleans to know that the black community in which Sister grew up was not predominantly Catholic. So, what was it that made the difference in their religious convictions?

The environment of Sister's youth in New Orleans was rigidly segregated, a system that bred numerous injustices and made it very difficult for black families to stay together. It was especially difficult for black men to earn a living to support their family. Sister's father worked long, hard hours. Yet after a long work day, he would eat his supper and then quiz his children on the Baltimore Catechism as they sat around him at the kitchen table.

I never had the privilege of meeting Sister's dad, but he is a man like my own father that I greatly admire. Here is a man that in very trying circumstances did three of the important things that characterize faithful fathers: he trained his children in their faith by word and example; he was faithful to their mother, and he labored assiduously to support his large family. We need more dads like that.

These reflections brought to mind another topic, our heavenly Father. What is he like? Philosophically it is possible to know something about God from reason alone, but this rudimentary awareness does not motivate anyone to radically redirect the course of their life to live for him, much less die for him. Reason alone is useful, but it is inadequate in the ultimate analysis. Revelation fills many, but not all, of the gaps that reason alone cannot touch. So what does revelation teach us about fatherhood?

From the first human father we only learn negative example. In Genesis 2:15 God commanded Adam to "till and keep" the Garden of Eden. Here we discover the difficulties with translations. Literally, the Hebrew text says, "work and defend." The idea of guarding or defending is easy to grasp. It implies a threat outside and something inside worth defending, but what kind of "work" is God commanding? Is Adam instructed to become a gardener? Hardly! When the Hebrew word that is translated as "work" is cross-referenced against its use in other passages, the precise meaning comes into focus. Adam is called to a special kind of "work." He is called to "worship" God (cf. Ex 3:12; Deut 6:3; 11:13), the first duty of which is obedience.

We all know the tragic story of Adam's failure because we have all been negatively impacted by it. His failure is called the original sin. In the climactic moment in Genesis 3 Eve's temptation by the devil is depicted as a seduction into sin. The guard, Adam, was afraid to confront Satan to defend his bride and their future offspring (his garden). Once she succumbed he simply caved in: "She took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate" (Gen 3:6). Adam's failure does not yield a positive example of fatherhood, but all was not lost.

St. Paul instructs us that Adam "was a type of the one to come" (Rom 5:14), namely, Jesus Christ, who he calls "the last Adam" (1 Cor 15:45). Now we are getting somewhere because Jesus said: "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30). Then when Philip declared during the Last Supper: "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied" (Jn 14:8) Jesus replied, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). Because Jesus is the perfect image of the Father, he exemplifies the perfect qualities of fatherhood. Therefore, it is legitimate to reflect on Jesus' life to identify qualities of an ideal father. Below are qualities that jump out at me, but I have made no attempt to be exhaustive. Rather I invite you to put together your own list.

Loved His Bride

The bridegroom is my favorite metaphor the prophets used to depict the future Messiah (See: Ezek 16:7-12, 60-62; Hos 2:18f; Is 54:5f). The man who does not love his wife is a failure as a father, a husband and a man. Jesus is the preeminent example of the man who lays down his life for his bride.

Courageous

The Gospels are replete with examples of Jesus' courage. His courage comes through in a special way in Mark's Gospel, which I call the heart of a lion as Mark depicts Jesus bravely traveling up to Jerusalem to fulfill his mission on Calvary.

Gentle

Jesus said he was "gentle and lowly in heart" (Mt 11:29). Jesus gentleness is evident, for example, in his tender treatment of the woman caught in the act of adultery. After Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of those who wanted to stone the women Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replied, "No one, Lord." Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (Jn 8:10-11).

Man of Prayer

Jesus prayed before all his important activities. He began his public ministry with forty days of prayer and fasting. He spend whole nights in prayer. If Jesus needed prayer to sustain his human nature, how much more do we need it? The apostles were so impressed with Jesus' prayer life they asked him to teach them to pray (Lk 11:1; cf. Mt 14:23; Mk 1:35; 6:46; 14:32; Lk 5:16; 9:18, 28-29).

Obedient

Obedience is love in action. These two words are synonyms, two sides of the same coin. Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn 4:34). Subsequently, he added: "I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 5:30; 6:38). My favorite passage regarding Jesus' obedience is from the letter to the Hebrews: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience [love] through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:7-10).