

THE MAN OF GOD IS A MAN FOR OTHERS: SOME THEMES IN MEN'S SPIRITUALITY

SIXTH PASTORAL LETTER OF
BISHOP GREGORY JOHN MANSOUR
BISHOP OF THE EPARCHY OF SAINT MARON OF BROOKLYN



Introduction

In this Pastoral Letter, meant to complement and build upon others on the *Eucharist, Penance, Liturgy, Mercy, and Man and Woman*, I hope to highlight some important themes in men's spirituality.

In recent years there has been a great deal of profound reflection on the spirituality of women, but less on the vocation and mission of men. Coupled with some worrisome trends in our culture to undermine masculinity under the guise of remedying past chauvinism or over-reliance on patriarchal structures, not to mention the absence of dads in far too many homes in our country and the need for inspiring male role models, many young men are growing up without effective guidance about how to live out their male identity.

Saint Edith Stein (Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, OCD), one of the greatest writers on femininity in Church history, wrote last century:

Only a person blinded by the passion of controversy could deny that a woman in soul and in body is formed for a particular purpose. Woman is destined to be wife and mother (even if she is not wife or physical mother). Both physically and spiritually she is endowed for this purpose, both body and soul work together... The soul of a woman is different from that of a man. Woman's soul is destined to be a shelter in which other souls may flourish. (*The Ethos of Women's Professions*, 45).

Her thought examines what is called woman's spirituality, which looks respectfully at woman's nature. I hope to touch upon what may be called man's spirituality by looking at his nature, assisted by insights from Sacred Scripture and the lives of the saints. I hope to reach above all the hearts of men, but I would be grateful if this Pastoral Letter nourishes women and youth as well, because so much of this letter can be helpful to everyone interested in the spiritual life.

I would like to do so by pondering what God reveals to us in several passages of Sacred Scripture.

Man and Woman Created in the Image of God

We begin at the very beginning, the Book of Genesis:

The LORD God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him. So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each living creature was then its name. The man gave names to all the tame animals, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be a helper suited to the man. So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, the man said:

“This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called ‘woman,’ for out of man this one has been taken. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and the two of them become one body. The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame. (GENESIS 2:18-25)

This divinely inspired, yet profoundly human, passage describes the love and intention by which God created us, male and female, in his very image and likeness and pronounced us “very good.” Yet God, our loving Creator, also realized that it was “not good for man to be alone,” and so he created woman, intending that man and woman would be “a helpmate” for each other. It was God who noticed what was lacking in man, well before man himself did! God always notices our great need before we do and seeks to provide for us in that need.

This great love and confidence that God has for man is described in a poem by Father Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ:

GOD’S GRANDEUR

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the Soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Hopkins reminds us that this “grand” world in which we live will never lose its “dearest freshness deep down.” Sadly enough, however, our world has been marred by “man’s smudge,” the man-made troubles in the world. Hopkins ponders the “mystery of iniquity,” an expression that Pope Saint John Paul II often used to refer to our human sinfulness.

God's Grandeur, Man's Imperfection

The second passage comes from the Psalms:

When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of the man that you care for him?
(PSALM 8)

We see here that man has a special calling, indeed a wondrous one. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council understood this very well and summarized the human vocation, "Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self" (GAUDIUM ET SPES 24). If only man could understand how intentionally and beautifully he was created, in whose image he was made, he would then be able to find himself more easily through self-giving love in imitation of the God who is love. He would also then realize just how far he has sometimes strayed from that noble state and calling.

It bears repeating that if a man truly grasped and believed he was created in the image and likeness of God and beloved to his Heavenly Father, he would far more naturally assume the role of a faithful son, a caring father, a protector, and a guide to his family. Men who live as "chips off the old (divine) block" are the greatest need today; women and children long for this — many men also long for this. Whether a man is called to be a father, husband, generous single man, celibate priest, monk, or consecrated religious, if he is truly a man of God, prayer, and integrity, he will necessarily be a man "for others."

How then can we discover man's spirituality? We can learn a lot by reflecting on our Lord's witness as a "man for others." Jesus said, "The Son of Man has come not to be served, but to serve, and to offer his life as ransom for others" (MT 20:28).

We can also learn a great deal from the prophetic encyclical of Pope Saint Paul VI *Humanae Vitae*, written in 1968 at the beginning of the sexual revolution. This encyclical has been often overlooked, and at times scorned, but it contains wisdom that is increasingly being appreciated. It not only gives clear and prophetic teaching on contraception but, perhaps even more importantly, elucidates at a profound level the proper relationship between men and women in all aspects of life. Pope Saint Paul VI wanted to restore the original God-intended relationship between man and woman:

Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection. (*HV* 17)

The Holy Father's insights into the interpersonal damage of sex without commitment or consequences, and how easily a man can lose his true, natural, and profound respect for his life-long spouse, are at the heart of the wounds so many are suffering today. The true meaning of sex has been lost. It is now considered a

means primarily of personal pleasure or satisfaction, pursued even to the serious harm of the other. Sex for some is mainly or exclusively for personal benefit, no longer the imitation of the Creator's wonderful self-gift made for noble purposes. Sex for selfish gain or pleasure, using a spouse solely as a means of gratification, not only leads a man to lessen his commitment to care for his wife but also to decrease his commitment to care, protect, and cultivate the world God created for him. Instead, he can begin to use this world, and those within it, for self-directed aims, without a true sense of life's value as a gift.

Man's True Calling

Pope Saint Paul VI asserts that a man needs to learn the value of sacrifice to be able to place others first and to adapt himself to the needs of women and children.

This lesson is taught very clearly by a third passage of Sacred Scripture, namely Jesus' actions and instructions at the beginning of the Last Supper.

After washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus says: "What I have done for you, you also are to do for others" (JN 13:15). In this striking gesture of cleansing the dirt from his disciples' feet, Jesus teaches all of us, but especially men, a form of servant leadership. His apostles, intentionally all men, were thus asked to follow him and do as he did.

What was in our Lord's mind when he did this? Jesus wanted to teach men how to undo the sin of the first man, Adam, who after the Fall would "rule over" his "helpmate" Eve (GEN. 3:16). He was thus making service his privileged way. The path of redemption would involve self-mastery rather than domination of others, and the purpose of self-mastery would be to serve others with self-sacrificial love.

Following our Lord's own example, no man — whether in the Church, in the family, or in society — can ever claim the right to dominion over another, whether he be a father, a husband, a single man, a priest, monk or religious. All men are therefore called, by the Last Supper's command, to servant leadership in the footsteps of the Master.

Moreover, in our Lord's discourse on marriage and divorce, Jesus rebutted the religious leaders of the day who were justifying divorce by referring to how Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever. Jesus, however, stated that it was God's intention from the beginning that what God has joined no human authority should separate. This new command shattered all previous rights to male domination in marriage. Jesus, it should be noted, was speaking only to men, because women did not have the "right," given by Moses, to divorce their husbands. Thus, Jesus was indicating that a woman and a man are, by nature, and by the intention of the Creator, of equal importance and dignity.

A clear masculine spirituality thus emerges from Pope Saint Paul VI's prophetic call to men to never "forget the reverence due to a woman," from Jesus' example of washing his disciples' feet, and from his clear prohibition against divorce, seeing one's wife as a possession to be discarded even at a whim. God's challenge, therefore, to men is to be, by their very nature, godly men, respectful men, men for others.

Thus, we men need to ask ourselves: With such a clear, strong, and challenging imperative from Christ himself, am I still willing to be his follower? Can I willingly embody the virtues of respect and responsibility to which he summons me? Am I willing to place limits upon myself for others' good? Will I use my strength and passion to care for, protect, and cultivate those entrusted to me?

The Gift of Self to the Other

Far too often we go through life unsure of why God created us or what is our purpose in life. We often do not understand how we were created out of love in order to love. (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 1604*). Instead, we define or even label ourselves based on externals or non-essentials and sometimes even reduce ourselves to sexual preferences, orientations, or attractions, yet there is much more that defines us.

The most important aspect of our human identity is what is in our soul, our longing for God, our desire for the good of others and for ourselves as God's beloved. Since we were created by Love for love, our spirituality, philosophy of life, and Christian worldview should be grounded in our firm belief that God created us good so that we might be morally good. This should be the moral compass guiding all the decisions of our lives.

By each decision we either build up or weaken our relationship with God and others. Regarding the choice of giving ourselves to another through the Mystery of Marriage, we are called to be ever so careful. From Christian Tradition, when a man loves his spouse, he will necessarily place her first, before himself, just as Christ placed the Church, his Bride, first. Saint Paul reminded all Christian men of this in his letter to the Christians of Ephesus. "Husbands," he wrote, "love your wives even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, ... that she might be holy and without blemish" (EPH 5:25-27). This kind of love draws a man to sacrificial self-giving and invites his spouse to make a similar gift herself.

By her nature, a woman invites a man to bond with her for life in a stable union, one that enables her to feel safe in that relationship so that she can be at peace in this marital embrace. Thus, as God intends, she may be able to conceive and raise children with her husband at her side, not only at the time of pregnancy and birth but throughout her life, especially on the most vulnerable occasions.

According to our Catholic understanding, marriage is meant to be a covenant — "until death do us part" — between the spouses as well as between spouses and God. Marriage is not a contract, which means, "I promise to do this as long as you do that"; rather, it is a covenant, which means "I will do this no matter what." A covenant is a complete gift of self, without reservations or conditions. Covenantal love is therefore by nature unitive, life-long, exclusive, and pro-creative, giving the husband and his wife a secure and nurturing place in which to raise their children. (CCC 1601)

The Gift of Children

God intended children to come into this world through this kind of covenantal love between a man and woman, committed to each other for life. With an intimate and personal act, honored best and truthfully

only in marriage, a man shares with his wife the gift of life. This new life, the preborn child, then lives in the womb of the mother, just under her heart, for nine months. Thus, the dignity and worth of every man, woman, and child is based on the fact that God lovingly and intentionally created man and woman with an amazing ability to make the world new again by bringing children into the world in this awesome way.

Thus, these “little ones” should never be seen as a mere ‘means to an end,’ or objects created simply for the pleasure or benefit of adults. Rather all children, and in fact all people, should be treated as an “end in themselves,” never just to be used by or for others. The inherent dignity of a child, moreover, is not something given to him or her by parents, or by anyone else, but by God himself. Based on this truth, children have inalienable rights and adults have full responsibilities when it comes to caring for children whom they, together with God, have brought into the world.

We do well when we put children first in our considerations. A child has the right to come into the world through this kind of marital love, embrace, complementarity, and commitment, in which the mother and father mutually pledge to love and care for the child and each other in a stable and permanent relationship.

Through no fault of their own, some couples are not able to conceive children, and this often causes great suffering. Nonetheless, these couples are often highly creative in the ways they are truly able to serve others. Their unselfish love inspires and encourages us both in the family and the Church to greater love and respect. To these couples, we give great gratitude for “being there” for so many so generously.

The objective truths described above about the natural rights of children affirm once again that the place of sexual expression is fitting only in the marriage of a man and a woman: where children brought into this world are guaranteed to be respected, protected, and cared for by those committed to them for life. We ought, therefore, to be vigilant to protect children from all that may harm them, and this includes the many ideologies present today that are contrary to a truly Christian worldview.

The Complementarity of Man and Woman

Pope Saint John Paul II, in what is referred to as his *Theology of the Body*, said that our bodies are made for love. Thus, a man and woman are gifts, and they can also make gifts of themselves to one another in love. This gives sexual intimacy its meaning and purpose.

For this reason, a man and woman need to develop within themselves the virtues necessary to ensure that they can be faithful to each other. The virtue of chastity means that their sexual love for one another is appropriately expressed in fidelity, love, and mutual reverence. A man and woman should therefore have a sense of self that sees themselves as good, loved by the Heavenly Father and created in his image and likeness. Man and woman are not only equal to each other in dignity, but also complementary to each other, that is, created intentionally for each other. Man completes woman and woman completes man, as two halves make a whole.

Pope Francis urges us to honor and appreciate this God-given difference and to cherish one's masculinity or femininity as a gift from the Creator. The Holy Father cautions us not to redefine or attempt to change gender, or to view it as non-binary, fluid, or unimportant, but rather to honor and appreciate the complexity of our male or female nature. Each of us was created as a man or a woman by God's design, according to his loving plan for us.

This natural God-given identity is part of what Pope Francis, and before him, Pope Benedict, referred to as human ecology. Our natures, different and complementary, are not merely social constructs open to alteration or redefinition but constitute a profound spiritual and physical reality. To view our gender as anything less diminishes the meaning and beauty of our nature as created in the very image and likeness of God.

Learning to Love

According to the law of our nature, and "how it was in the beginning," Jesus reminded us that what God has brought together, "let no man separate" (Mt. 19:4). The bond of marriage is so important to our Lord that he gave a great challenge to men and women to be sure that they marry for the right reasons, motivated by true love and respect, for life. True love means that one is willing to give oneself fully to the other in a shared life, "until death do us part," even without knowing all the future joys and sorrows that a shared life may bring them.

A man's spirituality will thus focus on his responsibility to learn to love his wife, and not to use her, take advantage of her, dominate her, or demand his own way with her, but rather protect, guide, care for, and serve her. Man, therefore, must not grab, possess, or control his wife, but rather support, defend, and protect her. He is not made to subdue her, but to lift her up, to sacrifice for her, and to show her God's love.

Family and the Church

Along with our responsibilities as Christians to be "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" for the society in which we live, there are only two institutions created directly by God: family and the Church. Political parties, sports teams, or any other human inventions are not comparable to the Church and the family.

The Church continues the Divine Son's plan of salvation, and the family continues God's unique plan for our happiness. Thus, we can affirm once again the importance of marriage and family, as well as the Church's timeless teachings regarding marriage. There is something — in fact Someone — greater than ourselves involved, and we are answerable to him. Thus, the way we choose to live is consequential and should help us to discover who we are, to practice the virtues, and to cultivate inner freedom, so that we may offer ourselves as a gift to others.

Chastity

Saint Paul exhorted us, "I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, pleasing, and perfect" (ROM 12:1-2).

Unfortunately, what is most beautiful in life can also be misused and abused. We can easily enslave ourselves to our desires, passions, compulsions, addictions, and whims. Pornography, masturbation, and sexual promiscuity are always sinful, as is sexual harassment or abuse. If one falls into such sins, temptations, or crimes, he should repent of these quickly, and “flee” from them, as Saint Paul says (1 COR 6:18). One may need spiritual and professional help to overcome such sins. We should all work to rid ourselves and the culture of such ills, to make our culture and ourselves, more holy, chaste, and respectful, especially for the sake of women, girls and boys.

Chastity, according to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is an “apprenticeship in self-mastery” (CCC 2339), and a “long and exacting work” (CCC 2342). Chastity means that one has the self-control not to enter into a sexual or a romantic relationship with someone other than one’s spouse. Thus, chastity is built on self-control, sacrifice, and faithfulness and is tied to love, purity, and reverence. The clearest image of chastity in the Sacred Scriptures is Christ’s lovingly pouring himself out for the sake of his spouse the Church.

Although it may seem old-fashioned, and perhaps counter-intuitive in today’s overly sexualized culture, chastity is a gift of love that places limits on our freedom. In reality, however, chastity makes us truly free! When Pope Saint Paul VI called men in *Humanae Vitae* never to “forget the reverence due to a woman,” he was calling them to chastity, since chastity helps keep a man’s attraction to a woman reverent by elevating to the good of her complete person, body and soul as a whole.

Chastity is essential for holiness. In his Letter to the Christians in Thessalonika, Saint Paul first reminds them of their vocation to holiness: “This is the will of God for you, your holiness.” Immediately after, however, he describes what could easily short-circuit this calling: “Therefore, avoid all unchastity” (1 THESS 4:3). Holiness is the perfection of the love of God and of neighbor, and chastity is what preserves that love.

Natural Family Planning

Among the ways that man can grow in the interior freedom to which chastity leads is by supporting his wife with the practice of Natural Family Planning (NFP). Contraception introduces something unnatural between husband and wife. Rather than engaging in mutual self-giving, contraception introduces what Saint John Paul II described as a dissonance: the couples reject their life-giving potential in the very act made by God for it to be expressed. They do not revere in their body language the total self-giving of their marital vows. Depending upon the form of contraception employed, the husband rejects the maternal meaning of his wife’s femininity, or the wife rejects the paternal meaning of her husband’s masculinity, thus lacking complete trust in, and openness to God and each other. In this way, they “miss the mark” of the profound meaning of sexual union.

If a couple for serious reasons prayerfully recognizes the need to space children, they should not make recourse to contraception but work together to achieve a healthy spacing of children in the chaste and natural way given by God. In today’s society, we love natural foods and homeopathic remedies. Why then are some so ready to suggest artificial contraception, especially when so many testimonies by women as well as from medical and professional studies, tell us that these practices upset a woman’s natural and healthy equilibrium?

NFP is an excellent way in which a couple can cooperate with God, respect the natural reproductive cycle of the woman, and protect and honor the natural two-fold purpose of marriage: the union of the spouses and the gift of procreation. NFP helps couples stay healthy while respecting the bodily integrity and dignity of the woman, accepting that God has created woman with a cyclical pattern to her fertility.

The Nuptial Meaning of the Body

We have written much about masculine spirituality that refers to a married man, whose wife and family constitute the first field of his attention and devotion. The single or celibate man, whose first field is God's Kingdom, must also discover his own similar spirituality. By an embrace of chastity, sacrifice, and self-denial, he, too, can enjoy much peace and a priceless communion with others. For the single man, such as a priest, monk, or consecrated religious, or also a single layman, no matter what his life experiences have been, a chaste masculine spirituality is possible and necessary. The man who thus chooses to forsake marriage for the Kingdom can make a gift of himself as a true self-offering and find joy if he embraces what is called the "nuptial meaning" of his body. (CCC 1619)

This profound concept, as taught by Pope Saint John Paul II, describes us as living in a spiritual union with God, who is our "True Spouse" (Maronite *Hoosoyo* of Morning Prayer for Sundays). By our intentional desire, we can thus make a generous, chaste, sacrificial, and nuptial gift of ourselves to God in spousal union. This gift, in imitation of the chaste and celibate Christ, depends on and deepens one's communion with God, and sets one free to embrace an intense and life-giving love for others. Mary and her chaste spouse, Joseph, lived this chastity, this nuptial meaning of the body, and the man or woman who embraces this way will also find the same joy and meaning. This singleness in conformity to Christ gives witness to our Lord's personal lifestyle and proclamation of the Gospel.

What About Our Past Sins?

No matter what has happened in one's past, the Gospel calls each of us to self-mastery and sacrifice. Although this is counter-cultural and may seem impossible today, by the grace of God, such virtue is not only possible but happily achievable. Even if one has made mistakes, one can still begin anew with the grace of conversion and the sacraments. Jesus said, "He who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:25). By letting go of one's sins, with the grace of a good confession, and by sincere repentance, one can truly find oneself again. True sexual freedom, unhinged from sin, leads to a flourishing and fulfillment of the human person.

Whether we have done well throughout our lives in living chastely, or not, God still calls us to a new day and a new life. There is no greater self-mastery than a wholesome, loving chastity. The chaste man, who is humbly aware of his limitations and his failings, can thus, by grace, find his way to God.

Witness of the Saints

The greatest witness to a truly masculine spirituality is Saint Joseph, who became the man he was because of the grace of God and the help of the Virgin Mary. Joseph married a chaste virgin who was not his own and was a foster father to a Son who was also not his own. The great respect and other-centered love he

showed them both teaches us that a wife belongs first to God and a child also belongs first to God before they are our own.

Moreover, Saint Joseph teaches us that the man of God is also a man devoted to others, for he placed our Lord and the Virgin before himself, and is thus the finest model we have for men to discover their unique nature and calling.

Christian tradition calls Joseph not just “chaste,” but “most chaste.” That expression shows us that chastity is not a minimal virtue and certainly not a “no,” but something which we are called to grow into, so that we are not merely “chaste enough” but “most chaste,” because to be most chaste is to be most loving. Saint Joseph shows us that to love another chastely means that we do not have to express in genital relations that love. Unfortunately, today many are addicted to sexual sins. Thus everyone should have recourse to Saint Joseph praying that, like him, we may be “most chaste” and always keep our love for others truly loving, respectful of their having been made in God’s image and likeness and called to communion with Him.

We can also mention Saint Maron, father of the Maronite Church, who according to Theodoret of Cyr was a priest and an “open air” hermit. This “open air” asceticism was a good example to us of a man who lived with no obstacle between himself and others or between himself and God. Maron, in this chosen asceticism, was thus completely available to God, and completely available to be of service to others. Maron is another good example for us of how to live our love in the open, which chastity makes possible.

In the tradition of Saint Maron we also have other great examples of Saint Sharbel, a man completely devoted to God; Saint Neemtallah Hardini, who confessed his sins each day to always stay in the state of grace; and Blessed Estephen Nehme, who lived each day in manual labor and humble service proclaiming his motto: “God sees me.”

Likewise, we also have the three Blessed Massabki Brothers, who were laymen martyred for their faith in Damascus, Syria in 1860. Francis, the eldest, was a married businessman and a father of eight, Abdul Moti was a married teacher and a father of five, and Rafael was a generous single man. All three brothers fulfilled, before all else, their responsibilities to their family, to daily prayer, to spiritual disciplines, to the Church, and the faith, even to death.

These men are among so many who through their witness are all models for men of a faithful and godly masculine spirituality.

A Man of Prayer

Spirituality is often described as a person’s journey in search of the sacred. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* appropriately describes this mysterious journey as prayer, in which the Creator invites, and we gratefully receive. (CCC 2567) As such, we cannot speak of a masculine spirituality without also speaking of the necessity for all people to pray.

A prayerful man comes to recognize that the purpose of his life is rooted in the universal call to holiness. This life of sanctity, however, cannot be achieved by man's own doing. Rather it requires that pride be put aside and replaced with a constant and consistent openness to grace. This same pride not only closes one off to receive help from others and God, but can also distort one's view of what God is asking when he calls one to perfect holiness.

Although we are all called to a state of "perfection," it is important for us to remember that God is not a perfectionist. He kindly points out the obstacles in our path toward holiness, and then asks us not to cling too close to the image we have of our own "perfection." Often, we think we know what we are supposed to do, and who we are supposed to be, but like the challenges given to Saint Joseph, sometimes our plans change very quickly with a dream or an appearance of an angel. Thus, only a solid and consistent prayer life can help release us from the error of pride or self-deception. It is through an encounter with God that truth is revealed to us, engaging our hearts to come to understand what God is truly asking of us.

The encounter with God requires docility, often achieved through an attitude of detachment. Again, we can see in Saint Joseph the model par excellence of the man who listens and generously responds. Saint Therese of Lisieux asks us to "decide to choose what I have not chosen." Thus, each man is asked to detach from his ideas, his point of view, his way of doing things, his "wisdom," and do as God asks. Consequently, small practices of detachment are of great value because they will impact positively a man's relationship with his spouse, his children, his colleagues, and especially with God. To pray like a man, therefore, is to pray with a vulnerable heart, one docile to the Holy Spirit, allowing God's grace to enter and mold that prayerful heart.

However, to be vulnerable as a man is no small request, for by his nature as protector, provider, and cultivator it would seem almost contradictory to be at the same time vulnerable. For this reason, it may be difficult for men to enter more deeply into prayer, for it is difficult enough for a man to admit that he needs help and cannot do something on his own, but to also enter into a prayerful state requires a man to now go a step even further, and to stand vulnerable before another man, that is before the God-man, Jesus Christ, and ask him for help. Perhaps some men avoid going deep into prayer because they are afraid of what they might hear. The stillness of God's voice, which is often a long-desired peace and an answer to prayer, requires a vulnerable and docile heart.

It would also be contradictory to speak of man as protector, provider, and cultivator, and yet imply that a man's prayer life is only for his own good! Prayer is not only for him but also for others as well! The responsibility to build a relationship with God in this mysterious encounter of prayer thus not only impacts the prayerful man but also all those for whom he loves and cares. A good father, husband, friend, priest, or consecrated man carries the responsibility to not only answer his call to holiness, but to also help bring others to holiness as well. Near-sightedness in this regard is harmful; as a provider, father, husband, friend, priest, or consecrated man he is expected to not only prepare himself and those he loves for what they will encounter in this earthly life but also to prepare them for eternal life as well.

Fatherhood

For the man of God, the responsibility to pray not only for oneself, but for others as well, may seem like a burden that cannot be asked of all men. In fact, some men might think that they are unworthy to pray for others. This is a false perception because the call of each man to be 'father' to others carries with it the same responsibility, regardless of one's perceived imperfections. Further, it might be thought that if one does not have biological children of his own, he is relieved of this responsibility to pray "like a father."

However, fatherhood is expected of all men, whether biological, natural, or spiritual. For some men, such as those that God blesses with the gift of biological children, their fatherhood would carry with it all three dimensions, biological, natural, and spiritual. For others, such as a godfather, celibate priest, or religious monk, their fatherhood would take on natural and spiritual dimensions. Each dimension holds with it a responsibility, allowing a man to discover his God-designed fatherhood.

Biological fatherhood carries with it an echo of Christ's name for his Heavenly Father, "Abba." (LK 11:2) Since we call God 'Father,' our Christian identity, and our communion with a heavenly fatherhood makes earthly fatherhood even more important and meaningful.

Saint Paul makes it clear to us that earthly and heavenly fatherhood cannot be separated, for their connection is vital to understanding what it means to be a father: "I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth, takes its name." (EPH 3:14-15) All fatherhood is thus a reflection and an extension of our Heavenly Father.

The biological father, resembling the Heavenly Father, is a generator of life. Through an intimate union with his spouse, a new life is created. This profound cooperation with God lies not simply in the father being a generator of life, but rather in the father being a generator of life that will go on to nurture other generators of life. Thus, the biological father 'passes on the torch' allowing his sons the potential to take on the same name, "father." Fatherhood does not end with the generation of new life, but rather the perfection of this new life through proper rearing, education, and accompaniment.

Natural fatherhood is not only expected of every biological father, but is also a call to men of other states in life for the good of the life of another. A married man who, with his spouse, was unable to conceive a biological child, a godfather asked to oversee the spiritual life of a newly baptized person, a chaste single man who acts as a mentor, or celibate priests and vowed religious who hold an office of trusted leadership, are all called to natural fatherhood.

Natural fatherhood is a role in which a man teaches by example, providing proof that what the father teaches is possible in one's life. The natural father also holds the responsibility of being a steady emotional support and influence, which perseveres through the turmoil presented to the child individually or to the family collectively. This emotional support requires much prayer and grace. For this reason, the natural father is called to showcase a virtuous life that embodies a lifestyle worthy of imitating.

Whether one is both a biological and natural father or only a natural father, both roles are ordered to an even greater level of fatherhood: spiritual fatherhood. This is a fatherhood expected of all men of goodwill, focused on accompanying one's loved ones through this temporal, earthly journey while keeping their eyes fixated on eternal life. This fatherhood engenders grace for those he cares for and those whom he encounters, through a consistent act of mentoring and prayer.

Here again, we look to Saint Joseph, who exemplified a fatherhood that was not biological, but, par excellence, natural and spiritual. Despite a man's state in life, the opportunity for him to be a father is always present. It takes only the willingness to cooperate with God's plan to make his fatherhood a worthy reflection of God's eternal fatherhood for the sake of others.

Full Stature in Christ

We can now come closer to a deeper understanding of masculine spirituality. Jesus chose twelve very different men to be his apostles; although they were far from perfect, our Lord slowly shaped and taught them, not without trials, to be perfect, to be one with him and his Father. Saint Paul says that each man is called "to come to full stature in Christ" (EPH 4:13). Thus, our Lord prepared men to make a positive impact on the world and gave them an identity like his own: beloved by the Heavenly Father and called to be men of God, men for others, entrusted with a mission of love and servant leadership. God made them, by grace, to be like Adam, to "cultivate," to "till and to keep" (GN 2:14). Jesus entrusted them with his Mother at the Cross to be with them, as she has from Pentecost to our present day. This same Mary, who with God's grace helped make Joseph the man he became, can also help us if we ask and allow. Although the "grandeur of God" in which we live still bears "man's smudge," yet "the Holy Ghost, over the bent world broods." (Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*)

Conclusion

Saint Edith Stein wrote of the special and unique "soul" that belongs to a woman. We might now add that the masculine "soul," man's unique spirituality, could also be defined by Scripture, the lives of the saints, and by his very nature. Man is created to be a man for others. Married or single, consecrated, ordained, or lay, each man must find his way in the two divinely established institutions, the Church and the family, to become a leader like Christ, who came "not to be served but to serve." Men must discern how God is calling them to care, cultivate, and protect, and thus make a difference in the world. A personal relationship with Christ makes all the difference for the man who asks for his help.

We turn again to the words of Saint Edith Stein:

Despite the distinction between the virtues of men and women, the more Christ-like a person becomes, the more we see in holy men a womanly tenderness, and a truly maternal solicitude for souls entrusted to them, and we also see in holy women a manly boldness, efficiency, and determination.

Thus, being a man does not exclude a certain manly tenderness for others, as Pope Francis has so often told us. Rather a “masculine spirituality”, when complementary to a “feminine spirituality,” helps men and women cooperate with God so that we may see those most vulnerable, and in need, and find our courage to care, protect, and nurture.

Following our chaste Lord Jesus Christ, may we too bring joy, despite our small sufferings and loneliness, into this world as married, single, ordained, or consecrated men, and may we bear abundant fruit, as our Lord Jesus promised: “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly” (JN 10:10).

O Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Virgin Mary, pray for us!

Select Bibliography

- Acklin, Thomas and Boniface Hicks. *Personal Prayer: A Guide for Receiving the Father's Love*. Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2020.
- Acklin, Thomas and Boniface Hicks. *Spiritual Direction: A Guide for Sharing the Father's Love*. Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017.
- Benedict XVI. Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est [On Christian Love]*. Dec. 25, 2005. Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011.
- Favale, Abigail Rine. *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2022.
- Francis. Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si' [On Care for Our Common Home]*. May 24, 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
- Griffin, Carter H. “The Gift of Fatherhood.” In *The Building the Domestic Church Series*, presented by the Knights of Columbus. New Haven: Catholic Information Service, 2014.
- John Paul II. *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*. Jun. 29, 1995. Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.
- Olmstead, Thomas J. “Into the Breach: An Apostolic Exhortation to Catholic Men.” In *The Building the Domestic Church Series*, presented by the Knights of Columbus. New Haven: Catholic Information Service, 2021.
- Olmstead, Thomas J. *Into the Breach [An Apostolic Exhortation to Catholic Men, my Spiritual Sons in the Diocese of Phoenix]*. Sep. 29, 2015. Diocese of Phoenix, AZ. <https://dphx.org/into-the-breach/>.
- Paul VI. Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae [On the Regulation of Birth]*. Jul. 25, 1968. Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.
- Stein, Edith. *Essays On Woman (The Collected Works of Edith Stein)*. 2nd revised ed. Edited by Dr. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven. Translated by Freda Mary Oben, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996.
- Von Hildebrand, Alice. *The Privilege of Being a Woman*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005.

