

Introduction



The topic of priestly spiritual fatherhood is an important one today. It is a delicate topic, particularly in light of the sad revelation of the behavior of some priests which is in total contradiction with true fatherhood.

There is nonetheless an enormous need in our world for people who are authentic reflections of divine fatherhood. Not that it's their exclusive domain, but I think that it forms an essential part of the priestly vocation.

For the priest himself, experiencing the unfolding of a true fatherhood in the exercise of his ministry is a real grace; it gives his priesthood a quite invigorating depth and beauty.

Through this little book, I would like to encourage my brother priests, who often have a pressing need for encouragement, and to help them believe in the fruitfulness—the fertility—and the beauty of their

vocations. Even if it's a difficult, demanding reality, fatherhood is also a source of great joy. There is nothing more beautiful than to give life, and so much more so when this life is eternal life, the very life of God.

My book is addressed especially to priests, but I think that all people who are called to exercise a certain form of paternity (the fathers of a family, spiritual fathers, educators, people in positions of authority . . .) could find some useful elucidation on how to live their responsibilities fairly.

PART ONE



Fatherhood, a Difficult but Essential Reality

Precautions on Language

Treating this topic requires caution for many reasons.

There is a warning Jesus gives in the Gospel of Matthew: “*Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven*” (Mt 23:9).

Jesus teaches us through these words that there is really only one fatherhood—that of God—and that all human fatherhood, especially the priest’s, only makes sense in the measure of how much it is at the service of divine paternity, in which human fatherhood finds its origin and its final end: helping men and women be

sons and daughters of God. Priestly fatherhood is not something that the priest possesses in himself, but a humble service of the only essential paternity, which is God's. The priest's own person is in no way the source or the goal of the relationship that he encourages as a priest with those entrusted to him in his ministry. It's not about making them his own children but making them the children of the heavenly Father.

Note also that while Scripture and the Tradition both speak of priestly ministry, the preferred image for describing this ministry is not the image of a father, which is actually used quite rarely, but rather the image of a shepherd. The priest is a good shepherd who takes care of his sheep, and who would even go so far as to give his own life for them. The sacramental grace of the priest is first of all the grace to be established, as was the good shepherd, Christ. Fatherhood can only come after, building on the base of pastoral charity. In a certain sense, fatherhood is not something that the priest can attain directly. He must first strive to be a good shepherd. If he really is, the grace of fatherhood can then be given to him.

Another observation is that the grace of the priesthood is above all a grace to be like Christ, who is not a father, but is the Son. If it's legitimate to speak of priestly paternity (and I think it is), this paternity cannot be

founded on anything other than participation in the sonship of Jesus with his Father.

What justifies the language of paternity when speaking of the priesthood are Jesus' words to Philip in the Gospel of John: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). Jesus is the Son, but in living this sonship fully, he reveals it in a new way, making God's fatherhood visible: the infinite, tender, merciful love of the Father for all his children. In the same way, if a priest lets himself be fashioned after Christ, he makes the face and love of the Father visible.

Even more so than theological reflection, what legitimizes the language of paternity is the witness, throughout the history of the Church, of so many holy bishops and priests through whom God's paternity is manifested for the good of all. I'm thinking particularly of all the bishop saints from history, from St. Paul to St. Francis de Sales to Pope St. John Paul II. I'm also thinking of so many holy and good priests who were pastors, educators, or missionaries, full of kindness and care for their flocks, of whom we could make a list longer than this book, without even counting those that history hasn't recorded. They wouldn't have claimed the title "Father" and would have felt unworthy, but the Christian people have recognized them as father figures and so used the name.