

Citation for the following article:

Matthew Lewis Sutton, "Retrieval of Fatherhood through a Retrieval of Faith in God the Father," *Proceedings of the Nineteenth University Faculty for Life Conference at the University of St. Thomas School of Law, Minneapolis MN (2009)*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: University Faculty for Life, 2013), pp. 191-203.

# Retrieval of Fatherhood through a Retrieval of Faith in God the Father

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ABSTRACT: Many methods exist for analyzing the rise of abortions and its connection with the absence of fathers. The dramatic changes in law, politics, ethics, and society provide material for various accounts of the decline in the culture of fatherhood, but the dramatic changes in Christian theologies of the Trinity also provide additional reasons for the decline. In this article I argue that to retrieve a culture of fatherhood we must retrieve a faith in God the Father. Through the use of select books of the New Testament, particularly Paul's letters, I establish the causal relationship between a retrieval of theologies of the God the Father and the retrieval of a culture of fatherhood. Only by having a right understanding of the fatherhood presented to us by the God the Father above can we have a right understanding of fatherhood here below.

IT ALL STARTED WHEN my wife and I had to attend a baptism class for our newborn daughter. As a Catholic theologian who knows something about the beauty and depth of this sacrament, I was looking forward to the class. It began well with a nice if all-too-cheesy video of a baptism with a happy, young priest teaching a happy couple about the happy sacrament. After the video, the well-meaning couple teaching the class led us seven couples in a nice, relaxed conversation about what we thought was the meaning of baptism—as if there had not been nearly two thousand years of serious theological scholarship on this sacrament. Anyway, the happy talk had to end sometime and so we were all given a handout with a closing prayer, which we were told was given to us by the Church. “Let us pray together,” the happy couple said. We

all sheepishly looked at each other and began to pray, “Our Parent who is our creator, redeemer, and sustainer.”<sup>1</sup> I choked, coughed, contorted, looked at my wife, and sulked as we continued to prayer to the divine up-there, to the one who is cuddly and looks like a budding flower.

After the class, one of the teachers asked me, as a theologian, what I thought about the class. An interior battle ensued. The Midwestern nice in me wanted to say, “It was nice. Thank you. Have a good night.” But the Catholic theologian in me inspired by years of studying Trinitarian theology won. I said, “I didn’t like that parent prayer and I really think we should be praying to God the Father.” As I walked away, embarrassed at my outburst, I asked myself, “How could I be so rude?” Then I asked myself the real question. What has happened to Christianity’s belief in God the Father? Why at this moment when the six other young fathers and I were newly struck by the beauty, blessing, and burdens of being a father did we have to pray to the Divine Parent who is cuddly, cute, and syrupy?

I know that the teaching couple were just passing on what the parish sacrament director had given to them. I also know this sacrament director was just passing on the theological training that she received in one of the mostly well-run lay ecclesial minister programs. But, let us be serious. This is bad theology. When Jesus the Lord rose from the dead and appeared to the apostles who were bewildered and standing on a mountain in Galilee, he did not command them with the words, “Be alright and maybe go and tell someone about baptism in the name of the parent and the child and the budding flower.” No, we are told by the one Lord of heaven and earth, who has taught us to pray to God the Father, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). Why were these six new fathers and I, being told by my church that I should not call upon God as Father at this superlatively, Trinitarian time

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<sup>1</sup> For an argument regarding these types of liturgical and prayer changes, see Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1990).

of baptism? Why are we abandoning a theology and spirituality that can help fathers be present in the lives of their children in an age in which fathers are abandoning their children?

One of the reasons for the rise of abortions in the last quarter of the twentieth-century and at the beginning of this century is due to the absence of fathers who should be caring for these crisis-pregnancy mothers and aborted children. Many methods exist in analyzing the rise of abortions and its connection with the absence of fathers. The dramatic changes in law, politics, ethics, and society provide accounts for the decline in the culture of fatherhood, but I think that the dramatic changes in Christian theologies of the Trinity also provide an additional reason for the decline. The influence of radical feminist theologies of the Trinity has systematically deconstructed good theologies of God the Father. One of the consequences of this deconstruction is that a healthy culture of fatherhood has disappeared.

In this essay I argue that to retrieve a culture of fatherhood we must retrieve a faith in God the Father. The tragic societal decline of fatherhood has been accompanied by the equally tragic theological decline of theologies of God the Father. Through the use of select books of the New Testament, particularly Paul's letters, I establish the causal relationship between a retrieval of theologies of the God the Father and the retrieval of a culture of fatherhood. What is at stake here is that with the return of fatherhood, there will be a decrease in abortions and ultimately an established culture of life.

Let us first briefly discuss the societal decline of fatherhood. In a recent report by the National Center for Health Statistics, which is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, children born to single mothers have increased sharply in the past couple of years.<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, eighteen percent of all births were children born to single mothers. In the early 2000s, children born to single mothers rose

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<sup>2</sup> Stephanie J. Ventura, "Changing Patterns of Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States," National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief, no. 18 (Hyattsville MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2009).

dramatically but became relatively stable at thirty-four percent. In 2007, forty percent of children were born to single mothers. Forty percent of children in 2007 and predictably in 2008 will not have a father present at the beginning of their life in any significant way, if at all. Among the many demographic and sociological shifts in our culture, this fatherless generation is seriously detrimental.<sup>3</sup> In the next decades as these children progress through the educational system and eventually reach adulthood, their sense of “normal” family life will mean a single mother and no father. The ramifications of this shift no doubt include an increase in abortions.

In a related way, the recent book *Fragmenting Fatherhood: A Socio-legal Study* by the British law professors Richard Collier and Sally Sheldon tracks the diminishing status of the role of fatherhood in society and law.<sup>4</sup> They argue that from the beginning of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, the role of the father has fragmented the father as a socially positive archetype to socially negative arch nemesis and legally from the father as sole-authority to no-authority. In our culture’s demands for immediacy, celebrity, and sexuality divorced from procreativity, the role of the father has declined socially and legally.

I think that we should also add theologically. Just as our culture has abandoned the father, we have also abandoned theologies of God the Father. I would now like to discuss the decline of theologies of the God the Father.

In the last third of the twentieth century, Christian theology experienced a dramatic onslaught of feminist critiques of its belief in the

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<sup>3</sup> There is, for example, the transformative segregation of different marriage and family models as well as the increase of women desiring motherhood before marriage. See Kay Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age* (Chicago IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2007) and the important study, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Collier and Sally Sheldon, *Fragmenting Fatherhood: A Socio-legal Study* (Oxford UK: Hart Publishing Limited, 2008).

designation of the First Person of the Trinity as God the *Father*. Such theologians like Rosemary Radford Reuther, Elizabeth Johnson, Elizabeth Schüssler Fioenza, Gavin D'Costa, and more recently Tina Beattie argued in different ways that "father" language used by Christianity is sexist speech applied to god in order to reinforce patriarchal societal roles. In their very different ways, Christian feminist theologians want to disrupt gendered speech about God through radical designations of God as "She Who Is" or emphasis on the Holy Spirit as feminine Sophia-god who has equality with the masculine Father-god. They advocate non- or multi-gendered language of God by arguing that such divine language shifts will create a transformed church and society in which men and women are equal. In the words of D'Costa,

If all signs are polyvalent, then little wonder that the great "crown jewel of theological sophistication," the symbol of the living god, the sign of redemption, the trinity, can also turn into a homosexual rod of slavery and domination regarding gender and its cultural patterning. Without a never-ending vigilance, the church might fall into the greatest error it has stubbornly resisted: worshipping a false god of man's creation. <sup>5</sup>

For D'Costa, the church must be vigilant against gendered-language about God because it quickly turns into an enslaving, oppressive, false Trinity.

Although the feminist critique of father language of God is quite complex and varied, the effect of these feminist critiques has been consistent. It is common for many educated Christians who work in mainline Protestant and Catholic churches to avoid referring to God as Father and the use of the masculine pronoun when referring to God. In the majority of seminaries and masters of theology or divinity programs throughout the country, the curriculum includes an examination of the feminist critique of the language of God usually presented by mostly sympathetic academic theologians. In my own judgment, the encounter

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<sup>5</sup> Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture and the Divine* (London UK: SCM Press, 2000), p. 203.

with this curriculum does not create many feminist theologians, priests, religious, or lay ecclesial ministers. It does, however, definitely make them scared of calling God “Father.”

In the story from the beginning of this talk, the parish staff person who trained the couple in giving baptism classes is not a radical feminist theologian. She is a good Christian woman trying to help the church heal and grow good families. However, this person thinks this prayer will not scare anybody away from the church. By giving out a prayer to “Our Parent, who art up there” she is able to avoid all those negative feelings we have about our bad fathers who abused our mothers and abandoned us. It is not the case that these types of educated Christians are all radical feminist theologians; rather, they think that a good minister should avoid father language to help as many people become happy, comfortable, and Christian.

I am sympathetic to the legion of lay ecclesial ministers, sisters, priests, and religious who work long hours for very little compensation in Christian churches and ministries. However, we have a devastating problem when a Christian has to apologize for praying the Lord’s Prayer and crying out to God as Abba, Father.

The question we must deal with now is the causal link between the societal decline of fatherhood and the theological decline of theologies of God the Father. Which is the cause and which is the effect? If we know which is the cause and which is the effect then we can better achieve a retrieval of a culture of fatherhood in order to reduce abortions and truly create a culture of life.

One initial response to this question is that the societal decline precedes the theological. But there is another response that I think is correct. The theological decline leads to a societal decline. In order to establish this causal relationship, let us begin with Paul.

Pope Benedict XVI declared the year beginning from June 29, 2008, the Solemnity of the Saints Peter and Paul, to the same date in 2009 as the Year of Saint Paul.<sup>6</sup> Benedict thus provided the Church the opportu

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, *Saint Paul: General Audiences July 2, 2008 – February*

nity to deepen its relationship to Paul, who was born some 2000 years ago. Among the many fascinating aspects I have been learning about Paul this year has been his really surprisingly profound theology of God the Father and the Father's relationship to earthly fatherhood.

The common idea in feminist theologies is that the designation of fatherhood is projected upon God by human fathers. Paul made the reverse claim. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he prayed for them by saying, "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph. 3:14-15). Who does the giving of the name and who receives the name? For Paul, God the Father gives his name to every family in heaven and on earth. These families receive their existence from God the Father.

Paul, of course, spoke here about the church as a family who receives its existence from God the Father alone, but also closely attached with or at least in connection to his idea is the interpretation that families receive their existence from God the Father. It is this Father as creator, originator, and *archè* of the Trinity who is at the originating point of everything.<sup>7</sup> For Paul, if the church at Ephesus is going to have a renewal in its commitment to being counter-cultural and completely imitating the crucified Christ, it will only be through a bowing of knees to God the Father. When they bow their knees to the Father, Paul reminded them that the Holy Spirit will strengthen them from within so that Jesus Christ may dwell in their hearts (Eph. 3:16-17).

Belief in God the Father as the First Person of the Trinity and as the one who is ultimately the focus of prayer is central to early Christianity. The Pauline scholar Michael Gorman makes the case in his theological study of Paul: "One of the distinctive features of Jesus', Paul's, and (it appears) most early Christians' relationship with God was their practice

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4, 2009, trans. *L'Osservatore Romano* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Jean Daniélou, *God and the Ways of Knowing*, translated by Walter Roberts (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1957), p. 132.



of calling God ‘Father,’ often using the Aramaic word Abba to do so.”<sup>8</sup> For Jesus, Paul, and early Christians calling God “Father” was essential to God’s revelation of himself and was necessary for encountering God in prayer.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul described the apparently common early Christian experience of crying out in prayer to God as “Abba! Father!” (Rom. 8:15). He explained that this occurs because we have received the spirit of sonship through the Holy Spirit, which happens in baptism. Paul taught that just as Jesus as the Son of God cried out to God as his Abba, so too should the Romans cry out to God as their Abba (Rom. 8:12-17). Similarly, in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians he reminded the church at Galatia that they have received the Spirit of the Son and so from their hearts they are “crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6). In these letters, Paul placed father-child language at the center of the Christian’s encounter with God. The child gives his father honor and obedience and the father provides his child with fulfillment of all their needs now and in the future. Paul argued that when one becomes Christian in baptism, they are taken from a master-slave relationship with God to a truly divine father-son or daughter relationship with God (Gal. 4:7).

Along with these points about Paul’s theology of God the Father, we must remember that the first document written by a Christian, namely, Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, began this way, “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace” (1 Thes. 1:1). The first written Christian word about God is that he is *Father* and that Jesus is *Lord*. For Paul as a good Jew, Lord-language is reserved for YHWH alone. The message of Paul’s greeting is that Jesus Christ is he who is one with YHWH and is therefore Lord and that this YHWH is Father. Father language is present in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Sam. 9:1,

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<sup>8</sup> Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company 2004), p. 119.

16:6, 2 Sam. 8:16, 2 Chr. 29:1, and Judges 9:1).<sup>9</sup> However, the father language in the New Testament presents God the Father as *the* central image of the God revealed by Jesus Christ as Son. In his commentary on this first Christian verse, Gorman makes the following point:

the opening [of 1 Thessalonians] identifies the church as being “in” not only Christ (a common Pauline idea) but also God the Father. This pair corresponds to the summary of Paul’s gospel in 1:9-10 and of God’s guidance in 3:11. The role of the Spirit, though not mentioned in either of these places, is still prominent in the letter (1:5-6; 4:8; 5:19). The Thessalonians’ experience of God and the gospel is Trinitarian in character.<sup>10</sup>

In this letter, Paul greeted the Thessalonians with a reminder of the gospel he preached to them that had at its center being in Christ and in God the Father. The whole letter as the first surviving document of early Christianity prominently displays a sincere belief in the Trinitarian character of God and the deep need of early Christians to encounter God as the Father who has sent his Son and Holy Spirit in order to bring them into himself.

The Synoptic Gospels, which are of course written after Paul’s letters, are in continuity with this Trinitarian character of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI makes the theologically and exegetical argument that central to the synoptic, historical Jesus is the revelation of God as Father.<sup>11</sup> The insistence of the synoptic gospel writers is clear that Jesus invoked God as Father. This insistence can be seen, for example in Mark’s preservation of the Aramaic in Jesus’s prayer in the Garden of

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<sup>9</sup> “The common occurrence of these names shows the idea of God, or Yahweh, as father was well known and accepted.” Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing God the Father Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, translated by Adrian Walker (New York NY: Double Day, 2007), pp. 23-24, 319-55.

Gethsemane when he cries out, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this chalice from me; yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mk 14:36). The revelation of God as Father is seen also in Jesus’s teaching on prayer during the Sermon on the Mount: “Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven...” (Mt 6:9, cf. Lk 11:2). The Synoptic Jesus is in intimate relation with God as his Abba and he teaches a relationship of prayer that invokes God as Abba.

The Gospel of John, which is a later New Testament writing, amplifies Jesus’s relationship to God as Father. In the Book of Glory (John 13:1-20:31), which is the second half of John’s Gospel, has the central feature of Jesus as the Son revealing his interior prayer relationship to God the Father. All of the Father-language in these dialogues led the apostle Philip to burst out, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied” (John 14:8). It is as if Philip’s words gathered up all of humanity’s yearning and he summed them in his prayer to Jesus, “Show us the Father” and then and only then, “we shall be satisfied.” Jesus the Son then answered the prayer of Philip with the important words, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” because, Jesus continued, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:9-10). Jesus taught that the satisfaction Philip seeks, and with him all of humanity, can be found only in the Father and the only way to the Father is in Jesus as the Son.

Rather than something that is tertiary or secondary to the revelation of the God of the New Testament, Paul, the Synoptic gospels, and the Gospel of John speak about the fatherhood of God as essential to his revealing of himself in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Additionally, we have seen that by relating to God as Father, one receives from him all that he truly needs.<sup>12</sup>

As a final point in this section, I would like to add in the teaching

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<sup>12</sup> I do not have time here to present a full theology of God the Father in the New Testament, but if I did it would be reasonable to present such aspects of the fatherhood of God like his mercy, personal presence, covenant relationship, oneness with the Son and Holy Spirit, which is shared with the Church, sacrificial love, providence ancient, present and forever along with our need to honor, cherish, obey, and love him.

and caution provided by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It says that, “By calling God ‘Father,’ the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children.”<sup>13</sup> Further along, it also says that we ought

to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard (Ps. 27:10, Eph. 3:14, Is. 49:15): no one is father as God is Father.”<sup>41</sup>

The Catechism is saying that father-language is the language of faith that speaks of God’s transcendence and his intimate care. It also says that God transcends our concept of father and even mother because the nature of God transcends human sexual differentiation. God, however, has chosen to reveal himself as father in the words and life of Jesus Christ. In other words, as we speak about God as Father, we cannot limit ourselves to our own experience of fatherhood and motherhood. Instead, we must allow God’s way of being father be the “origin and standard” of our concept of fatherhood and motherhood.

Having provided an argument for the need to retrieve a theology of God the Father, I would like to discuss the implications of this retrieval. In the Letter of James, we are encouraged to believe that “every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). The effect that we truly desire in our society, the concern here of course is the retrieval of fatherhood (certainly, one of the perfect gifts), comes from God the Father. It is only from the Father above that there can be a retrieval of fatherhood below. Every perfect gift does not come from below. The letter of James or the Pauline letters discussed earlier do not instruct us that deconstructing father language of God achieves social harmony. Every perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of

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<sup>13</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica* (New York NY: Doubleday, 1997), § 239.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

lights. As strange as it might sound to some, only when we have a right faith and understanding of God's fatherhood can we have a right understanding of human fatherhood.

The Christian feminist critique of the language of God has one point correct. Language about God affects our relationship with each other. However, what they do with this insight, namely, changing the language revealed about God in order affect a change in society, forgets the proper order of revelation. It is God who reveals his fatherhood throughout the Old Testament and in a more definitive way in the New Testament. Fatherhood language has not been projected upon the divine realm. This idea would give into the critique of the atheist humanist philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, who argued that God the Father-language is only a projection of human desire. Instead, the Christian should believe and teach that fatherhood language has been revealed by God himself.<sup>15</sup>

When we speak about a God beyond the Father revealed by Jesus Christ, we distort the revealed God of salvation history. The effect of this distortion of belief, as good as the intentions of many Christian feminist theologians might be, is not positive change. Rather, the effect is the belittling of earthly fatherhood. Let me be clear here, the critique of patriarchal social sin is a necessary act of Christians; however, the critique must be done in the right way. It is only through a proper understanding of God the Father's sacrificial love that we truly see the potential of what human fatherhood could be. Since the practice of good religion is inextricably tied with the development of good culture, it is my firm belief that faith in God the Father, "who so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son" (John 3:16), will be essential for

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<sup>15</sup> Along with Hans Urs von Balthasar, the important twentieth-century Catholic theologian, Christians must insist that God has interpreted his own being in Jesus Christ and this interpretation given by God is that he is Father: "How then can man, who is created with an orientation towards God and constantly seeks him, begin to interpret him? Only God, who has the vision of his own wisdom is able to reveal his wisdom." Hans Urs Von Balthasar, "God is His Own Exegete," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 4 (1986): 280-87.

affecting a retrieval of a culture of fatherhood. The right relation between men, women, and children can only happen with a right understanding of God who has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, I have been arguing in this paper that the retrieval of fatherhood, which will affect a reduction in abortions, must be preceded by a retrieval of good theologies of God the Father. Only by having a right understanding of the fatherhood presented to us by the God the Father above can we have a right understanding of the fatherhood we all desire here below. Rather than having a daggers-drawn relationship to the Father language of the Christian God, we must sheath our animosity and draw out instead a love for God the Father revealed by Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Holy Spirit as their mutual love.

Returning to the baptism class I spoke about earlier, I would like us to think about the fathers in that class who had to read that awful prayer to the divine parent. What if the brand new fathers, who are full of new-found love for their child while also experiencing bewilderment at how they are supposed to be a father, would have prayed to God the Father in the words our Lord taught us? If they called out to God as Abba, do we think they would have been better or worse fathers? Should they not be praying to the origin and standard of all life “who so loved the world” who so loved his Son, who so loved us, “that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16)? What if instead of belittling the Father language of God we embraced it?