

Apostolic and Pastoral Fatherhood

Logia 36.2

In a world full of people hungry for the attention and love of their earthly fathers, pastors have a powerful role to play.

Psychologists note that we are experiencing an epidemic of father hunger in our societies. They define father hunger as craving for the approval and love of an absent father. People with father hunger do not have a father to discipline and encourage them, assess and bless them. They feel the lack of a father who is able to give them a sure sense of themselves as women and men. Since they feel uncertain about themselves, insignificant and unnoticed, they crave a father, or father figure, to recognise their real worth, give them a true sense of who they are, and confirm their identity as men or women.

When fathers fail to pay attention to their children, or remain physically and emotionally absent from them, the lack of proper fathering leaves a disturbing emotional vacuum in them. It results in a sense of dislocation and disconnection, disorder and disorientation that is often accompanied by a deep sense of unworthiness and shame. But if the neglect of children by their father becomes rejection, the damage is even worse. Persistent rejection has a devastating impact on them. Rejection results in an uncertain sense of identity and an obsession with gaining and retaining attention and approval. It can lead to obsessive, compulsive behaviour. It may contribute to eating disorders and emotional instability, personal aimlessness and sexual confusion, substance abuse and other forms of addiction. At worst, people who suffer from severe father hunger seek attention and affirmation from a surrogate father. They may rage against people in authority and be drawn to powerful personalities who promise to vindicate and empower them.

I am not sure whether, and to what extent, this is always true, but I do know that we are often uncertain about ourselves and our own worth. This is so, most of all, for young people in their teen years when they are learning to stand on their own feet as persons in their own right. That often used to be true for girls, but now seems to even more so for boys and young men. Most young people are subject to all kinds of cultural and social pressures that threaten their sense of self, discount their worth, and rob them of their identity. They need a father, or father figure, to guide them and help them to find themselves as they make their way in life; they need someone to take notice of them and approve of them, someone to affirm them and mentor them.

Spiritual father hunger is much more common than this. Though seldom recognized, it is, in fact, universal. We all suffer from a kind of spiritual father hunger that even the best human father cannot satisfy. We all need someone greater than we are with the authority to test us and to approve of us, someone to judge us and to justify us - someone to assess our unruly selves and to bless us, someone to affirm us and encourage us. We all need someone to father us spiritually.

And that is just what God the Father does for us, both physically and spiritually. He does it in two ways: through Jesus His incarnate Son and through the men that He has appointed as His apostles and our pastors.

God the Father has sent His Son Jesus as a man with a human body who has been authorised to adopt us as sons and heirs and show Himself physically and spiritually to us. His Son does not do his own work, but the work of the Father who sent him. He does not speak his own words, but the words of his gracious Father. Anyone who hears what Jesus says hears the voice of God the Father. Anyone who sees the Son sees the Father also, because the Son is the visible image of the Father. He is the mirror of the Father's heart. Through Jesus people see what God is like as their true Father, and how He regards them. They gain their true identity as children of God. This was true for people who followed Jesus during his earthly life; it is still true for us even now in our life as his disciples and in the divine service where Jesus represents the Father to us in his care for us.

God also fathers us through the pastors that He gives to us. Like the apostles they have been sent by Jesus and his Father to make peace with us by forgiving us our sins and pouring out his Holy Spirit on us (John 20:19-23). In the divine service pastors represent God's Son personally to us as his agents. Through their ministry he, in turn, represents his heavenly Father to us in word and deed. He speaks the word of the Father and does the Father's work. Those who listen to a pastor as their teacher hear the voice of God the Son speaking on behalf of the Father (Luke 10:16). Those who receive a pastor as God's spokesman receive both the Son and his divine Father (Matt 10:40; John 13:20). Those who reject the word of God spoken by the pastor as God's spokesman and enacted by them as His agents, reject both the Son and his heavenly Father (Luke 10:16).

A pastor therefore does not just speak Christ's word to his people, but, like the Son, also represents the Father to them. As he exercises his ministry, he speaks the Father's pardon, welcome, acceptance, approval, love, and blessing to His faithful children. And all this is done in a physical and spiritual way. He does these things with his human body as he is commissioned by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Thus God the Father fathers us spiritually through the men who serve with the risen Lord Jesus in the ministry of the gospel. He does not father us by laying down his law and exercising his power over us; He fathers us by speaking His gospel to us and empowering us with His Holy Spirit who recreates us as His dear children.

Luther teaches this quite simply in his explanation of the fourth commandment in the Large Catechism where he says: "Thus we have three kinds of fathers presented to us in this commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of the household, and fathers of the nation. Besides these, there are also our spiritual fathers...For the name spiritual father belongs only to those who govern and guide us by the word of God." He bases this on Paul's claim in 1 Corinthians 4:14-15 that he had fathered the congregation in Corinth. There he says: "Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel."

Like Christ and his apostles, pastors are called to be spiritual fathers to their people. They represent God the Father, who exercises his fatherhood by justifying sinners, adopting them as His beloved children, and making them His honoured heirs. Through their ministry, pastors help to rectify the damage done to people by the failure of their biological fathers and to nurture them as they seek to fulfil their spiritual vocations as children of God.

That could well be why Christ chose men to be his apostles, and why He appoints men, rather than women, as pastors to father God's children. Their character as adult men and, even more so, as human fathers and husbands equips them to do this.