

The 'fatherhood of a priest'

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There was a flood of "Happy Father's Day" greetings on social media this week. I find this disconcerting and amusing because I don't have a wife or children. I have been a faithful celibate through all these years, with no illegitimate or secret love child.

One message I received reads: "Though biologically you are not, but in all aspects truly you are. This day belongs to you too."

I still insist that the day is primarily to honor all the real fathers (especially the biological fathers) who have brought children into the world, helped nurture them, care for them, facilitated their growth and, in their own imperfect ways, mirror God's paternal love for them.

I agree that fatherhood is more than biological engendering. That is why we priests are often referred to as "Father." Everybody calls me "Father," so I do not begrudge those who greet me. I just hope I really deserve this title.

What does it mean for priests to be called "Father?"

Celibacy is not just a question of remaining unmarried or avoiding women and children. It is not an end in itself. It is a gift that is to be used to attain an end, which is service to the kingdom of God. It becomes meaningless if it does not express the priest's total dedication and commitment and his availability to God and to others. It is empty if it does not witness to the universality of God's love.

Instead of committing himself totally to a woman, the priest commits himself totally to God and his church. Instead of raising a particular family, which is the domestic church, the priest forms a larger family, the spiritual family that is the church, the Christian community, the parish, which is a network of Basic Ecclesial Communities.

Instead of being a biological father to a few children, he becomes the spiritual father to the flock that the Lord has entrusted to his care. That is why he is often addressed as "Father."

Instead of forming a family, the celibate priest forms and leads the Christian community. He fosters communion — loving union, sharing and caring — not in a particular family and home but in a broader and bigger family and home.

The love and care of the priest is not exclusively focused on a wife and children but for the church, the Christian community to which he has dedicated his entire life. He is freed from dealing with domestic responsibilities and problems so that he can deal with bigger responsibilities and problems of his flock.

Celibacy allows the priest to be more available to his flock without worrying about his own family. With an undivided heart and mind the priest is able to serve God and his flock. Thus the spiritual fatherhood of the priest is highlighted. This is what Vatican II referred to as "paternity in Christ."

The fatherhood of the priest is fulfilled not just in forming and building up the family of God that is the local church and Christian community. It is also manifested as the newly baptized are born anew through water and Spirit incorporated into the Family of God.

This fatherhood is expressed as the priest facilitates the members grow and mature in faith and actively participate in the mission they have received from Christ through baptism and empowered by the gift of the Spirit in confirmation.

The "fatherhood of a priest" is also expressed as he provides for the spiritual nourishment of the family of God by preaching the Word of God and consecrating the bread and wine as body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

The priest does not only provide for the spiritual hunger of the members. By his social ministry the priest provides for the temporal needs of the flock — through programs and projects that alleviate their poverty and bring about justice, peace and development.

Thus, through the celibate priest's ministry of pastoral leadership and communion, through his prophetic and sacramental ministry, through his social ministry as well as his ministry to the poor, the priest's fatherhood is fully manifested.

The relationship between the priest and the Christian community is not only a paternal one. It can also be seen in spousal terms. The priest is configured to Christ who loves the church as a groom loves his bride. In an analogical sense, the priest — alter christus — is betrothed to the church.

The priest is wedded to the church — totally committed to her and remaining faithful to her for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, unto death and beyond death, forever and ever.

When he is not available to the people, to his parishioners, to the poor, when he does not have time for encounter with God in prayer, a priest's celibacy becomes empty and meaningless. His life is characterized by perpetual boredom and loneliness making him more vulnerable to the "temptations of the flesh."

When celibacy is not intimately connected to ministry and mission, when it does not further the realization of the kingdom of God, it turns the priest into an irresponsible bachelor. Instead of being an authentic sign of selfless dedication to the kingdom it becomes a sign of selfishness and self-indulgence.

Committing oneself to a celibate way of life and remaining faithful to one's promise is the ultimate self-sacrifice that a man can make. He is foregoing something that is beautiful and good that fulfills his deepest desires and needs and that can bring fulfillment to his manhood, the intimate love with a woman expressed in the sexual act, and the fruit of that love — the offspring that will guarantee his posterity.

Celibacy is an act of consecration, of self-oblation and of total self-giving to something and someone greater than himself — to the transcendent reality that is God and his kingdom. It is indeed a witness to the reality and priority of God. This is at the heart of what it means to be a priest.

A priest must always remember that he made a sacred vow to the Lord — a promise and commitment to dedicate his whole life to him and his Kingdom and to forego marriage and family so that he can raise and build up the spiritual family of God that is the church. It is a promise that he has to constantly keep every day for the rest of his life.

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