

TEOLOGIA CORPO



God's Plan of Salvation: Love and Responsibility in the Family

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The human person is a marvelously created physical, mental and spiritual being, wired for relationships. This is apparent in the first moments of an infant's life. Touching is the first means to express relationships. For nine months the child has been cradled in the mother's womb. He felt secure. When he comes into the world, the warmth and pressure of his parent's arms reassure him. He becomes calm and his crying abates. Touching and holding facilitate the bonding between the child and the parents. The mother becomes more aware of the child's physical needs as she learns to distinguish the sound of one cry from another. Skin to skin contact releases the hormone oxytocin, which relaxes both mother and child, and helps both of them sleep better. Bonding, touching, and holding all facilitate normal mental, emotional and physical development. Face to face with the parent during those first few months, the child learns that he exists, who he is, and experiences his first attempt to communicate in that relationship.

Since the human person is a being with a mind, body and soul, it is understandable that a need for relationships exists. We are not rocks. In our Jewish and Christian heritage we believe we are created by God "in his image." When a child comes into the world the first question asked is, "Who does he look like?" We seek to see in the child a resemblance to the mother and/or the father. This says there is a part of me in this child and he is mine. The parents and the family claim him and bring him into their family. This is not something only biological parents experience. Quite often parents of adopted children are told by a stranger how much their child looks like them. It is more than just genes as they take on similar characteristics and mannerisms. It is living together in a loving relationship that unites the family.

Human beings desire also to have a relationship with the God who created them "in his image." In Genesis 1:27 it is written that it was "in his divine image he created him." It is very clear: each person reflects the face of God, the Father. By means of our human birth we become members of the human family and also the family of God. We have been willed and created by God in the union of a man and woman. It is through God's gift of the child upon conception that makes the woman, the mother, and the man, the father. Therefore, it is through the mother's acceptance of her vocation of motherhood that the man is able to accept his call to fatherhood.

The role accepted by the mother and the father calls them, as children of God, to mirror God's love and his authority. Every child does have the right to be loved, to be brought into a home where love abounds. This is as God wills it. With love comes responsibility. It is the responsibility of the parents to guide the child in the ways of the Lord that is, to be Christ-like.

According to our Jewish and Christian tradition, God chose to initiate this relationship with man. God was eager to share all he created upon the earth with a living being. With the creation of Eve, the human family, the source of human relationships, is complete. God blessed them, saying: "Be fertile and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). His love was abundant. So much so that he gave them everything in the garden. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over ...all the creatures" (Genesis 1:26). God was willing to share his authority with man, enabling him to possess, use and control the creatures that crawled on the ground.

According to the second Creation story, Adam's role in the Garden was given to him by God prior to Eve's creation. Genesis 2:15-17 states: "The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and care for it. The Lord God gave man this order: 'You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad.'

Then in verse 18: "The Lord God said: 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.'

We assume that God's next action was to be the creation of Eve. Instead, God creates the "animals and various birds of the air" permitting Adam to name and have dominion over the animals who now reside in the Garden. God instructed him to "cultivate and care for" this Garden and issued these responsibilities before he created Eve. Yet, "none proved to be the suitable partner for the man." Not until verse 22 was the woman created by God, who, "brought her to the man."

In this Creation story, there is no mention of God directing any responsibilities to Eve once she is created. She was to be Adam's companion; his partner and friend. While God gave the couple dominion over the land, that is, the mutual right to possess, use and control it, it was Adam alone whom God instructed to "cultivate and care for" the Garden. When we "care for" someone, they become the object of our concern and attention. If Eve was Adam's companion, bone of his bone, then to care for Eve would demand that he give her his utmost attention and protection. God was asking Adam to care for and love Eve as God loved her.

Then something went terribly wrong, damaging the relationship with the Divine and forever distorting our human relationships. Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of God, but their actions did not reflect God's treasury of virtue. As the story unfolds, we imagine Adam off asleep somewhere, rather than caring for his companion, Eve, when she succumbed to the wiles of the serpent. Adam also succumbed by accepting the apple from Eve. Using their freewill, their human inadequacies caused Adam and Eve to fall for the tantalizing proposal to "be like gods." By eating from the forbidden tree, they failed to make proper use of their God-given authority over the Garden. Instead, by accepting

the serpent's lie that, "Your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods", they desired to exert their own authority, placing themselves above God.

If we think that it was only a matter of disobedience when they shared an apple, we miss a meaningful piece of the story. Adam failed to live up to his commitment to "cultivate and care for" all placed within the Garden, including the one who was most like himself, Eve. If Adam truly understood the depth of his relationship with Eve, that "the two of them become one body" (Genesis 2:24), and demonstrated his proper concern for her, he would have realized she was about to fall. Ultimately, his desire for authority trumped their relationship.

Adam and Eve also failed to understand the depth of God's relationship with them. The sole source of their authority was God who, motivated by love, freely gifted them with authority. Had Adam and Eve recognized and praised God as the one who bestows authority, they would have preserved their dominion over the Garden. To make matters worse, when confronted by God, Eve blamed the serpent, who lied about the prize of knowledge, and Adam blamed Eve, revealing the fallen state of humanity's first familial relationship. Unable to admit their fault to the Divine Authority, they fracture their relationship with God.

These are the parents of the first family. Subsequent generations have transmitted these disordered principles, elevating authority over the importance of a caring relationship. This has resulted in the distorted representation of God as an authoritarian Judge as opposed to a caring Father

God, as a loving Father, wanted to protect us from harm and show us how to live correctly with others in flourishing relationships and ultimately in a relationship with him. Overcoming generations void of virtue and societies consumed by disordered priorities demanded a supreme example of holiness. God would reveal the authentic love he initially desired for Adam and Eve within a new family, bringing about a new humanity. It is as if he wanted to say to us, "Men, this is the kind of man and father I want you to be. Women, here is the example of womanhood – follow her! This is what it means to be family! This is the relationship I desire to have with you! "

A woman saying "Yes" and becoming the Mother of God was essential for God to take on a human nature within a real human family. Although bearing a child is something only a woman can do, Mary did not see bearing the Messiah as a tempting proposition elevating her to the level of God. The Incarnation was not an example of empowerment of a woman. Mary acknowledged God's authority and in her submission preserved her relationship with God. Mary's "Yes" to God the Father was the antithesis of the woman who said yes to the father of lies. Here is a young woman who agrees to accept a situation totally beyond human understanding. Despite her inability to comprehend what she was about to undertake, her heart was moved to say "Yes", and so she became the key protagonist for the salvation of humanity.

Yet, the fulfillment of the gift of her son still required more. To accomplish our redemption and witness the fullness of God's relationship with us, Christ would need an exemplary, holy family. The woman, Mary, could feed and clothe him, but a human family needs a father to care for and protect it, someone to mirror God's authority, to guard the faith and live in virtue.

Like Mary, Joseph was a man who knew God and would be able to say yes to God without understanding what the future held. It should be noted that in accordance with the Jewish tradition at the time, their betrothal was tantamount to marriage. In effect, God had already chosen this man, Joseph, to protect this Holy Family, *before* he even asked Mary to bear his son. And yet, Joseph was so frightened by the announcement that he mentally checked through his options. He could have fled, or blamed Mary and divorced her. Witnessing his deep trust in God, this “just” man, Joseph, gave his “yes” to this mystery. He took Mary into his house, protected her and loved her with a level of commitment that can only happen with a dependence on God and the grace radiating from marriage. By dying to himself, Joseph becomes the perfection of manhood and fatherhood. Here we witness the establishment of an authentic human relationship formed from divine and human love.

Like Adam at the creation of Eve, Joseph also had a role in “naming” this new creation, Christ. According to Jewish custom, the act of naming a child constitutes the father’s claim to the child. The name Jesus was given to Joseph by an angel. By assigning the name, God preserved his own claim on his son. By naming Jesus, Joseph knew that Jesus was legally *his* son and so he assumed full responsibility to care for him. This was the case for Adam who named and had dominion over the animals. Unlike Adam, Joseph said “yes” to God’s plan and then followed through. Joseph honored God’s authority and thereby, became the authority in the home of Jesus. Joseph becomes the first new man in Christ, that is, the first man to know Christ and have eternal life by sharing in his redemptive Love.

Joseph’s fatherhood was a direct result of Mary’s motherhood. Without this woman’s acceptance of her motherhood, he would not have been a father. In their complementarity, they fulfilled God’s plan and became the new and perfected model of family life. Mary tended to the immediate needs of Jesus and her husband. Joseph transmitted their faith and familial customs, dutifully presenting him in the temple. He cared for him and guided him through infancy to adult life in Nazareth. He would protect Mary and Jesus during the flight to Egypt. Joseph was being what he was called by God to be: a father to this Son. His perfection of human fatherhood and committed love relationship with Mary and Jesus was an act of reparation for Adam’s failure in the first human family.

Fathers and leaders of the tribes in the Old Testament were getting it wrong also. The head of the household had the duty to bestow the treasure of faith and instruct the child so that the covenant could be shared with all his descendants. This belief and trust in God ensured their happiness in life and peace with God and amended Adam’s rejection. Men like Noah and Abraham followed through and submitted their will to God. The increasing failure of subsequent generations to protect the faith and lead their families in the faith put them on the wrong course. Thus, the Levites were appointed priests. They were charged with the preservation of the faith in its integrity enabling the head of the household to transfer to his children their covenant with God. The Levites were the priests in the synagogue and the father was the priest in his home providing his children with their spiritual needs.

We have this same structure in the Catholic Church today. The role of the priest in the Church and the role of the father in the family, the “domestic church”, are similar, that is, to protect the Church (the home), provide and transmit the fullness of the faith, and to care for their well-being by nurturing the importance of God’s relationship to them and their relationship with God. We are well familiar with the

crisis in the priesthood and the past decline in vocations. It is no coincidence that fatherhood is also in crisis. When man has a problem acknowledging God, he will have difficulty fully realizing the meaning and potential of his vocation. The state of the priesthood today is a reflection of the crisis in fatherhood in the family. The Church suffers, the family suffers. When there is a problem with God, fatherhood suffers. Physically they may be healthy, but spiritually they are starving.

There is no need to go into a detailed analysis of the state of the family. We can all acknowledge that given the breakdown of the family in society today; we are still getting something terribly wrong.

The mother intuitively sees all the needs of the child and the family. She instinctively cares for the physical needs of her child bonded to her since conception. She brings the person and all of their needs into herself. If a child needs discipline or moral direction, and no one else is present or capable, she will step in. If required she will have the strength to provide, protect and care for her child. However, in God's plan she was not to do it alone. In fact, she cannot do it alone. She cannot usurp the role of the father, without dire consequences for the child. She may try, but will never replace the father's relationship with the child.

Fatherhood is a call to self-sacrifice. He must make a conscious decision to do what is necessary for the good of his child. He needs to communicate to his child the love of God the Father, to whom the child ultimately owes his existence. Often this is not what children witness in their fathers. Whether verbalized or exemplified in his actions, many children perceive the attitude, "Do what I say and not as I do." Then, the child charges the parent, and for that matter, the priest or any adult authority, with hypocrisy. The father must acknowledge that his authority, like Adam's and Joseph's before him, comes from God. Failure to demonstrate this to his child diminishes the child's inheritance of an authentic relationship with God the Father. As a consequence, the child has no source for his paternal authority as he approaches adulthood.

Obviously, our human fathers are not perfect and so the image of fatherhood they present will always be less than perfect. Fathers with the best intentions believe they are following through on their responsibilities for their family. They work hard, sometimes unhealthily hard. The family has a beautiful life by the world's standard. They may be actively involved in their church, school and community. Then, suddenly their life is shaken. They are taken by surprise when a child falls into a deep depression, flunks out of school or turns to drugs or some other form of addiction or immoral behavior. It seems a mystery – how did this happen?

Although meaning well, the parents were busy parenting but not being a true guardian, that is: elevating their work and home responsibilities to become "daily expressions of love [as seen] in the life of the Holy Family. (Redemptoris Custos, JP II , 22) The parents were doing their job at the office, fulfilling their duties to supply food, clothing and shelter, observing their religious practices but not living in a relationship with God. The focus has been to complete a task, thereby, having control over a situation so that the family's needs are provided. This is admirable but love for God and each other must be woven through the family in their daily interactions with each other.

The child must see in his earthly father two attributes of God the Father from which all virtues flow: authority and love. The father has the responsibility to recognize his authority as a gift from God. Joseph, the head of the house, received the authority to care for and protect his family only after submitting to God's will. When asked by the angel, he bowed to God's authority while respecting his relationship to Mary. Joseph renewed his marriage vow and accepted his vocation of fatherhood, taking Mary and the Child into his home and loving them. Joseph, unlike Adam, equally values authority and relationship and the love of God that is immersed in both. His decision reflects a balance of thought and pure virtue. His choice enables him to be the head of the Holy Family. Joseph understood the meaning of his relationship to God and how that was to be lived out in the relationship with Mary and Christ. Hence, the process of salvation was able to begin in this Holy Family.

Here is a typical situation in family life today. A father makes a decision to take a new job which requires uprooting the family; he confidently assures himself and his family that he has weighed all the pros and cons. But throughout his decision process, he didn't call upon God to assist him. The child sees that the father decided on his own what to do. Since the paternal witness of submission to the authority of God the Father is missing, the father becomes the "god", the highest authority in the child's life. If any difficulties result from this decision to move, the child blames the father. He becomes angry and disappointed with his father and ultimately rejects him as a valid authority figure in his life.

In their defense, the parents, and most importantly the father, may have a personal relationship with God, but the child may not witness it. Perhaps, it was behind closed doors or in the silent recesses of their heart. But, like the lamp under the basket it produced no light. The child is in the dark. Where is he to go? When the child's eyes are open to the inadequacies of the father, he experiences confusion. To whom is he to turn?

Imagine the situation differently. Before making his decision the father consults his wife and they pray together for God's guidance. Then he presents the matter to the child. The father witnesses his dependence on God the Father by asking his wife and children to call upon God for the grace to help him to make the decision that God would want him to make for the good of his family. The child sees that his father really loves God. The father has shown his son the meaning of the virtue of humility by acknowledging God's authority. The good that flows from the decision is then seen as a blessing from God. With the father's guidance, the child comes to see any difficulties that arise from the decision as challenges from God to help them live their Christian life. He can't blame his parents when he sees that they obtained guidance from God, who is the ultimate authority. This is enormously liberating to the parent!

The second attribute of God the Father which human fathers are called to reveal to their children is the face of a loving God. The respect and love the father bestows on the mother teaches the child how God wants him to respect and treat others. The child is imprinted with the manner in which the parents speak to each other, look at each other, and touch each other. Actions do speak louder than words. As mentioned earlier, touching is the infant's first means of experiencing feeling and personal relationship. When love is sweetly communicated between the mother and father, the child feels secure within this "union of hearts." (St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 29, a. 2 in conclus.)

When he sees his father praying to God like a little child, he comes to understand that he too is a child of God. When he sees his parents forgive each other, he sees the merciful face of the Father. Armed with the ability to forgive, he will come to know that as much as his parent loves him, perfect love only comes from God. He will understand, then, that his talents are gifts from God to be used for the service of others. He will see the face of God in others and so respect them. This proper relationship with God puts him on solid ground to establish a love of, and responsibility for, his fellow man.

We must remember: men cannot give what they do not have. How can he reflect the face of a loving God when his own father failed to prepare him? How can he convey the face of authentic fatherhood to the next generation if he doesn't know that he, himself, is a gift from God to humanity? If he never witnessed the mercy of God, how will he be able to forgive his own father for the wounds he received? The father's witness to the importance of having a relationship with God to the point of dying to self even in the smallest matters will go farther in saving the family than any social or religious program.

God, Himself, demonstrated this for us through his own relationship with his son, Jesus Christ. Christ was tempted but remained faithful to the person of God the Father and submitted to his will. With obedience to God the Father, Christ becomes the Way, the Truth and the Light, sharing in the Trinitarian authority with the Holy Spirit. As Christ was willing to die for us, we are called die to ourselves for others.

In Baptism we are named in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and are claimed as daughters and sons of our heavenly Father. God is the one who loved us from the beginning, who knew us first. Like Joseph, our earthly fathers must reflect the same love and care our heavenly Father showers upon us. They must show us that being a father means enlightening the children with the face of God. Fathers must call upon the name of the Lord and guide them in his way, so the children might avoid risk and peril. Men are called to be Priest, Prophet and King to protect, lead and care for their family, both physically and spiritually.

Women, wives, and daughters intuitively want men to lead, and lead with love. We know the best gift a father can give his children is for him to love their mother. In marriage, Joseph commits to loving Mary always thereby demonstrating the value of relationship with the proper use of authority. Accepting his fatherhood, Joseph is able to fulfill what Adam did not. Mary and Joseph, each being a gift to the other, redefine the relationship with God as one of love and responsibility lived together through marriage and the family.

John Paul II, in *Redemptoris Custos (1)*, expressed the need for "the whole Christian people to not only turn to Saint Joseph with greater fervor and invoke his patronage with trust, but also...always keep before their eyes his humble, mature way of serving and of "taking part" in the plan of salvation."

In summary, the father is to be like Joseph guiding his family on the path to God by being the spiritual leader of the home. Mary needed Joseph and women today need men who are willing to accept their responsibilities to provide, to protect and to care for others. Answering the call of God to become a new creation in Christ, the father cooperates in his own redemption. Following in the footsteps of Christ who

came to “turn the hearts of the fathers toward children...and to prepare a people fit for the Lord” (Luke 1:18) the father enables his family’s eternal happiness and destiny in God’s plan of salvation.

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