

FATHERHOOD

by Ian Pinto, sdb

Every human being has to function in various roles all through his/her life. One of the key roles that human beings play is that of parents. For a man, being a father is one of the greatest roles he will ever play on his sojourn on earth while for a woman it is being a mother.



Fathers play a significant role in the life of the family. They are husbands to their wives and fathers to their children. Their role in the family cannot be undermined. Research suggests that children with involved fathers are less likely to break the law and drop out of school. Guided by close relationships with their dads, these kids disproportionately grow up to avoid risky sex, pursue healthy relationships, and hold down high-paying jobs. They're unlikely to become homeless or over-dependent and more likely to have higher IQ scores than their peers by age three. They develop mental strength and are less prone to obesity.

Within the context of a family, 'father' has two different meanings viz: paternity and fatherhood. Paternity refers to giving

life to the child while fatherhood refers to the loving and caring upbringing of children. Fatherhood is a special gift shared among human beings but paternity is shared with animals too. Contrasting motherhood with fatherhood, we realize that motherhood is a relationship with the child in all the senses. This means that the mother is not only emotionally or spiritually attached to the child but also at some point shared a physical attachment with the child. There continues to be a bodily relationship between child and mother even after birth. Fatherhood, on the other hand, shares with motherhood all other aspects except the physical relationship with the child. Therefore, fatherhood is more a mental and spiritual relationship and is vital to the growth and development of a child. It is a sacred and responsible relationship.

The father exercises authority over his children. Earlier, fathers used their authority in a strict manner, but now many fathers are not even exercising their authority over the children. Some men think that raising a child is a woman's job. It's not! Such attitudes can affect the character formation of a child. The ability or inability of a father to exercise authority over his children depends largely on his personality and maturity level. While a father ought to exercise authority he also ought to be open and democratic. I've heard of instances where the father would boss

around the house with a "my way or the highway" kind of attitude or "my ship, my rules" or other similar obdurate style. Although such behaviours may have delivered good results, their long-term effects aren't very pleasant.



St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians advises fathers on their role. His advice has both negative and positive content. "Fathers, do not make rebels of your children, but educate them by correction and instruction which the Lord may inspire" (6:4). The negative indicates that a father is not to foster negativity in his children by severity, injustice, partiality or unreasonable exercise of authority. Harsh and unreasonable conduct towards a child will only serve to nurture evil in the heart. This in turn will produce adverse reactions, deadening children's affection, reducing their desire for holiness, and making them feel that they cannot please their parents.

The positive part is expressed in a comprehensive direction - educate them, bring them up, develop their conduct in all of life by the instruction and admonition of the Lord. This is the whole process of educating and discipline. The word "admonition"

carries the idea of reminding the child of faults, not in a derogatory but constructive way, and duties or responsibilities.

Charles Peguy once called fathers of families "the great adventurers of the modern world." He was making reference to the great risk which the father assumes when he each day puts himself at the disposal of life instead of, as it is often done or attempted, to put life at his disposal. Being a father is no easy task. Every father will testify to this fact. Despite the attempts by the media to portray a good father as a "sugar-daddy", fathers will know that it takes a lot more to be a good father. One of the first virtues a father must and often does possess is courage. You may wonder why I mention courage as the first, it is because being a father is a pretty difficult job and so many people shy away from it. Let me remind you once again that being a father includes not just contributing to the birth of a child but also playing a role in its nurture and development. While there are many who father children biologically, there aren't as many who father them in other spheres of their innocent lives.

It isn't for nothing that it takes two individuals of opposite sexes to give rise to life. Plants and animals too require a partner to reproduce but usually the responsibility of nurturing the offspring is left to just one. This is not meant to be the case with human beings. Both partners are important and necessary not just to transmit life but to care for it and help it grow optimally. A child without a parent or parents, studies have



shown, develop differently compared to those who grow up with both parents. In most cases of single parents, it is the father that a child misses. This absence of the father has potentially negative effects on the growth and behaviour of the child.

Fatherhood is a sharing in the divine creative action of God. A father becomes co-creator with his wife. He partakes in the divinity of God to a certain extent and therefore, fatherhood becomes a holy and elevated responsibility. The father assumes the role of God within the family; he is responsible for each member, for their health, well-being and progress. He cares for them, provides for them, protects them and is ready to make sacrifices for their sake.

A father who is determined to be present naturally fulfills the two key aspects of fatherhood: life-giving and protecting. He must be committed to the protection of his wife and children from all dangers including one's own weaknesses. St. Joseph is a good model in this regard. The Gospels show him to be a strong and courageous man, a working man, with a heart full of tenderness, which is not a virtue of the weak but

rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love.

"God sets the father in the family so that by the gifts of his masculinity he can be close to his wife and share everything, joy and sorrow, hope and hardship. And to be close to his children as they grow - when they play and when they work, when they are carefree and when they are distressed, when they are talkative and when they are silent, when they are daring and when they are afraid, when they stray and when they get back on the right path. To be a father who is always present." These words of Pope Francis throw light on fatherhood as a vocation and a challenge. While it is easy to say that a father must be there, it isn't always as easy in practice. Juggling work, family, friends and other responsibilities is not child's play, even grown ups have a hard time doing it. But nevertheless, it ought to be done, as best as one can. No one is perfect but that doesn't mean one shouldn't try.



The early patterns of interaction that a child has with his/her father are the very patterns that will be projected forward into all relationships. Girls look for men who hold the patterns of their father. Therefore, if father was



kind, loving and gentle, they will reach for those characteristics in men. Girls will look for, in others, what they have experienced and become familiar with in childhood. Boys on the other hand, will model themselves after their fathers. They will look for their father's approval in everything they do, and copy those behaviours that they recognize as both successful and familiar. Thus, if father was abusive, controlling and dominating, those will be the patterns that their sons will imitate and practice. However, if father is loving, kind, supportive, and protective, boys will want to be that.

It is extremely difficult to overestimate the importance of a father. For example, girls who have good relationships with their fathers tend to do better in math, and boys who have actively involved fathers tend to have better grades and perform better on achievement tests. And well-bonded boys develop securely with a stable and sustained sense of self. Who we are and

who we are to be, we are becoming, and fathers are central to that outcome.

The animal kingdom offers some stunning lessons on fatherhood. I think they have a lot to teach us about fatherhood. They may not be doing it willfully or consciously or intelligently but they do it; how much more can we who have intellect and will? Allow me to elaborate a few:

The male catfish captures the idea of a father providing security and protection to his family quite literally, he keeps the fertilized eggs of his children in his mouth and foregoes eating until they hatch. If that isn't self-sacrifice for the sake of others, I don't know what is.

Male beavers secure their offspring along with the females during the first few hours of their life. As the young beavers mature, the father will teach them how to search for materials to build and repair their own dams, before they disperse to find their own mates. Human fathers are charged with educating their children, not just to academic qualification but also to personal and social maturity. Children require a lot more than education in school, they require to be taught to be human. If you stop to think for awhile you will realize how much your father has taught you. It may have been to ride a bicycle or a car, fishing, cooking or changing a light bulb. It may simply have been to treat others with respect and to help the poor. All these things go a long way in turning the child into a man or woman. □