

+ Saint Benedict: Transitus

March 21, 2020

In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.

My Very Dear Sons,

In a time when many things are falling apart and the very cultural ground that once held up the civilized world seems to be crumbling under our feet—and with it the sense of God—we see more clearly the point of the words of Our Lord, when He asked, “But yet the Son of man, when He cometh, shall He find, think you, faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). A pillar that has been shaken to the core, one that is linked to the very Christian faith we profess, is that of paternity. Paternity is taken here, not only in its natural sense, but also in its fuller meaning: paternity as understood by Christians. Ours is increasingly a society without fathers. As long as there remains a single Christian, it is true, one who can make the sign of the Cross and say, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” the truth of fatherhood will not be entirely lost. But how it can be threatened!

As a well enlightened monk, commenting on the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict, has put it, “experience shows that no earthly fatherhood has ever so closely resembled the fatherhood of God as did Saint Benedict’s.”¹ Indeed, the Holy Rule begins with an appeal to the one aspiring to religious life that traces for us a small but powerful portrait of this paternity of the Saint, who was and is, in the end, but the earthly shadow of the Father in Heaven.

Hearken, O my son, to the precept of your master, and incline the ear of your heart; willingly receive and faithfully fulfill the admonition of your loving father, that you may return by the labor of obedience to Him from whom you had departed through the sloth of disobedience.²

Now, just as the quote from the Rule clearly sets out, paternity (and maternity as well, as it is implied in its complementary dimension) supposes a kind of hierarchy in the family. It implies as well that the father has authority, something much feared in our day. But the true father, the father in the Christian sense especially, is not a merciless judge or a petty tyrant, who is looking for a pretext to condemn. Rather, he is the kind and loving parent, whose authority provides the reassurance that we are not orphans and that we are not left to fend for ourselves in a jungle where the “survival of the fittest” is the only law. Only under that loving care of a father can we have peace and security. The father’s authority is one of discipline, but of a discipline meant to train us for the good, the beautiful, and the truth of human life.

How can we restore the sacred sense of fatherhood in our all too decadent society? For one thing, we can promote authentic monastic life, in particular that based on the Holy Rule of Our Father Saint Benedict, who is the Patriarch, which is to say the venerable father, of the monks of the Western portion of the Christian world. Another way to underline the unique mystery of the fatherhood, especially the fatherhood of God, is to protect and foster, to promote and encourage that priceless gift God has bestowed upon the Church in the grace of priestly celibacy.

In their recently published book, *From the Depths of Our Hearts*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and His Eminence Robert Cardinal Sarah make the compelling case for maintaining integrally the rule of celibacy for Catholic priests, despite the historical exceptions that have occurred. Here is a passage from the part of the book authored by Cardinal Sarah:

¹ Dom Paul Delatte, *Commentary on the Rule*, Prologue, p. 1.

² St. Benedict, *Holy Rule*, Prologue.

We are living through these difficult, troubling times in distress and suffering. It was our sacred duty to recall the truth about the Catholic priesthood. For through it, the whole beauty of the Church is being called into question. The Church is not a human organization. She is a mystery. She is the Mystical Bride of Christ. Our priestly celibacy continually reminds the world of precisely this. [...] It is urgent and necessary for everyone—bishops, priests, and lay people—to take a fresh look with the eyes of faith at the Church and at priestly celibacy, which protects her mystery.³

In this perspective it is very reassuring that Pope Francis has chosen not to make an exception to the rule of celibacy in the context of the recent Synod for the Amazonian region. The controversy may not be over, however, as a number of more liberal Catholic prelates seem determined at any cost to promote the idea of lessening the rule of priestly celibacy.

The sacred humanity of Our Lord is a bridge for us toward the Father. Since the Renaissance and the Protestant Reform there has been a strong tendency in the West to focus on what is human: the human genius, the study of the humanities rather than that of divinity. In more recent times this emphasis has been condensed into what is commonly referred to as ‘humanism.’ In order to combat the evil fruits of this humanism, that is to say the entirely secular and atheistic humanism espoused by such killers of Christian Culture as Karl Marx and Frederick Nietzsche, the Catholic Church has proposed a different sort of humanism, that of the mystery of Christ, who reveals to the world the true riches of our human nature, a human nature sublimated and given an incomparable perfection in the Lord. But even this most perfect humanity of Christ is really there to point us toward the *Father*.

The actions of the Lord’s flesh [that is to say of His human nature], explains Saint Ambrose in his commentary on Saint Luke, are the exemplar of His divinity; and by those visible things [of Christ’s life on earth] are made manifest the invisible things [of His divinity].⁴

In view of an ever increasing decadence in our Western World, perhaps it is time to recall again the upward path toward the Father. What is best in human nature is found in the perfect human nature of the Lord. The sacred humanity of Christ, in turn, leads us to understand and adore Him as a Divine Person. Finally, the Divine Person of Christ, the Second Person, the Son, is pure relation to the Father, Who is the First Person of the Most Holy Trinity. This was the perspective of the Early Church and of the Fathers, as well as of the great doctors of medieval times. We must appreciate the great good that is in human nature—it is always true—but we must not stop there; we must not be satisfied with mere humanism. Rather, our souls must follow the road leading us higher up, as we are taught to do when we recite the Lord’s prayer, the Our Father.

May Our Blessed Father Saint Benedict provide us with a living example of the spiritual paternity inherent in the monastic life and in the grace of celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven. The Church cannot live without these treasures. May he also intercede for our much tormented present world against the terrible plague that is afflicting it. May our bishops, seeing how the people of God hungers for the Bread of Life, open again very soon the doors of our churches for Holy Mass. What better way to chase away the terrible illness that has beset us than powerfully to nourish the soul that communicates its very life to the body? For, as Our Lord taught us on the first Sunday of Lent, man does not live by [material] bread alone. Amen.

³ Page 146.

⁴ Book IV, on Luke 4:14-30.