

What is a father?

Reflections on Fatherhood
by fr. Joseph Kentenich

edited by
fr. Jonathan Niehaus

Introduction

This little collection of texts by Father Joseph Kentenich (1885-1968) is meant to give some motivation and inspiration to fathers. It is not an exhaustive study of either fathers or fatherhood, but a small sampler of encouraging thoughts.

Three main themes have been chosen. They reflect three of the predominant themes in Fr. Kentenich's thoughts about fathers. They are features which are central to fatherhood, namely: The father is:

1. Shepherd
2. Priest
3. Bridge to God the Father

May those who read it find encouragement to honor their own fathers. Those those who are fathers themselves find encouragement to grow in this sacred vocation.

Fr. Jonathan Niehaus

Chapter One:
Shepherd

In this first selection¹ Fr. Kentenich considers the meaning of Christ as the Good Shepherd and then of parents—and especially fathers—as shepherds in the image of Christ.

We have just heard the image of Christ as portrayed to us by the Gospel²—the image of the Good Shepherd. Can we suppose that our image of Christ, our image of God, bears these same features? It is very likely. It is very likely because this is an image of Christ which has deeply and vitally penetrated into the feeling of life of all centuries of Christianity. For an example we only need to turn to the image of Christ found in the catacombs. The image of the Good Shepherd is found there more than 90 times. That is how deeply this image—presented in today's Gospel by Christ himself—has penetrated into the feeling of life of the Church. It has continued through the Middle Ages up until today. And when we think of our own experience, who has not already seen pictures of the Good Shepherd? They primarily come in two forms.

The *first image* shows Our Lord in the garb of a shepherd, shepherd's staff in his hand, surrounded by his flock. And how lovingly, how warmly does the Shepherd look upon his flock! And how the flock feels drawn to its Shepherd! What do we see written in the face of the Shepherd and of every sheep? It is the deep awareness—we belong together. Shepherd and flock form a single unity of souls, the souls of Shepherd and flock are united in, with, and for one another.

And the *second image*? It probably touches our hearts even more deeply. It shows the Good Shepherd and a sheep that has fallen into

the thorns. It cannot free itself. With a single courageous, loving motion, the hand of the Good Shepherd reaches into the thicket. Before long, the sheep is free. The Good Shepherd takes it on his shoulders. And now? They are reunited! How lovingly the Shepherd carries the sheep on his shoulders! How sheltered the little sheep feels on his shoulders, or rather, in the heart of the Good Shepherd! (....)

When we look more closely and ask ourselves why there is such a deep-seated love between us and the Good Shepherd, we will find the question easy to answer. All of us without exception bear the burden of unredeemedness: We bear the burden of original sin and the burden of personal sin. Who shall set us free? We are the little lamb caught in the thicket. Who shall free us from the bondage of our passions, the bonds of slavery? It is easy for us to understand where the secret longing, the secret sympathy comes from which unites us and the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd must redeem us too, he must free us from the thicket, so that we can say: Now we have begun to become truly free children of God—inwardly carefree, inwardly free children of God.

My dear friends, is it not true that when we consider these things we see how fitting it is to study the features of the Good Shepherd more closely today? The main reason for this is, of course, to let this ideal become for us more and more a mirror; we want to become reflections of the image of the Good Shepherd. For this reason we want to consider two thoughts:

1) What are the features of the Good Shepherd?

2) When we take this image as our mirror, what kind of reflections should we be, especially as fathers and mothers, especially as parents? (....)

1. Features of the Good Shepherd

Our Lord uses clear words to describe the ideal. And what he says becomes all the more important because he he paints the picture with a strong contrasting image. On the one hand is the image of the bad shepherd. On the other hand is himself as the ideal of the good

¹ Source: Sermon at St. Michael's Church, Milwaukee, April 28, 1963: *Aus dem Glauben leben*, Vol. 7, p. 71-75, 78-85.

² John 10, 11-16.

shepherd. (....)

What sort of shepherds were the priests of that time? Did they have the good of the people, the good of the individual—the individual believer, the individual member of the synagogue—in mind? By no means! Against this background Our Lord portrays himself, as if to say: Here is a caricature of a shepherd, but I am the ideal of a good shepherd. And what does he go on to describe? If we look at it more clearly, he emphasizes three features in himself. He wants to say:

First, I am the *teacher* of my people and my followers. I therefore have the function of a teacher—the teaching office in my life. He says this expressly: “The sheep hear my voice” (Jn 10,4,16). We must therefore consider how often Our Lord made his voice heard during his life, how often he preached, how often he was a teacher.

Secondly, the Gospel and Our Lord himself stress that he is the *priest* of his people. And that is the core and center of what he has to say to us. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10,11). The priestly ministry of Our Lord!

And finally, his office as *shepherd*. He is also the shepherd of his people. He compares himself again with the false shepherds. They are “hired hands.” When the wolf comes they run away (cf Jn 10,12). They do not watch the sheep. But *he* watches his sheep, even if it costs him his life. That is the ideal of the Good Shepherd as taught in words!

If we now look at the *life* of Our Lord, it is not hard at all to show how in practical life he was a priest, a teacher, and a shepherd of his people.

I think we should look more closely at one feature of the Good Shepherd as he lived it practically. It is one that stands out so clearly in his self-portrait—“The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” (Jn 10,11). This is the source of our secret sympathy for him. This is what moves us, again and again, to seek him out when we have been lost sheep for a time. (....)

We must take a moment to consider what would have happened if Our Lord had said, “Yes, I want to redeem them, but only by

becoming man. That will be enough of a sacrifice.” That surely would have been sacrifice enough. (....) A single drop of his blood would have been enough to tip the scales in our favor. After all, it was the blood of the God-man! But that was not enough for him. What did he want? To demonstrate to us how infinitely he loves us! (....)

Why? It is simply a great law in the Kingdom of God: God wants to be loved. And because he wants to be loved, he must lavishly demonstrate his love to the world! *Si vis amari, ama!* If you want to be loved, love! Lavishly love, lavishly give of self! How else can you win over the love of the other? Anyone can make demands, but you must put *yourself* in the balance! Yes, truly, if you want to be loved, then you must love! And God wants to be loved. This is why he held nothing back in giving us his only begotten Son to prove his love; [this is] why he gave his last drop of blood for us.

It is said that the real quest for holiness began for all great men, Christians and Catholics when they realized how specially God loved them. This is a great law in the Kingdom of God: When I know and feel God’s love for me, when I am interiorly swept away by this love, then it awakens in me the desire to respond. The “eagle’s flight” of the God-man awakens the “eagle’s flight” in the soul of man. The “eagle’s flight” of love awakens the “eagle’s flight” of love in return.

My dear friends, how does it happen that we barely manage to rise above the things of this earth? How does it happen that we are so little enkindled inside for God and the Divine? We do not understand the “eagle’s flight” of love in the God-man! We therefore stay in our accustomed rut and live and work as if there were no God, as if there were no God-man who died for us!

2. The Father as Reflection of the Good Shepherd

It is told of Alexander the Great that while on a military campaign in Asia he passed through a vast desert. In the hot sun his army began to thirst deparately for water. Not even a drop of water could be seen for miles around. Suddenly his soldiers found a puddle. They scooped up the muddy water in a helmet and brought it to

Alexander. Alexander was about to drink when he noticed how his soldiers looked on in thirst. What did he do? He poured out the water! He would not drink. He wanted to share the same fate as his soldiers. If they were to die, he would die with them. The effect? With extraordinary enthusiasm they swore fealty to Alexander and went with him through thick and thin.

My dear friends, we know what this story is about. If this is an image of Christ—Our Lord on the Cross who gave up his last drop of blood—what should it mean for us, for me? Heroism awakens heroism. The heroic flight, the “eagle’s flight” of love must awaken the “eagle’s flight” of love in return.

If we now consider the lives of great Catholic men and women we can ask: How did they learn to love God so fervently and give everything for him? By rekindling the glow of their heart with the fire of Him who died because He loves us. (...) Hence we do not toy around with some sentimentality, dabbling here and there [with love] out of sympathy or mutual admiration. No, no! We give our lives, our all! We endure loneliness and misunderstandings, cross and suffering! That, my dear friends, is how the image of the Good Shepherd is placed before us!

Turning to the second thought now for a moment, we move from the ideal image to the image as it is reflected in ourselves.

If all of us without exception are called to imitate the image of Our Lord, then this is especially true, I think, of us as parents, of us as fathers and mothers. Or, if we belong to a religious community, it is especially true of those in positions of leadership. What are we called to do? The answer can be put quite briefly: We participate in Christ’s

office as teacher,
office as priest, and
office as shepherd.

In other words, we mirror and reflect in our lives the office of teacher, priest, and shepherd in the life of Our Lord.

I turn now for a moment to our parents in particular. I ask you: How have we, especially here, in this foreign land, lived up to this

office? Are we even aware that we have a serious duty, a binding obligation to take part in this threefold office of Christ?

Participation in his office as *teacher*. Instead of giving you a lot of theory, let me give you an example. In 1863 a French colonel died, named Paqueron. His life was described this way: He left behind a group of children which was thoroughly Christian. He considered them the crown of his life. — [Just think about it:] My children the crown of my life! My children the most glorious fruit of my activity as father and mother!

So how did he see his task as a father? Two principles left their mark on his life. The first principle: If I want to educate my children right, educate them Christian and Catholic, then I have no choice but to strive for real holiness. The second principle: I must imitate the example of Our Lord. What does this mean for me in practical terms? I must deal with my children with mild strictness. But that alone is not enough. From earliest childhood I must reveal to them the highest Christian ideals not only through what I say, but also through what I do. These are the demands which he placed on himself.

And his testament to his children practically consisted of two great commands. The first: Whenever you go somewhere, be it to study or do some task in life, be sure that in 48 hours everyone knows what you think and what you are! Don’t hide your Catholicism! After 48 hours everyone should know exactly who they are dealing with. That is how I have always done it as a father, and it truly never hurt me. Quite the contrary: it often worked to my advantage. As Catholics we do not have to be ashamed of ourselves and being good Catholics! We must totally become what we are. This is real masculine thinking. And then the second principle, the second great command: When I felt down in life and didn’t know which way to turn: Quick, to the confessional! And: Quick, to the communion rail!

My dear friends, this is what true Catholic fathers are like. They participate in the teaching office of Our Lord. They do not teach through words but through their life.

Participation in the *shepherd’s* office as well. It was the same colonel who said, “Once a father, I will never stop being a father!”

He liked to joke: “The first time I will stop being a father, especially a guardian of my children, is when God takes it from me.” In this spirit he always took care that his children were not overly exposed to the dangers of the times, took care to warn them of the dangers and protect them. — Now, if I want to imitate the Good Shepherd, what would you say I have to do as a father and mother?

And participation in Christ’s *priesthood*. The priesthood of the father has a two tasks. [First:] To educate the children in their faith. You see, to care for the family’s religion is especially the task of the father, not just the mother! And then secondly: Participation in the life of suffering of Our Lord, in His death on the cross. — Here, too, let me share the one or the other simple example.

Anna Katharina Emmerich’s³ father was a simple farmer. For him it was self-evident that when he went to work in the field he would work facing the church as much as possible. He liked to say to his little daughter: I want to be seen by my Savior in the tabernacle. And when he could not attend daily Mass it was his practice to listen for the church bell to ring and at least participate spiritually in the three parts of Holy Mass.

How many genuine Catholic fathers do we know who are really the priest of their family, who take the office of leading the prayers in their hand—participation in the priesthood [of Christ]! But the greatest participation comes when we, as father and mother, are drawn into the holy sacrifice of the Mass, sharing in the suffering and death of Our Lord, offering up all that we are and have for our children. We want to live and die for our children as priests, as the priest of our family.

My dear friends, what can I say at the end? Go and do what you have heard! Amen.

Chapter Two:

Priest

In this selection⁴ Fr. Kentenich meditates on “priestly hands” and “fatherly hands.” It leads into the mystery of the “priestly hands” of fathers in the family, whose great task is to be a mediator and bridgebuilder between his children and God the Father.

Today we wish to continue our reflection on priestly hands. The context is our effort to learn, as we live in the world, to discover and take God’s hand in every area of everyday life. As God normally does things, he does not touch us with *His* hand directly, but uses the hands of others. Sometimes these hands are cruel and hard. But even these hands are, in a certain sense, blessed hands. Why? Because God is using them. It is the masterpiece of life to be able to find God in everything that happens in everyday life. Of course, He often also touches us with hands that are mild and kind. But behind them are always the hand of God.

Priestly Hands

In this context the hands of priests and of fathers and mothers have a special role to play. (...) What meaning do priestly hands have in our practical everyday lives? Here we always presuppose, of course, that we see things with the eyes of faith, for without the eyes of faith the hands of the priest have no special meaning for our lives. But if we see priestly hands in the light of faith and consider their meaning for our lives, we have to admit: Without the hands of the priest we would not be Christians and would not be able to lead a Christian life.

Because this is so important, let me mention the features of the

³ Anna Katharina Emmerich (1774-1824), Augustinian nun from Dülmen, Germany, mystic and stigmatist.

⁴ Source: Talks for Couples in Milwaukee, June 12 and 19, 1961: *Am Montagabend...*, Vol. 21, p. 203f, 221f, 226-229, and May 25, 1964, transcript p. 3-5, 6, 7.

hands of a priest. First of all:

Priestly hands are creative hands.

Priestly hands are praying hands.

Priestly hands are blessing hands.

Then we must add a word which we have already talked about, namely: they are *Christ's* hands. Therefore:

Priestly hands are Christ's creative hands.

Priestly hands are Christ's praying hands.

Priestly hands are Christ's blessing hands. (....)

Fatherly Hands

God touches our lives in a special way through the hands of the priest. We will continue this thought again some other time, but tonight we want to turn to the thought that God touches us through fatherly hands, through the hands of *our fathers*.

When we think about what Father's Day should really mean for us, we only need to look to Mother's Day. Father's Day means circling around our earthly father, but also around our heavenly Father. After all, we know that the earthly father is a transparency of the heavenly Father.

What does it mean, practically, to circle around our father? First: our *earthly* father. Call him to mind again. Then ask: How did I experience my father? What do I owe him? What all did he do for me? And if he is now in eternity, I want to expressly think of him again and thank him from the bottom of my heart for all the good of whatever kind he did for me... that he gave me my life, that he took care of my health, my education, or whatever else he did for me.

But if I have to admit that he failed here and there—maybe I didn't get a good education while he made it possible for another brother or sister, or whatever the case may be—then we must first think: Poor Father, he probably couldn't do any better. How did *he* grow up? It is plain that he could not give me any more than what he himself had received. And if I still think I see mistakes, then I think we could forgive him with all our hearts.

And if we ourselves are fathers, then we want to remember that

a day like today, like all Christian feastdays, is not only a remembrance day, but also a day of renewal. How should I be renewed? In my fatherliness toward my children. (....)

If we now explore what modern fatherhood looks like in practical terms, let me return to an image which I shared with you while talking about priestly hands. A zealous priest took ill and left for a spa to recover his strength. He died on the way. The parish wanted to bury him in their cemetery. But the summer heat caused his body to decompose rapidly. When he was laid in state, only his hands could be shown. [But his people knew him by his hands.] You see, these were priestly hands.

Let me paint another picture for you in the same direction, but applied to a father. There is a famous author in Germany named Peter Dörfler⁵. (....) He wrote a book called "While Mother still Lived," a book about his own mother. He could also have written a book entitled "While Father still Lived," but never did. He describes the hands of his father with special love.

He tells about his boyhood. His father was a farmer. They had a big farm and had enough to take care of their needs. Peter went off to school to be a priest. Whenever he came home on vacation, it was self-understood that he helped with everything around the farm. There was only one thing that always made him nervous. It always took place at the end of each vacation. His father—a real father!—would ask, "Well, son, how much money do you need for the next term?" And the young man would say to himself, "I see how hard my parents work day and night to make a living." Then his father pulled the billfold out of his pocket. What happened next remained an indelible part of this man's memory, even many years later as a priest: It was the weather-beaten hands, worn by hard work, here a wound and there a scar, and there the place where the horse bit him. The father was a man of few words, and said, "You know you shall have whatever you need. You should not have to blush before anyone else. But you know how hard we have to work for it. We can

⁵ Peter Dörfler, 1878-1955.

take care of ourselves, but you can see how we must work for it.” Although the father was in the prime of his years, his hand was trembling. Then his father gave him the money.

What are fatherly hands? Powerfully caring and providing hands. We can see that when we consider the image of such a farmer. His was not a life of many distractions. What was the great focus of his life? To provide for his family, to provide for his children! There is no mention of other things we have as children of the modern world. These are powerfully caring hands!

And then: fatherly-kind hands. How did they show kindness? He did not give a long lecture. He knew his son. He would have what he needed! He didn’t make a big deal about it on the outside. But his hands trembled. Why did they tremble? It was his tender love for his son and his vocation. Do you understand why I am telling you this? The ideal of the father!

Think about it again: Are *we* like this? Do *we* embody this ideal? He said that a day like today is not just a day of remembrance but also a day of renewal.

Hands of God the Father

Now I need to say the second thing. I have already explained what happens when our image of fathers is distorted, when we even talk about “father murder.” I think there are two words that you should think together: “father murder” and its ultimate consequence “God murder” We all know (...) how strong godlessness and hatred of God is all over the world today. Even when we look into the Catholic Church—How shakey the relationship to God so frequently is! Why? Those of us who have been together for a while already know the reason, since we discussed this at length some time ago. Our image of God is normally determined by our image of the father. I say: *normally*. And if it is true that the modern image of the father is a distorted one, if it is true that we must speak of a murder of the father, then we understand why the image of God is, as it were, being murdered today.

Let me draw a consequence from this which is of extremely great

importance to us. Let me suppose that I am married and have a great apostolic zeal. I want to convert the whole world. (...) What is the first thing I should do? Live the ideal of being a *father*! This is the greatest apostolate which I can do as a man and father: be the image of God as the *father* of my children! This is not primarily about words, this is about my being. Do not think that I am exaggerating; I mean this very literally!

A Priestly Educator

The way⁶ industry and economics has developed has led to parents being separated and torn apart from their children—especially fathers from their children, fathers from sons. The father spends all day at work; the children spend all day at home and in school. This presents the danger that when Father comes home, he is the “enforcer”—punishing the children who were bad, or he is exhausted and says, “Just leave me alone. I’m tired and need my rest.”

You can sense how the inner bond which is supposed to unite children and father has consequently been more and more dissolved and torn apart.

For the most part, fathers were not ready for this new situation. At least this was the general case. Today we live in times which are in constant revolution. To be sure, here and there we still find ideal fathers, but fathers have largely become victims of the new situation. Before, in the old order, fathers were educators through their *being*, through their common life with wife and children. Then they didn’t need to be so conscious of their words and deeds. They could just be an example. In every regard, parents were the ones children relied on and were educated by.

Today it is totally different. This is why the father, coming home from work—a time with the children which is so short!—must see himself much more consciously as an *educator*. He must more *consciously* think about how he can share this task with the mother and educate the children with her.

⁶ Here begins the excerpts from May 25, 1964.

The last time I pointed out to you that this problem finds a natural solution for us in the home shrine. If you continue to share a spiritual life together—father and mother with the children—you will succeed in this task. To be sure, some aspects of educating children must be done much more consciously today than in the past. We already touched on this the last time; now I just want to deepen the thought a little.

Above all, we—including the *father*—must see to it that our children learn obedience. They must learn to obey on the basis of their conscience. What does this mean? The child should learn to see and obey in my authority the *authority of God*. I must form my child's *conscience*. The child should not obey just because Father is home and is stronger than Mother and will punish me. The child needs to obey out of the devotion to right conscience which I have taught him.

In other words, children today must learn more about and at a younger age to see the authority of God behind the parental authority. *God* speaks through my father. *God* speaks through my conscience. Of course this is much more difficult than in the past. And more important. I must almost be more schooled pedagogically than in the past. In a certain sense we must develop a great warmth and love for our task as an *educator*. The father should not just consider himself a *worker*, who earns money to support the physical needs of his children. No, now more than ever, he must also be his children's *educator*. (....)

Allow me to express this thought a little differently. We have so often said that the home shrine is a living shrine. And in the home shrine the father is the “house priest.” Do you understand what this means? This cannot just stay a pretty phrase. What is the task of a priest? It is a threefold mission. He participates in the priesthood of Christ:

in His office as teacher,
in His office as priest, and
in His office as shepherd.

You see, as father I should therefore be a teacher to my children,

because I share in Christ's office as teacher. I must be a “home teacher.” Don't try and get out of it by saying that's why we have teachers and priests! (....)

I repeat: It is not enough that I work myself to the bone so that my wife and children have enough to eat and drink, and so that they have a good education. No. That is all very well and good. But what we too easily forget is what we must consciously stress today. We should be the *educators* of our children!

Leading my Children to God the Father

Let me mention a point which may be quite difficult to realize, namely the forming of my child's conscience. In other words, the child must see *God* behind me. He should learn to listen inside himself: Is *God* telling me something there? Later on I will not be with my children. By then they will be essentially formed. If they only obeyed at home because I said so, that won't help much. Who will help them when I am no longer around? It must be the voice of their conscience. It is ultimately obedience toward *God*. That must be the norm which the child obeys, or else he will be helpless.

Now let me ask you: Why have fathers failed so often in the new situation? One answer is: They were not up to it because they separated too much

the father as worker or provider on the one hand,
and the educator on the other.

Let me go deeper. Why have fathers failed? I could give you many answers. If I seek out the ultimate answer, I think I have to say: because the fundamental relationship between us fathers and *God* the Father was not deep enough. What does that mean? If I as a father do not have an example and personal relationship with *God* the Father, then the foundation of my fatherhood is not on solid ground.

Just think. Where are the two main areas which we must grow into more deeply again and again? On the one hand it is the deep love for the Blessed Mother. On the other hand it is love for *God* the Father.

We Schoenstatt children cannot say that we have not been shown

the way to a relationship with God as *Father*. If Our Lady wants to give our fathers the grace of transformation, then she must help us so that our fathers develop a deep, childlike relationship with God the Father. In our home shrines we must naturally beg the Blessed Mother: “Lead us to the Father!”

Chapter three:

Bridge to God the Father

(June 1966 to the men on Mount Mary)

or

(PT 50)