

# What is a father?

Volume 2

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Chapter One:

## Fatherly Authority

*This selection<sup>1</sup> is taken from conferences on education held by Father Kentenich in 1951. He considers the importance of fatherly authority and how it must be rediscovered today.*

There are life processes in the natural order and the supernatural order. Today we want to especially focus on the natural order. Its nucleus is *the family*. In God's plan, a healthy natural family should be an organic whole and be built around the spiritual in-one-anotherness of

husband and wife,  
father and mother,  
parents and children.

*It should be an organic life-unity*, not a spiritual next-to-one-anotherness or against-one-anotherness.

Today this life-unity is greatly disturbed. This does not say that there haven't always been many difficulties which hinder the forming and shaping of this life-unity. That is not at issue here. At issue is: *Where does this lack of unity come from?* One of the most important is separatistic, mechanistic thinking and behavior. There are even those who brag about tearing families apart. Fathers are being torn apart from mothers, parents are being torn apart from their children.

What happens to a woman when mechanistic thinking and behavior tear her out of family life oriented on God? What happens when a child no longer has a home in a natural family? In the interests of our topic during these days we want to leave these questions unanswered and focus instead on what has happened to the father in the family.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: *Daß neue Menschen werden* (Vallendar-Schoenstatt, 1978, 2nd ed.), conferences on education, Schoenstatt, Germany, 1951. Here quoted: p. 80-94.

## Metaphysical Foundations

The reason for the homelessness of the world of today is to be found in its fatherlessness. With Nietzsche we might add that there are also no more “mother-lands,” which would be correct. Especially in Catholic circles there is much talk about mothers and motherhood. But *the significance of fathers and fatherhood* is given too little consideration.

Metaphysically speaking, the final foundation of the family is the father. His authority is the most basic one because he shares in the begetting activity of God. Motherly authority is only supplemental, derivatory.

So much depends on making sure the father is not torn out of the organism of family life. The healing of the world presupposes the healing of the family, and the *healing of the family essentially depends on a reform*

*of the idea of fatherhood,  
of the awareness of fatherhood,  
and of fatherliness.*

The final metaphysical reason why the father is the final foundation of the family lies in his sharing in the begetting activity of God. In the bosom of the most Blessed Trinity it is the Father who is the final foundation because He is the one Who begets<sup>2</sup>. The Father begets the Son; Father and Son determine the Holy Spirit.

We live in fatherless times. They are fatherless because the family has become fatherless. First, we will establish the fact, then try to answer the question “why?” and show how important fatherly authority is.

### A. Today’s Fatherlessness: The Fact

First: *the fact*.

By and large, fathers today are removed from the entire complex of family life. It is even seen as something desirable, and leads to the splitting, separating, and tearing apart of all aspects of family life. A

healthy organism, the family, is being destroyed. Separatistic thinking is not only trying (and successfully at that) to introduce a separation of ideas from life, but also *a separation of the life processes from one other*. Here is the real tragedy of mechanistic thinking.

Because the father has been dissolved from the organism of the family, one must deal with so-called “mother families,” i.e. families without fathers. This caused one politician to suggest some years ago—because of the shortage of men—to not only legalize polygamy, but also allow divorce on demand, just because many women might otherwise never find a husband<sup>3</sup>. A second reasoning said that man’s task in the public sphere is greater today and he must be active in politics and commerce; because of this he ‘really ought to be’ taken out of the family. Such views are not proposed as, say, a concession to human weakness in the face of duress, but come from a thinking flawed in its underlying assumptions—mechanistic thinking.

Modern thinkers also try to separate sexuality and love. This is the terrible tragedy wreaked by separatism and mechanistic thinking.

Let us allow a little light to fall from this fact on our Catholic circles, on our Catholic pastors and teachers. Don’t you think that as a whole we, too, have to admit that we are partly infected with this separatistic approach, omitting the father more and more from things concerning the family? For instance, when we look for volunteers to help teach families, or to teach in general, we always call on the mothers, hardly ever the fathers. We don’t know what to say to the main begetter of the family—the father! This is a concession to the spirit of the modern world. Without being aware of it, we are infected by mechanistic thinking and help—even if we do not do so on purpose—to tear apart the organic unity of the family. And then we go looking for those to blame for modern man’s lack of receptivity to religious experience! We will later present in detail what damage is caused when we remove the idea of the father from the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jn 14,29; 1 Cor 15,24ff.

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<sup>3</sup> A suggestion apparently sparked by a post-war situation in which a large percentage of the men of marriage age had died.

family.

## **B. Today's Fatherlessness: Reasons**

Second: *We ask what the reasons are for thinking that there can be fatherless families, a fatherless world order.*

Many reasons can be given. One of the most important is the disappearance of the father and, with the disappearance of the father, the disappearance of fatherly authority. The reasons for the elimination of the idea of the father lie in our times. The reasons are immediate and remote. The immediate reasons are both exterior and interior in nature.

### **1. Immediate Reasons**

#### **a. Exterior Reasons**

First of all, *exterior reasons* can be found in the long absence of fathers caused by the war<sup>4</sup>. Because of this, the idea of the motherhood and motherly authority was placed more in the foreground. A second exterior reason for the disappearance of fatherly authority because of the long war separation lies in the unfulfilled longings of husband and wife. Each built up great expectations of the other and their reunited life after the war—hand in hand and heart in heart. The result of the new life together was often terribly disappointing. The husband had developed quite differently in the meantime, and the wife had gone other ways. The net effect was a great mutual disappointment. In addition, the wife, now in charge for many years, did not want to surrender any of her authority. She wanted to rule on her own. Often the men returning from the war tired and sick. They became the object of motherly love, but did not become natural representatives of authority.

So it is that we can list many exterior reasons which cast light on

the image of our times, and which document for us the disappearance of fatherly authority in the family.

#### **b. Interior Reasons**

The interior reasons for the loss of fatherly authority may very well be connected to the fact that over the years fathers have felt exterior and interior helplessness. He was unable to protect his children from the dangers of war bombings. He himself had to plunge into dangers he was not ready for. This led to diminished awareness of the fatherly strength and caused this fundamental experience of family life to be more and more pushed aside.

### **2. Remote Reasons**

If you want to know the *remote reasons*, you must go back into history.

Protestantism robbed the religious sphere of the idea of the father—namely the father-figure of the pope, the Holy Father. The Enlightenment went even further. Until then we lived in patriarchal times. In everyday life, fatherly authority was at the center-point. This radiated into the whole style of how nations were governed, so that the whole was patriarchal in flavor. That is how deeply fatherly authority and the fatherly government of nations are interwoven. The French Revolution declared as its motto: “Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood.” It also beheaded the family. All things stand next to each other. The family lacks a head, has no more support in a strong, final authority.

Of course we must admit that fatherly authority was misused many times in the past centuries. Fatherly power-mongering was praised. People forgot that fatherly authority is selfless service toward the life of others—natural and supernatural life—especially in the family.

## **C. Today's Fatherlessness: The Importance of Fatherly Authority**

Third: A word about *the importance of fatherly authority* and the father-experience.

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<sup>4</sup> This is verified by studies of American families whose fathers were in World War II. See David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America* (New York, 1995), p.50-60.

## 1. A Crucial Support to Individual and Community

First statement: *It provides crucial support to both the individual and the community.*

First, it gives the individual a firm support. For a child or youth, fatherly authority is simply one of the conditions for existence. It provides the child, whether girl or boy, with an instinctive awareness of authority, and consequently an experience of security. It gives spiritual and emotional shelter. Instinctively experienced fatherly authority simultaneously gives the child, through word and example, a unique world view and a far-reaching opportunity for contact [and relationships]<sup>5</sup>. Each of these statements is a whole world in itself. Would we not want to take the time to think them through in detail? Anyone who just hears the thoughts, who only takes home an impression but does not grasp the whole context, will be unable to do much with these things in practical daily life.

Genuine fatherly authority also gives a firm support to community. Brothers and sisters who are next to one another in the family need a higher authority. To be sure, motherly authority can and should be this too, but from the metaphysical standpoint the final foundation on which the family's ability, opportunity, and reality of making contact and relationships must be the father. We are brothers and sisters because we were begotten by the same father. Of course also because we come from the same mother. But because the fatherly share in begetting is primarily active, so it is that primarily the father—as Thomas Aquinas and Leo XIII maintain, and practical life verifies this—is the powerful support of a family, the caulking that holds it together. Of course, the father need to be complemented by the mother.

Our modern time, no longer familiar with the experience of fatherly authority and therefore ignorant of its final roots in the framework of the family, is forced to seek strange new ways to form

community in its ability and opportunity to make contact and relationships. Dictatorship is one such means. It forces man into a yoke. If we had real fathers again, if we had ideal families, then we would not need dictators. There would be real community again, with a firm and secure support in fatherly authority. This fatherly authority would extend and expand in all directions—into the local community and national government.

If we want to solve modern problems at their root, we must especially see to it that we bring about a new era of father-awareness. What good does it do if we priests and teachers work again and again but do not seize the illness by its root and try to heal it! We can talk about a league of nations which might restore the lack of unity among the nations. But you will always find again and again: Every attempt at a substitute instead of the real cure has failed and will not bring about the cure. We can even say: Not even the authority of the pope and the priests, to the extent they are expected to support modern man, will bring about the cure if fatherly authority in the natural family is not reenforced. Under normal conditions, religious authority, a certain supernatural fatherly authority, will only be alive if there is a foundation in the natural order, in natural fatherliness. It may be that supernatural fatherliness and childlikeness are also possible without the natural foundation; but for long stretches of the way, such a self-giving will lack an instinctiveness. There is hardly anything that can replace this instinctiveness.

I remind you about what I have already said about St. Therese the Little Flower. It analyzes for you a spiritual life which is exemplary in its childlike relationship with her outstanding father.

You will not take it the wrong way, or misinterpret it when I dare to say: practically speaking, even Divine Fatherly authority can scarcely give to our times the support they need in the great present-day chaos without being supported by natural father-experiences. This is not meant theologically—theologically it is clear that God is the final authority. I mean this psychologically. As sentient creatures we need sentient experiences in the natural order. Childlike devotion to God's Fatherly authority quite often lacks an instinctive, sub-

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<sup>5</sup> The word "contact" in this context (as in *Kontaktfähigkeit, Kontaktmöglichkeit, Kontaktnot*) implies not just momentary encounter, but depth and duration as is associated with the word relationship.

conscious fullness and enthusiasm. If the experience of fatherly authority in the natural order is not there in one way or another, be it through the biological father or a substitute father, if therefore there is not a deep, childlike experience in the natural order in one way or another, you will observe a terrible tragedy, not only for the individual, but also for all of culture today.

Today it is not as easy to be a father as it was in earlier patriarchal times. For instance, if a father today does not have a deep respect for the mother—his wife, she will soon set herself up with the children, following the law of overcompensation, as an opposition party [to the father].

It is not easy to really be a father today. For instance, if the father becomes too controlling with his children, he will not understand how to properly guide their urge for freedom from within. Then tomorrow or the day after tomorrow he will have raised revolutionaries. Therefore: World renewal must come through the renewal of fathers and fatherhood. A massive program<sup>6</sup>!

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<sup>6</sup> In 1962 Fr. Kentenich characterized the rebirth of fatherhood this way: "The rebirth of the father.... entails three aspects: rebirth of fatherly love, of fatherly wisdom, and of fatherly concern.

"*Fatherly love* ultimately only grows and prospers if it constantly orients itself on divine Father-love. It presupposes a deep childlike love for the heavenly Father which knows how to pray wholeheartedly, 'Our Father, who art in heaven'.... Fatherly love takes on the form of *personal self-giving* to the personal, human You made in the image of God. It bows in *deep reverence* to the uniqueness of the individual, its fate and its personal mission. It brings about an inexhaustible *uplifting trust*, i.e. in every situations it believes in the good in the other and does not let itself be stopped from selfless service toward the mission of the child.... Above all, it accepts the awakened childlike love with plain matter-of-factness, with sincere gratitude and deep respect, and takes great care to deal with it in accord with the law of organic transference and transmission.

"*Fatherly wisdom* carefully cultivates interior unaffectedness with an appropriate exterior untouchedness in keeping with the state of life. It knows an eternal unity of tensions between nearness and farness, between strictness and kindness, in short: in every circumstance it imitates the educational wisdom of God the Father.

## 2. A Creative Unity of Tensions Between Father and Mother

Second statement: *Fatherly authority gives us a creative unity of tensions between father and mother.*

This comes from a two-fold function of the father:

First, this unity of tensions helps the mother to be a real mother.

Second, it needs the complementation of the mother; there can be no unity of tensions without it.

You notice that this is a massive program of reform—the reform of fatherly authority! It would take all our love to accomplish. If only we had more educators who were really "lovers who never stop loving"! If only we had more educators who constantly devoted themselves to the "little work" of personal relationships!

Let me consider the two functions of the father for the creative unity of tensions between father and mother.

[1. *The mother needs the authority of the father*]

The first function: *The mother needs the authority of the father so she can really be a mother.* If she does not have this authority, if she does not receive the inner support, back-up, and complementation of the father's authority, we quickly notice how she loses her instinctive love for children. She becomes "children shy." Motherhood does not mature enough into full-fledged motherliness. You see, in some way motherliness must always include an unfolding of childlikeness. After all, the most important kingdom in the feminine soul is the kingdom of childlikeness. In every woman is a child. In every woman the child cries out. Which relationship allows the woman to continue unfolding genuine childlikeness even as a mother? It is the relationship to the father. For instance, in many healthy families the mother does not call the father by his first name but "Father," just as he calls her "Mother." This is not only for the sake of the children, but comes from a healthy, natural need to be complemented.

[2. *The father needs the complementation of the mother*]

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"*Fatherly concern* wrestles with the art of opening the soul, of listening and of hearing between the lines, as well as with the masterpiece of enlightened, vigorous leadership."

The second function: *Fatherliness needs genuine motherliness for it to develop*; without this it cannot reach maturity.

[First,] *genuine motherliness complements fatherly authority in the order of action*. Fatherly control must be balanced by motherly selflessness, fatherly self-reliance by motherly readiness to serve. The father's tendency to want quick results, including in education, must be complemented by the mother's tender humility and unfailing cheerfulness. Moreover, fatherly restlessness must be balanced by motherly patience and self-sacrifice and self-surrender. These traits characterize the ideal of the true mother. Can women like this still be found today?

We must see to it that our renewal of the family leads to the reconquest of "mother lands" and "father lands," of ideal women and mothers and ideal men and fathers down the whole line. Our Lord chose to spend thirty years in a family. He sends a clear message by living a quiet family life for thirty years. He wants to heal and sanctify the family.

Secondly, *for the father genuine motherliness has a profound, all-encompassing function of sheltering*. While the father may think of great things and come up with great schemes in his creative way of thinking and coming up with ideas, the home for these thoughts is the woman's heart. The creativity of man's thinking and, to an even greater degree, the creativity of his efforts to form and shape the world and others, need the heart of a woman and mother. Those who wish to reform the Church and world must have the support of noble women. Men can think and plan, but the woman gives these great plans a home in her heart and life and is prepared to give up everything to see that they become reality.

Thirdly, *the woman has the task and function to complement the man, the father in the order of being*. Here is something truly great and valuable and far-reaching! Many of the thoughts we have already considered in the philosophy of the sexes ought to be repeated here. Valuable as it might be, I cannot go into these things in much detail now. In his wisdom, God did not create his full idea of humanity as one sex, but as two. This explains the invisible attraction constantly

at work between man and woman. This explains the strong and noble urge each sex has to complement the other.

The woman not only has a function to complement the man in the order of action, but also in the order of being. The ideal woman complements the being of man. Through the moderating influence of the woman and her natural givenness to tender service, the authority of the father can become more balanced and relaxed. The tendency to be domineering is moderated by love, while the soft and gentle features of the woman's being find their crowning and complementation in the strength, certainty, and firmness of the man.

Chapter two:

## childlikeness and Fathers

*This selection<sup>7</sup> is taken from a conference held by Father Kenterich in 1963. He considers the importance of childlikeness for the development of fatherliness. He also considers some of the distorted forms of fatherhood that are common today.*

[We are speaking of] a *Father kingdom*. By this we mean, first of all, the growth and unfolding of the religious world into and toward God the Father. Building a Father kingdom! Alone if you begin to think these thoughts through on your own and to place them into the world of today, you will find that the lack of love for the Father, for God the Father, is ultimately one of the most important reasons why the figure of the father on the earthly plane is being more and more watered down. It is both a cause and effect. Why do we have so few fathers? To seek the psychological, metaphysical reasons, we must admit: *A person who has not in one way or another become a child of God the Father will hardly be able to truly become a father.*

You must make the connections yourselves. Because we recognize and acknowledge God too little as Father, we really don't have a proper image of fathers any more. Since we ourselves have developed too little our spiritual childhood toward God, we can hardly become true fathers. As we have already said more than once: The Spartans never became strong personalities, even though they are famous as the epitome of the martial arts. Why? They remained eternally fragmented, dwarves, as it were. Now comes the reason which goes quite deep: *If you have never been a child you can never be a father.* If you have never been a child you can never become a mature man.

Do you understand what this means? We often consider the ideal

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<sup>7</sup> Source: Talk on January 16, 1963 (unpublished), 3/77-81.

of woman using the image of the tree. The root is childlikeness, the trunk is strong motherliness. In a certain sense we can say that *childlikeness is also the root of genuine masculinity*. Hence the term “eternal child.” Just as one speaks of the “eternal feminine,” one can also speak of the “eternal child.” This means that childlikeness is a permanent feature, a permanent need, a permanent gift. This means it is not just a passing phase for today, tomorrow, and the next day, but needs to be taken into permanent possession, come what may.

But it cuts the other way too. When we see that God the Father is so little known in the world today—also among us Christians, us Catholics—one cause is the distorted image of fathers in the natural order. It is therefore both a cause and effect. And how distorted the image of fathers is today! One even speaks literally of “father murder.” What are the practical consequences? If we consider the developments psychologically, especially in today's mechanized, industrialized and industrial culture, in today's technological culture, we simply have to say that *maleness is on the way to becoming something incredibly sterile.*

### Three Distorted Forms of Fatherhood

You should put three expressions together: *fatherliness, authority and creative power*. They belong together.

*Fatherly authority* — we have already talked about the essential part of this: *auctor esse*, being the author of life. It is practically the same as being a “creative force.” And the aim of this creative force is the formation of real substance, of the inner person<sup>8</sup>. The aim of real, genuine fatherliness as a creative force is therefore always to form the inner person. But what does maleness look like today when it takes on the form of fatherliness? Mostly confused and leading down the wrong path.

When we speak of *fatherliness* in modern culture, then in all honesty we must admit that it takes *three main forms*.

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<sup>8</sup> In German: *Wesensformung* or *Wesensgestaltung*. Literally the “formation of the essence [of a thing or person]”.

## 1. First Distortion: Rigid Formalism

The first form is a *rigid, merely formalistically maintained fatherliness*. I am speaking in typologies again. In other words, you will never find such an example in real life which is literally like this, but the trend goes in this direction. How often do you find this! For that matter, when we think of the families belonging to Schoenstatt here [in Milwaukee]—the parents suffer a great deal from the fact that to the children the father does not mean as much as their fathers meant to them. They desperately try to cling to the old ways, using their old memories of how their fathers treat them when they were young<sup>9</sup>. In reality it is nothing more than going through the motions, helplessness, not knowing the right way any more. The functions of parents, namely fathers or grandfathers, are not fulfilled [from within], but are exterior acts without an interior attitude, and therefore without interior creative force.

## 2. Second Distortion: Mimed Authority

Then comes a second image of father. In essence, if I may use the expression, it is *a kind of mimed fatherliness*. It is frequently like this: I want to act outwardly as if I were a father; I want to use all means to maintain my exterior authority. We have already talked enough about the difference between interior and exterior authority. You see, a mimed authority is a purely exterior authority without interior authority, and therefore without creative force, without educational power or influence. The woman instinctively fosters this process and way of acting in the man. In such cases, practically speaking, the authority, namely the authority in the sense of the formation of the inner person or of life, has passed over to the woman. The woman has become the final authority in the formation of the inner person. And the woman therefore knows how to outwardly foster what the father is doing, this miming of interior

authority. But in the meantime the real creative force of education is growing in her. But that is only a transition. After all, how will the woman of today, especially when we think of America, [where] the woman who is drawn into the whole economy, how will she be able to undertake from within a formation of the inner person and of life? More and more she will share the same fate as the man. *The “father murder” of today will lead to the “mother murder” of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow*. Just think about what this means for today’s culture!

## 3. Third Distortion: Deconstructed Authority

Now comes the third stage. What are its characteristics? It is the *complete tearing down of authority*. Instead of a man trying to form the inner life of his children, instead of working to become capable again in the formation of the inner person of his children, he settles for the formation of knowledge, but not even by teaching the knowledge himself, but by letting others do it, either the Church or the school or the state. In fact, his sole perspective is the following purpose: My children must find a place in the present economic order or disorder, must learn to fend for themselves. In the end, however, where is the power, the creative power, the creative power built on inner authority which grips and forms the essence and life of the young man or woman?

## Childlikeness: The Source of Fatherly Creative Power

When you hear this brief sketch and yourselves take on inner responsibility, starting with your own large family, and then perhaps for one another, for our vocations, etc., I hope you understand again how important it is that we have real fathers again, fathers with fatherly authority and creative formative power, when it comes to the formation of the inner life of a young person or a generation. These are all thoughts that can and want to leave a deep impression on our concept of fatherliness, Father kingdom, and community of Fathers. And the more you become aware of the broad cultural context, the more you will feel swept up in modern life, the higher the ideal will

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<sup>9</sup> See the example of Gilbert Schimmel and how he tried to be a good father in Fr. Jonathan Niehaus, *Gilbert Schimmel: The End Crowns the Work* (Waukesha, 1996).



soar before your eyes, the more seriously you will strive for self-discipline, already from the perspective of you yourselves becoming more and more children of the Heavenly Father.

If all of this is true, which I have only sketched in passing, what is my task as a man? To be a child before God! To be sure, we know the technical term: *To God a child — to men a man*, i.e. a vigorous personality. How important it is, therefore, that we ourselves come to know God as a father and can learn to love him as a father, already alone in the context of today's cultural collapse! In this way or in a similar way you should think through these thoughts for yourselves and expect and beg for light from above.