



This talk was given at the Faith and families conference in London Colney, October 2008

## **The Hearts of Fathers and the Teenager: Communicating the Faith in the Context of Modern Culture**

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### **Introduction**

In his *Reflections on Fatherhood*, Karol Wojtyła summarizes the core of his play *Radiation of Fatherhood*. Adam, who is the one speaking in this text, experiences the lack of relation, the loneliness, that is the fruit of sin, but he also experiences the desire for the communion of persons, the desire for being a bridegroom and a father.

“To absorb the radiation of fatherhood means not only to become a father but, much more, to become a child (become a son). Being the father of many, many people, I must be a child: the more I am a father, the more I become a child. Though I look

at the Son with admiration, yet I cannot transform myself into Him. In him, what immense fullness of humanity! He is the living contrary of all loneliness. If I knew how to dive into him and graft myself into him, I could draw from myself the love of which he has the fullness. It is this love that reveals the Father and that from the father through the Son lets the bridegroom proceed. Father and bridegroom: how much does he work for every human person, as for the greatest treasure, for an unrepeatable good, like a lover for his beloved.” (Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, p. 368; translation revised according to Italian).

The beginning and the end of things is very important. Their middle, of course, is important too. What are the very first human words quoted in the Bible? And what are the last human words quoted in the Bible?

The very first words are the words of joy and delight of the first bridegroom about his bride, “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (‘iššâ), for out of Man (‘îš) this one was taken” (Gen 2:23). These are words of the fulfillment of the joy of bridegroom and bride. The very last human word quoted in the Bible is a single word quoted near the end of the Revelation to John. It is a word of the definitive bride addressed to her bridegroom, a word 2 spoken at the same time by the Spirit who gives her life from within. “The Spirit and the bride say, Come (:Ercou)!” (Rev 22,17). It is a word of longing for the joy of bridegroom and bride. The “coming” of the bridegroom, of course, is the great day of the Lord prophesied in the Old Testament. The middle of the Bible is closely related to its beginning and end. I am not thinking right now of the position of the Song of Songs, which is indeed arithmetically at or very near the middle of most Bibles. I mean the point of contact between the very end of the Old Testament and the very beginning of the New. Here we are on somewhat less firm ground, because not all editions of the Bible agree on the order of books in the Old Testament. In most modern editions, at any rate, the book of the prophet Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, immediately before the Gospels. The very end of Malachi focuses on the great day of the Lord, exactly like the end of the Revelation to John. “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4,5-6). At the very beginning of the Gospel



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stories, when the angel announces the birth of John the Baptist, he applies Malachi's prophecy about Elijah to John. "With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1,17). If you compare angel's words with the prophecy of Malachi you can see an even greater emphasis on the hearts of fathers. The emphasis is already strong and clear in Malachi. So important is it that the hearts of fathers turn to children and vice versa, according to God's words to Malachi, that when the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, this turning of hearts decides the question whether God will strike the land with a curse or not. These words, by the way, "strike the land with a curse, **Hērem**" are the very last words of the Old Testament. The word "**Hērem**" means a sacred ban to total destruction. It is a terrifying word. In the angel's words about John the Baptist, the emphasis on the hearts of fathers is even clearer. John the Baptist will "turn the hearts of fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1,17). The hearts of the children are left out. All the emphasis falls on the hearts of fathers. Why is the turning of the hearts of fathers so important that it is decisive for the day of the Lord, for the difference between curse and blessing on the land? Why is it central for preparing the arrival of Jesus? The importance goes both ways. Children are important for the hearts of fathers and the hearts of fathers for children.

**Part One: The Importance of Children for the Hearts of Fathers** Children are important for the hearts of their fathers, because children are excellent teachers of their fathers. My little daughter Hannah, who is now six years old, gave me a big kiss some time ago. I then said to her, "Hannah, you are spoiling me." She looked at me absolutely seriously with big eyes and said, "No Papa, I cannot spoil you. You are a big person. You know what is good. I am just a little person." I think these few words did more to awaken my moral consciousness than any number of good sermons in Church. Hannah was the teacher and I the learner. There is a teaching of Jesus which is closely related to The prophecies about Elijah and John the Baptist. "Amen, I tell you, unless you turn around and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18,3). The Greek word used here is *strophō*. It means turning around. From going one way, we have to turn around and go the other way. How does one learn to turn around and be like a child? The answer is obvious. One has to live with children and learn from them. Children can teach their fathers very much about the meaning of life. What is it that tends to be important in the lives of fathers? Their professional occupation. And what is it that tends to give form to their professional occupation? Progress, expansion of the economy. The most important motor of professional life is progress in science, technology and the economy.

The roots of this motor in its present form in the West lie in the scientific and industrial revolution, particularly in two philosophers that played a key role in this revolution, Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes. The dream of Bacon and Descartes, a dream realized to an amazing extent, was the total reconstruction of knowledge in the interests of human power over nature. A consistently mechanist account of nature was the result of this moral choice. At the same time, a form of ethics arose that was congenial to this reconstruction of knowledge, namely, utilitarianism. John Paul II puts his finger on the logic of these developments. "The development of contemporary civilization is linked to a scientific and technological progress which is often achieved in a one-sided way and thus appears purely positivistic. Positivism, as we



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know results in agnosticism in theory and utilitarianism in practice and in ethics. In our own day history is in a way repeating itself. Utilitarianism is a civilization of production and of use, a civilization of things and not of persons, a civilization in which persons are used in the same way as things are used. In the context of a civilization of use, woman can become an object for man, children a hindrance to parents, the family an institution obstructing the freedom of its members” (Letter to Families, 13). Our age is deeply shaped by technological power over nature. The increase of power is so great that it threatens life on earth more and more through nuclear armaments and environmental threats. The increase in possessions and wealth that accompanies the increase of power, at least for some, is equally great. People live a life that is more and more swallowed up by these structures of power and their hearts are occupied more and more by the goals of these structures. From the point of view of the commandment of love, the only diagnosis that can be given of this situation is: poisoning of the heart. The commandment of love which is supposed to be the main “light for my path” (Psalm 119:105) shines less and less. The true goal of life, happiness as the fullness of life in communion with other people and God disappears behind the narrowing horizon. Especially in this situation of profound cultural corruption, children have the ability to form and to free the hearts of their fathers. Children have very little interest in the goals of the civilization of things. They are powerless. They have no capacity for and also no interest in technological power and material wealth. And they cannot help their fathers to get them.

But they are amazing experts in the science and practice of love. This expertise seems to be part of their nature from birth and it rises up powerfully already in the first few months of their lives. They have great sensitivity for personal relations, for warmth or coldness. At the same time they are transparent and unyielding if something is not right in those relations. They want love and they ask for it. They have love and they give it. They also have what is required to inspire love in the hearts of their fathers. They are very beautiful and loveable. Their beauty is often overshadowed by the difficulties of daily life and by the darkness of sin, especially the sins of fathers, but it is nevertheless a great educative power that can turn the hearts of fathers toward them. Of course, fathers must open themselves to this invitation to love. If they do, if they let themselves be drawn into the children’s world of joy in play, they can come to understand more deeply and to practice more effectively the one and only principle of Christian ethics, which St. Augustine expresses in the words, “*dilige et quod vis fac*, love and then do what you want” (Sermons on the First Letter of John, 7.8). In this way children are the great teachers of a civilization of love.

Children can teach their fathers not only about life, but also about death. The Jewish medical doctor and philosopher Leon Kass shows the main point with great insight. “Biological consequences aside, simply to covet a prolonged life span for ourselves is both a sign and a cause of our failure to open ourselves to this—or any higher—purpose [Kass is speaking about procreation.]. It is probably no accident that it is a generation whose intelligentsia proclaims the meaninglessness of life that embarks on its indefinite prolongation and that seeks to cure the emptiness of life by extending it. For the desire to prolong youthfulness is not only a childish desire to eat one’s life and keep it; it is also an expression of a childish and narcissistic wish incompatible with devotion to posterity. It seeks an endless present, isolated from anything truly eternal, and severed from any true continuity with past and future. It is in principle hostile to children, because children, those who come after, are those who will take one’s place; they are life’s answer to mortality and their presence in one’s house is a constant reminder that one no longer belongs to the frontier generation. One cannot pursue youthfulness for oneself and remain faithful to the spirit and meaning of perpetuation.” Leon Kass, *Toward a More Natural*



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*Science: Biology of Human Affairs* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 316. In this way, children are the great teachers of death. They allow fathers to let go, to detach themselves from what they have achieved in their professional and domestic life, to pass on the fruit of their work to their children and to face death with open eyes. To conclude this first part of my presentation, children are important for the hearts of their fathers. They can form the hearts of their fathers in the understanding and practice of life as well as death. We

fathers must be willing to learn.

**Part Two: The Importance of the Hearts of Fathers for their Children** The converse is true as well. The hearts of fathers are important for their children. If there is one thing developmental psychology shows, and if there is one thing crime statistics prove, it is the crucial role of the father in the formation of a child's personality. There is a conspicuous and massive sign of the failure of fathers in this area, namely, the teenager. The teenager is not an inevitable natural or God-given phenomenon, but was invented, fashioned, permitted and promoted in the period immediately after World War II by the generation of our parents and grandparents (See Michael Platt, "The Teenager and the West," 2 [unpublished]). It is truly amazing how this radically new phenomenon came on the scene with overwhelming success. One of the essential ingredients of the teenager in relation to parents is the so called generation gap. History shows that cultural and religious continuity between parents and children is the normal condition of human life. Our massive failure in passing on our cultural and religious heritage to our own children is without precedent. There are, I think, three factors that played an especially important role in the invention and formation of the teenager. The first and most fundamental, it seems to me, was and is the absence of fathers. I say fathers, though mothers are always included as well. The hearts of fathers were and are turned toward the pursuit of wealth and power. They were and are bent on constructing a civilization of things from which children, particularly adolescent children, can only feel excluded.

A second important factor is the sexual revolution. Again, the fault lies primarily with the fathers. They were the ones who first embraced an ethics of utilitarianism, which is the suitable counterpart to the pursuit of technological progress and wealth. Utilitarianism sees the final goal of all life in pleasure. Everything is to be evaluated according to its capacity to provide pleasure. Let's go back to John Paul II's description. "Utilitarianism is a civilization of production and of use, a civilization of things and not of persons, a civilization in which persons are used in the same way as things are used. In the context of a civilization of use, woman can become an object for man, children a hindrance to parents, the family an institution obstructing the freedom of its members." Utilitarianism inevitably destroys the link between sex and love, between sex and procreation by reducing the other person in erotic experience to a mere means for erotic drama and pleasure. In the formation of the teenager, the piercing sexual passions of adolescent children were suddenly released into destructive premature relationships. Instead of being introduced into a culture of love, they were and are abandoned to a culture of the use of each other for pleasure or, to use their own preferred word, "fun." The third main factor in the invention and propagation of the teenager is the rise of a new music produced specifically for adolescent children. It is a kind of music that is tailor-made for the absence of deeper personal formation of sexual passion by authentic love. This music and its cultural trappings could not have achieved the power it achieved without a large economic muscle behind it. American and European adolescents were perhaps the first generation of children who constituted a potent market by themselves in distinction from the adult world, because they got large amounts of discretionary money from their parents. The parents were happy enough to let the children do



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what they wanted while they themselves pursued their professional lives. The removal of women from the home and their induction into the work force increased the cultural vacuum in which children lived. It also increased the economic power of this vacuum. The entertainment industry exploded, aided by technological progress, especially by the invention of the radio and the television.

Music turned out to be the single most important article of trade in this exploding market. It is a music that consistently conquers market share by preying on the most intense and most immature passions in adolescents, above all on erotic passion and on anger. The hearts of children were simply abandoned to the formative power of this music. Michael Platt seems to me correct in his summary of the situation. "The Teenager was „created’ by the negligence of the parents, the indifference of the statesmen, and the cupidity of the merchants. . . . [T]he most vulnerable were exposed to the most predatory by those most naturally interested in their welfare, their own parents. Absolutely astonishing! What Plato thought no parents would ever do, turn over their own children to others to be reeducated, the parents of America did after World War II. Before then there were a few disk jockeys, some movie stars, and no TVs, but all of these were seldom allowed in the home, and never to educate the children. Suddenly after the War, into the American home came hordes of them, persons that few parents would have invited as guests and yet they turned over the souls of their own children to them to be educated" (Platt, p. 30 [unpublished]). These educators in the home increasingly serve as baby-sitters while both father and mother are away, pursuing their professional careers. Children don't return to a home after school. They return to a house with electronic appliances. They fill the absence of what makes a home with an alternative world constructed by entertainment. When they come together, it is this world of entertainment that forms their relationships, from the clothes in which they choose to appear to each other (usually with amazing conformism to the group) to the love relationships they develop. It is not surprising that many Catholic parents feel simply desperate. What is dearest to them, namely, the love of Christ, is something they seem unable to communicate to their children. An overwhelmingly strong youth culture takes possession of the souls of these children and drives a sharp knife between them and their parents. Again, history shows that this is not the normal condition of human life.

**Practical Suggestions** What should we do as fathers in this difficult situation? The first and most fundamental thing is to follow the urgent message of Elijah and John the Baptist and allow our hearts to be turned toward our children, present and future. The alternative is clear. The land will be cursed and we will not be ready for the coming of the Lord. There is a proverb that fits what we tend to spend much of our energy on, "Time is money." A more important truth is "Time is life." A father who wants to turn his heart toward his children must in the first place spend much time with them. The fallacy of "quality time" is an easy self-justification for the denial of this truth in practice. Of course, it is true that little time well spent is better than much time badly spent. Still, time is life and unless one spends much time, one lives little with one's children. It may be necessary for Catholic fathers to adopt explicitly the slogan rejected by feminists. A father's proper place is the home. He should take care of his children. Formulating the teaching of Elijah and John the Baptist in that way is perhaps too extreme, certainly too extreme if it means replacing the mother and giving up one's professional life to dedicate oneself entirely to one's children. Most fathers cannot afford to do this. Still, if one asks, What does the turning of the hearts of fathers to their children mean in actual practice? the clear answer is: it means living with the children and that means time. Time is life. There is a black hole in most homes that sucks much time into itself and away from the people who live together in those



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homes. Removing that black hole is perhaps the single most helpful external step in turning one's heart to one's children. You have probably guessed that I am talking about the television. Quite apart from the content it offers, it is an enemy because it deprives family members of what they need most for a life together, time. Time is life.

An excellent way of spending time that becomes available when the black hole is taken away, or at least used rarely, is to share music, good music. Music has the power to form the heart on a deep level. Socrates is right when he says in Plato's Republic, "The rearing in music is most sovereign, because rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it in bringing grace with them; and they make a person graceful if he is correctly reared, if not, the opposite." (401d) A little later he says, "Never are the ways of music changed without the greatest political laws being changed . . ." (424c). Another excellent way of spending time is for the father to read books out loud with the children. Reading out loud may seem a kind of entertainment that is not very different from watching television together, but in fact the difference is profound. It is not just that one can choose the books one reads, but that reading out loud is a more truly shared activity. One looks at each other instead of something else. One can stop and talk about things. Reading together builds up a treasury of shared images and ideas on which a common life depends. When fathers truly turn their hearts to their children, this has a deep impact on the father's relationship with his wife. You know the proverb, I am sure. "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother." One could add, it is to love their mother exactly as a mother, as the origin, together with himself, of new life. Being such an origin of new life is a gloriously good thing. It has the power to do what only a great good can do, namely, be a cause of great love. In the practice of this love, fathers need much healing, most of all healing from the sin of abortion, of pressuring women into abortion, which is a radically direct turning of the hearts of fathers against their children. The sin of contraception is similar. It strikes deep wounds in our hearts as fathers that hinder us from turning those hearts to our children.

**Conclusion:** To conclude, let me put before you the main practical proposal that I wanted to establish. We fathers urgently need a solid formation in the mind and heart of fatherhood, in the science and practice of fatherhood. The sources for such a formation are available, ready to be used. A particularly rich source is the teaching of Pope John Paul II, above all his Theology of the Body. We need priests, teachers and catechists who can communicate the mind and heart of fatherhood effectively.

Let me return to the text by Karol Wojtyła that I quoted at the very beginning. It contains all the essential points I wanted to make. Again, the one speaking is Adam. "To absorb the radiation of fatherhood means not only to become a father but, much more, to become a child (become a son). Being the father of many, many people, I must be a child: the more I am a father, the more I become a child. Though I look at the Son with admiration, yet I cannot transform myself into Him. In him, what immense fullness of humanity! He is the living contrary of all loneliness. If I knew how to dive into him and graft myself into him, I could draw from myself the love of which he has the fullness. It is this love that reveals the Father and that from the father through the Son lets the bridegroom proceed. Father and bridegroom: how much does he work for every human person, as for the greatest treasure, for an unrepeatable good, like a lover for his beloved."