

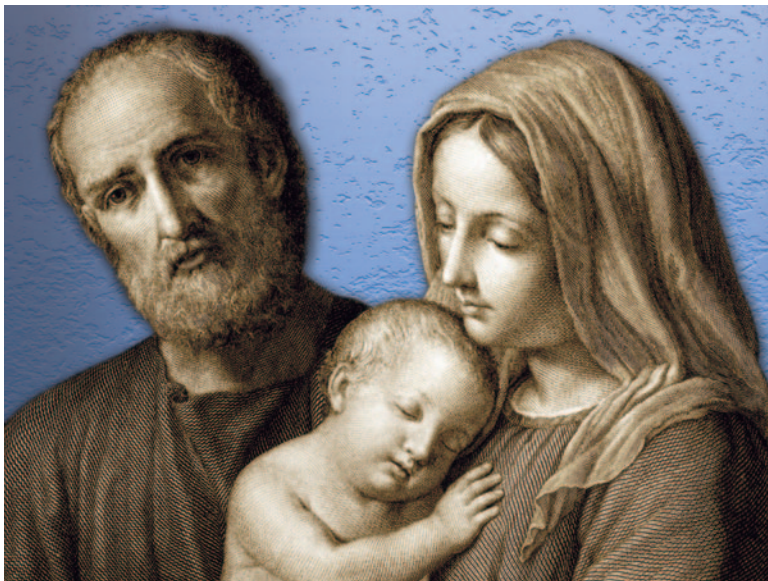
The Gift of Fatherhood

Father Carter H. Griffin



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The Gift of Fatherhood

What Every Man Should Know

Father Carter H. Griffin

Nihil Obstat:
Susan M. Timoney, S.T.D.
Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur:
Most Rev. Barry C. Knestout
Auxiliary Bishop of Washington
October 24, 2014

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The text of this booklet was transcribed and edited from a talk given by Father Carter H. Griffin on April 13, 2013, at the Saint John Paul II National Shrine in Washington, D.C. Transcription by Kellie Mason.

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Printed in the United States of America

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Bartolome Esteban Murillo (1618-1682), *Holy Family with Sparrow*, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. © Museo Nacional del Prado / Art Resource, NY

The Gift of Fatherhood

INTRODUCTION

My interest in fatherhood began almost 20 years ago, in the U.S. Navy, before I entered the seminary. I was a young officer on a ship, responsible for a number of men in my division. I had been well-trained to deal with Navy tactics, regulations, communications, chain of command, and many other important things. But I wasn't nearly as prepared for what took well over half my time—dealing with the personal problems of the guys in my division.

It was remarkable what some of these well-intentioned men were doing. One bought a nine-year-old Mustang at 22 percent annual interest though he couldn't even make the first payment, let alone cover the whole loan. Another fellow had given a general power of attorney to a young lady he had met a week before deploying and came back with nothing—completely wiped out.

There was so much confusion in their lives stemming from a lack of discipline and a failure to plan or set reasonable goals. It was clear to me that they had never really been shown how to be men by their fathers, and I saw up close and personal some of the effects of this crisis in fatherhood. At 22 years old, I was basically being a father to these men, some of whom were much older than I. To really help them, I needed to know not only their immediate actions but also to understand their underlying problems.

Obviously, what I experienced is not a universal phenomenon. There are many wonderful, holy, capable fathers

who are generous and kind. But there are many who struggle with this vocation to fatherhood.

THREE FOCAL POINTS FOR FATHERHOOD

In talking about fatherhood, I would like to make three basic points. The first is to identify the crisis—and I think crisis is not too strong of a word—that is facing fatherhood in our country and our culture.

The second is to speak about one approach to fatherhood that may help alleviate the crisis to some extent. My focus will be on fatherhood as something grounded in God's fatherhood and what that means for human fathers.

Finally, I will outline some conclusions and an action plan designed to make us better fathers, better sons, better brothers, and better husbands.

Let us look first at the crisis, which can be summarized by how fatherhood is portrayed in our mass media. Several years ago, *New York Times* columnist John Tierney wrote an article entitled "The Doofus Dad," in which he traced in popular culture a common trope: the clueless, ineffective father. Citing shows like *Jimmy Neutron*, *The Sopranos*, *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*, he concluded that according to prime-time depictions, today's fathers are oblivious, troubled, deranged and generally incompetent.

He cited a study by the National Fatherhood Initiative showing that fathers on national television are eight times more likely to be portrayed negatively as mothers in that medium.

There is a popular animated show called *The Amazing World of Gumball*. Here is a description of the show's father character from the official website: "Dad is a giant pink dummy rabbit. He spends most of his time at home watching TV and playing video

games.” As *Wikipedia* describes, the father “has a large appetite and is a voracious eater...[he] does not appear to have any degree of responsibility or intelligence.” Think Homer Simpson, only less responsible.

That, in a nutshell, is what people so often hear about fathers from movies, TV shows, commercials and music. Contrast that to the good and strong fathers of the past in *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Andy Griffith Show*. This negative father image would probably be harmless if it were an isolated thing. But in our popular culture, it’s far too common. And a steady diet of this will lead us to conclude that dads have become irrelevant at best and harmful at worst.

Someone recently emailed me a list of church bulletin bloopers that was making the rounds on the internet. One of them read: “Ladies, don’t forget the rummage sale. It’s a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Don’t forget your husbands.”

While that is a humorous misplacement of words, it certainly finds an echo in the cultural understanding of fatherhood today. I would argue that this is aided and abetted by certain uses of technology, such as the very aggressive forms of reproductive technology—in-vitro fertilization, cloning, and surrogate parenthood. Of course, our longstanding abortion laws, in which a father has no say in the prenatal life of the child he helped conceive, have been perhaps the most powerful force separating a man from his fatherhood. In all of these examples, the message is the same: fathers are largely irrelevant.

To get to the bottom of the problem, we need to find the source of this minimalistic understanding of fatherhood. I would argue that it is not a rejection of fatherhood *per se*. I think the problem of modern fatherhood rests in a more general rejection of authority that has taken place in the last 50 years. As authority

figures, fathers have been under attack by a culture that is stuck in adolescence due, in part, to a culture that exalts the autonomous self.

I saw a beautiful Father's Day card with the message: "When I was a child, Dad, I thought you knew everything. And when I was a teenager, I thought you knew nothing. Now that I am an adult, I realize you know quite a lot." We're kind of stuck in the middle stage: "Dad, I think you know nothing."

If that's where we are today, how do we get out of this situation?

It is a fact of human psychology that if you repeat a message enough times, you tend to believe it. If you are told over and over again that you are worthless and not needed, then eventually you may begin to accept it. In the case of fathers, this message has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I think there has been, for various reasons, an increase in male narcissism, a lack of confidence, a depression, an anger, a feeling of being detached and discarded, and the result has been that many men have become the very thing that the popular culture has said they are. As with all issues involving psychology and social interaction, cause and effect are often difficult to identify.

Yet there is a great irony in this downgrading of fatherhood. Just as we are being told how irrelevant fathers are, we are discovering in the social sciences just how vital a father is in family life. Never before have we had so much evidence of the importance of the role, dignity and nobility of a father, and just how vital a figure he is in the welfare of his children. By any measure, children who grow up without involved fathers start life at a distinct disadvantage and are correlated with negative results. We know many heroic examples of men and women who have overcome the circumstances of their upbringing. But whether you look at poverty rates, out-of-wedlock births, drug abuse, physical

abuse, suicide or any number of negative outcomes, not having a father in your life is one of the highest risk factors. I've heard a psychologist say that prisons are basically dormitories for fatherless men. The percentage of men in prison who had limited paternal influence is so high that it is impossible to ignore.

FAITH AND FATHERHOOD

The statistics may be grim, but I am very hopeful that we as people of faith can restore some of the vital energy that has been sucked out of the image of fatherhood, by reflecting on fatherhood in the light of our faith.

In Scripture, fatherhood—and motherhood—is worthy of tremendous veneration. If you think about the Ten Commandments, the first three deal with honoring God, honoring his holy name and honoring his Sabbath. In the next seven Commandments dealing with human relationships, the very first one tells us to honor our father and mother, “so that it may go well with you” (Dt 5:16). The connection between parents and children form the foundation of all human relationships, just as families are the basic units of society.

Yet when speaking about fatherhood, Jesus goes even further than the Decalogue. He says that human fathers not only deserve our love, admiration and respect, but he asserts that fatherhood is at the very heart of our existence and who we are. He reveals God's fatherhood, calling him Father and telling us to do the same.

Christians can easily forget how radical this teaching is. This fact is underscored by the story of a well-known Catholic evangelist about a friendly talk he had with a Muslim scholar before a formal debate. In the course of the conversation, this Catholic kept referring to God as Father, and eventually the Muslim said, “Can you please stop saying that?” Asked what the

problem was, the Muslim explained, “Stop calling God a father; I consider that blasphemous.”

Even in Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus, God was not commonly approached as a father. So when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father,” it was something new, especially since the title Jesus used – “Abba” – connotes a warm personal relationship – like our “Dad.” This Abba intimacy with God defines us as Christians. Even more radical is the connection between God’s fatherhood and human fatherhood that St. Paul makes. Writing to the Ephesians, he says, “I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth, takes its name” (Eph 3:14-15). We cannot understand our own human fatherhood unless we first ground it in the fatherhood of God.

How do we do that? What is God’s fatherhood like?

First, it is safe to say that God loves generating life. You see it especially on a beautiful day, when you go into the mountains or forests and you see the teeming life. But you also see it in humanity itself and the beautiful diversity of children that he has made for himself, those who are called to glorify him and to love each other.

But there’s one thing which is even greater than generating life: it’s generating generators of life. We see that in our own human relations. There is a special bond that connects grandparents and grandchildren. There’s a special pride in a man when his son or daughter has generated a life; there’s something remarkable in that. Why? Because he has not just generated his own son or daughter, he’s generated a generator. A beautiful thing goes on in the heart of a man when he becomes a

grandfather. And I think that is because he realizes he has generated a father.

That is what God has done: he has generated fathers. He has generated human creatures who have been elevated to take on his own name as a father.

So we see that a cascading pattern of paternity emanates from God's fatherhood. You can even see it, to some extent, in the other parts of creation. There's a sense in which we can say that angels have a kind of analogous paternity, inasmuch they pray for us, they assist us, and they encourage us. There is a sense in which they convey spiritual life, yet these purely spiritual being cannot physically reproduce. On the other side of the spectrum, we can say that animals have a kind of paternity. They reproduce physically, yet they cannot engender a person.

In the middle, between the animal and heavenly kingdoms, you find human beings, whose paternity is exercised in the highest way of all. A human being generates on both the physical and spiritual levels, a body and an immortal soul which make up a human person who is destined to live forever.

Of course, the immortal soul must be created directly by God, so human fatherhood is grounded in God's fatherhood.

CALL NO MAN FATHER?

You might think—and I know some non-Catholic Scripture scholars will say—“Now hold on. Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, ‘Call no man on earth your father, for you have one Father who is in heaven’” (Mt 23:9). I think that passage can be read in a number of ways. One, which is pretty superficial, is that we cannot use the word “father” for any human being. But the problem with that is Jesus himself used the word “father” frequently to refer to human fathers (there are numerous examples in Matthew's Gospel alone:

Mt 10:35,37; 15:5; 19:5,19,29; 21:31; 23:32). So he's pointing at something deeper. I think Jesus is saying that inasmuch as a man can be genuinely called a father here on earth, it is only because his role is first grounded in the fatherhood of God.

So call no man on earth your father as if he was your father, independent of God's fatherhood. When God created Adam and Eve, what was the command? To be fruitful and multiply. He inscribed into their very being, their human nature, this capacity, this call, this vocation to be fruitful. He inscribed part of himself inasmuch as he is the great generator of all human life. We see this most clearly in biological fatherhood, in the generation of a child, which carries with it an echo of God's Trinitarian love, in which two persons generate a third. In that union between a man and a woman, God enters in a very special way because he generates something that is totally beyond their capacity to conceive— an immortal, rational soul, a being who will live forever, a person who is called to the most intimate communion with God in the Blessed Trinity. This is fundamentally the difference between reproduction, which animals engage in, and human procreation, which is a beautiful participation in God's own life. In it, man and woman enter into that creative moment, where God produces something that was not there before; *ex nihilo* ("from nothing") he generates an immortal soul.

NATURAL FATHERHOOD

Human fatherhood does not end on the biological level. It doesn't end with just producing this beautiful child infused with an immortal soul. The man who conceives a child and then abandons him is not called a *former* father; he's called an *absentee* father. His fatherhood was supposed to begin with conception and birth, not to end with them. The procreation of a child goes beyond biological fatherhood and the generation of a person's natural life. There must also be an attempt to perfect

that new life through upbringing and education. We might call this “natural fatherhood” as opposed to simple “biological fatherhood.” When a man looks at his child, something happens to him: his heart changes. We’ve all seen this: the guy who grows up carefree, maybe a little irresponsible, gets married and has a child. He’s a different person as the responsibility and joy of fatherhood overwhelms him. It’s a little frightening, but really beautiful to see his heart expand to meet the challenge. Fatherhood fixes our gaze on our beloved child and draws a man out of himself. Any sacrifice or hardship becomes worthwhile for the sake of that child who has captured your heart. But the change is painful at times. A guy has to stretch his limits, become a better man, live in the present and work for the future. Yet he wouldn’t trade it for anything if it meant he couldn’t have his child. It makes possible that daily sacrifice: the father at work gazes at a family photo in his wallet or thinks of his wife and children, and with new energy gets back to his task. It’s all worth it when a man really grasps his own fatherhood.

So what is natural fatherhood all about? It certainly means a man has to be a provider. He has to provide a home, food, and education for his children’s future. He provides them with an identity – one of the most important things a father can give to his children. He’s a guide and a teacher, endowed, hopefully, with wisdom needed to build them up in natural virtue and in character, showing his children that life is worth living yet there are greater things worth dying for. It’s the father’s role to bring his children into the larger world and introduce them to challenging situations. The mother brings them into the world of the family; the father brings them into the larger world of society and social ties, and shows them that there is a life and a mission awaiting them. He

does this not only by teaching them about life. He must teach also by example so that they know what he says is possible.

In this role, the father can instill a vocation, as well, to priesthood and religious life, and also to a lay vocation of hard work and service to the community. The decline in vocations in many areas of our Church is likely related to the decline of involvement of fathers in the lives of their children.

The father not only opens the doors to the world for his offspring; he also should set a narrow path when needed. That means applying discipline and high standards, even when a dad's nature is forgiving and easy going. Certainly, discipline can be too severe, without mercy. Yet a bigger problem today is that many fathers fail to apply any discipline. If you act like a buddy or a nice guy to your kids, you may feel good about yourself now, but you may regret your lack of discipline later. Set rules and enforce them and your kids will thank you one day.

That's what my father did for me. When I was a teen, my parents lived in Puerto Rico, and I attended boarding school in England. We were a very close family, and I was homesick to death. So I would call home often to speak with my parents.

At one point, about four months into the separation, I said to myself, "I'm done, I can't do this, and I'm going home." I called my mother and told her. She was so happy and said, "I'll send you a ticket. I'll see you soon; I can't wait to see you." And then my father got on the phone and said, "You're not going anywhere."

I learned later that it was hard for him to do that. My mother's empathy reminded me that I *could* always go home, that my parents would always be there for me, and this gave me a lot of strength. But I don't know where I would be today if my dad hadn't made me stay at that boarding school. It changed my life. Sticking it out and persevering at that moment were exactly what I needed,

and it was my father who did that for me. He was my guide and he continues to be so.

So a natural father is a provider, a guide, and a teacher. He is also a protector. We might imagine that a father no longer needs to be a protector today; we have police and the military, video cameras, home alarm systems and smoke detectors. What is left to protect?

There still are circumstances in which a father has to protect his family physically. When there's a noise in the house at night, who puts on his slippers to investigate? When the car breaks down on the highway, who gets out to lift the hood? When a school bully pushes his kid, who helps his son learn to defend himself, or addresses the issue with the teachers? It *should* be the father.

But there are more common dangers that a father must confront, such as the emotional and spiritual harm his kids may suffer. Through the turmoil of family life, he must be a steady emotional influence, an unmovable rock for the objective good, a source of good morals and high morale for his children.

Today, there are unprecedented threats to a family's Catholic faith. From the highest levels of society seeking to secularize the public square, to the simple Saturday morning cartoon that glorifies personal power and violence, kids are exposed to soft yet constant suggestions that their Catholic faith does not fit into the modern world. The father must be aware of these threats and develop sensible ways to protect his children from the more serious ones. Going to church on Sunday with the family, though important, is not enough. Dad must be a leader in faith, hope and charity, showing through his daily actions that the Catholic faith is not just catechism truths or Sunday rituals; it also has very

practical applications in daily life and can bring happiness here and now.

The father must be particularly aware of the scourge of pornography, and how vulnerable his kids are in our media-saturated culture. Speaking as a confessor, I can say that the pervasive storm of porn is devouring the souls of kids today. A father must stand as a bulwark against the flood to protect his family. Through various devices and media, kids now have access to the most demeaning, brutal sexual images that objectify women and children and destroy lives, and most are exposed to some form of porn by age 11. A man must take the lead in speaking to his children about it, and not only once – it is a conversation that needs to take place all the way through their childhood and adolescence, in age-appropriate but very clear ways. As protector, a father makes sure this filth doesn't come into his home. I am shocked at how few fathers understand the dangers. No child – or even teenager, in my opinion – should have a smartphone or internet-enabled tablet or laptop. Period. Moreover, a protecting father will take steps to shield his children by installing filtering or other accountability software and hardware firewalls on the home network. Don't be lax and assume your kids know better. There are too many stories of kids' innocence being robbed by just a few looks, and a porn habit developed. Be a wise and vigilant protector of your family.

SUPERNATURAL FATHERHOOD

Biological and natural fatherhood don't exhaust the full nature of fatherhood. They are both ordered to something even higher, even greater, even more beautiful: the third and highest degree of paternity, which we can call supernatural paternity or spiritual fatherhood—fatherhood in the order of grace. The human child is born not just for temporal life, not just to enjoy the goods of this

world, although they are many and great; the child is born to enjoy the imperishable goods of heaven in eternal life.

Human fathers generate their children's natural lives, but that doesn't mean they are not responsible for generating their children's spiritual lives, their supernatural lives. They do that through their prayer and sacrifices, by teaching their children the faith, by setting an example of Christian discipleship, by bringing them to the sacraments, by forming them in virtue, by leading them to Christ.

Pope Francis, in his inaugural homily, called St. Joseph the perfect example of fatherhood. Clearly, his fatherhood was not biological and was primarily in the supernatural order. But don't think for a moment that this is a kind of metaphorical fatherhood, an ethereal, abstract fatherhood that has no connection to real life. It's a genuine, real fatherhood.

You might say, "I can't generate grace; how can I be a father of grace?" Well, nor can you generate an immortal, rational soul. It takes a direct act by God for that formless mass of cells at conception to become a human person. And so too does a man in his supernatural fatherhood cooperate with God as a procreator and lead souls to eternal life.

A seminarian I know had a little nephew who died at 14 months with severe birth defects. His parents and their whole family rallied around in the most remarkable way, praying for this child, making sure he was baptized, sacrificing for him, asking others to pray. There is no doubt in my mind that they are not just the natural and biological parents of that child; they also helped to usher him into heaven, where he is now praying for them, after

his brave suffering brought so many others to Christ during his short life on earth.

One of the great joys of a priest is his fatherhood. We call a priest “Father” because his fatherhood is ordered almost exclusively to this third level of fatherhood—supernatural fatherhood, in the order of grace. It’s one of the great joys of working as vocation director and as vice rector of a seminary that I am forming men to be fathers. The choice is not, “Do you want to be a father or become a priest?” The choice is, “You are called to fatherhood; the question is what kind?” There is a powerful fatherhood that priests exercise which I hope you have experienced. I know I have in my own life—not just being a priest, but receiving that fatherhood from other priests. It’s about as far removed from the “Doofus Dad” as you can imagine. It’s a beautiful, noble, and exalted view of the vocation to become a father in Christ.

Incidentally, every boy, if he grows to become a man, is called to fatherhood. Whether or not he is ever a biological or natural father, he is able to live and exercise the third and highest degree of paternity. How encouraging and uplifting it is that every man is called to the beauty of this vocation.

MOVING FORWARD IN FATHERHOOD

If we take this view of fatherhood seriously, I think it will answer many of the questions and challenges besieging fatherhood today. I think this is a way forward from that minimalistic and harmful view of fatherhood in the popular culture. This view, first of all, will make us better fathers. The Second Vatican Council, in its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, calls the family a “domestic church.” The father is the head of that

domestic church. He serves the others as a priest—a priest for his own family.

St. Augustine once said to fathers, “Fulfill my office in your homes.” He, of course, was a bishop. Augustine continues, “The word ‘bishop’ means ‘supervisor’. And since a man is called a bishop because he supervises and takes care of others, every man who heads a household also holds the office of bishop, supervising the way his people believe and seeing that none of them falls into heresy—not his wife or son or daughter or even his servant.” He calls fathers “my fellow bishops.”

We mustn’t be afraid of this role of a father. We mustn’t be afraid of that important authority that a man should exercise with humility, joy and grace in his own family. We’re not talking about paternalism or domination; we’re not talking about using or ordering our wife or children for our own good and comfort. We’re talking about paternity, dying to self, a complete gift of self, so others may grow and thrive. It’s a kind of servanthood, even a kind of slavery. And it’s genuine paternity because we’re looking not to generate dependence— children who will always need us. The whole idea of fatherhood is to generate equals; ultimately, brothers and sisters in Christ for eternity. That’s the Christian vision of a man’s headship in the family—bringing others to their potential and ultimately to heaven.

Part of this headship is found in forming a Christian home. When people walk into your home, is it clear that they are walking into a Christian home? Does Christ reign in this home? Is he your example, your Lord and guide? When your children one day give the eulogy at your funeral, will they say, “I grew up in a Christian home; there was no doubt about it?” We become better fathers

by recognizing that our first and primary task is to create an environment for the faith that will help our children to heaven.

We must become not only better fathers but better disciples, better sons of our Father in heaven. Jesus was a father. St. Paul calls Jesus “the second Adam.” The first Adam is the father of humanity, and the second Adam is the father of *redeemed* humanity. And yet, Jesus was not first a father, he was first a son. And this is true of us as well. We cannot be a father unless we are first a son. And we cannot be a supernatural father unless we are first sons of God the Father, committed disciples of Jesus Christ.

The life of holiness is not an optional extra in the life of a father. You can’t give what you don’t have. If we are not consciously, actively trying to grow in holiness—in a life of prayer, sacrifice, learning, and receiving the sacraments—then we’ll have nothing to give to our children. This knowledge of our supernatural fatherhood can impel us to deepen our own interior life and our own sonship in God the Father.

A FRATERNAL BOND

An important part of a father’s life is fraternity. There is a great need for support from other Catholic dads—that band of brothers which should allow for a tremendous mutual growth among men who are committed to Christ and committed to their families.

There’s a desperate need for this today, when there is a great distrust of intimacy in male friendships. Any hint of male bonding becomes over-sexualized, so we can’t reveal ourselves, or share ourselves, or engage in serious, honest, intimate conversation with another guy. I have met some, for instance, who watched the movie *Lord of the Rings* and remarked, “I didn’t realize Frodo and Sam were gay.” Why? Because they were good friends; because their friendship was so intimate. There is a depth of male

friendship that our culture does not get. It's great to have friends on the golf course or Friday night poker buddies, but the relationships need to go deeper and become more serious.

Another of the great blessings of being a priest is that the priesthood is a fraternity grounded in Christ. But there's no reason why that has to be limited to priests. Perhaps men who are not priests can learn something about those relationships from their priest friends.

When I was a parochial vicar at St. Peter's on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., we started a book discussion group for men. Halfway through it became clear that our meeting was no longer about the book. It was an opportunity for Christian men to get together and talk about what was going on in their lives. Eventually we just tossed the book and turned it into a discussion group. You might consider starting such a group in your parish—or a Bible study group or something in the community or the neighborhood—a group where fathers are supporting fathers.

Every Knight is called to be an example of brotherhood, and good friendship, to challenge others to really become that force in the world that the Knights inspire men to be.

Finally, after being better fathers, better sons, and better brothers, our wider understanding of fatherhood helps us to be better husbands. God willed that human biological fatherhood would come united with a woman, that two people, man and woman, would have to come together to generate offspring.

What is God saying to us in that? What's he saying to men? What's he saying to fathers? That fatherhood is achieved through another person, with another person, united to another person, a woman, your wife. He is saying that the importance of fatherhood cannot be divorced—no pun intended—from commitment to a spouse; that the bond which unites a man and

a woman is both a physical and a spiritual bond. We think of the Sacrament of Matrimony as something that helps you get through the tough times and the arguments, the disagreements and the financial difficulties. The commitment may help couples deal with these important issues, but that's not the primary purpose of the Sacrament of Matrimony. Its fuller and higher purpose is to unite two people in a spiritual bond that will be eclipsed only in death. This vision of love is not a saccharine sentimentality but a choice to say "I do," day in and day out. It's a choice of the will. You are united, and your primary job is to get your spouse to heaven.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was imprisoned by the Nazis during the Second World War, wrote to a young couple shortly after their marriage, telling them, "It is not your love any longer that sustains your marriage; it is from now on your marriage that sustains your love." To say "I do" every day, that commitment of fidelity, that commitment of permanence, that commitment of openness to human life is not always easy. We all know that. We know that marriage can be an extraordinarily challenging vocation.

It is so crucially important for men, fathers, and certainly women as well, to realize the supernatural dimensions of their relationship. A father must show his children in a very particular way how they should be loved and respected, and how women should be venerated. When I prepare young couples for marriage, I often tell the bride, "See how your fiancé treats his mother. If he doesn't treat her well—run! Because that's the way he is going to treat you." You can also tell a lot about a man's character by how he treats the Church, which is our spiritual mother. If a man truly loves the Church, he will honor and respect the woman he marries in the Church.

The couple's children will benefit as well. Just as they see how women are treated by how dad treats his wife, they see how

the Church should be treated by how he treats and trusts her. There is nothing more powerful for a child than seeing his father on his knees in prayer, to see him go to Confession, to see him open up to others in love, to see him serving the poor. By his example, he hands on to them a true and genuine supernatural fatherhood.

If this is all true of the Church, then this is in a very special way true of Our Lady. A father who loves his wife, who loves the Church, will show that love for the Blessed Mother as well. And she will show him how to be a good father. She will draw the gifts of paternity out of us, in whatever way we are called to live paternity in our lives. She is the one who will give us the strength, wisdom, courage, prudence, temperance—all the virtues we need to be good fathers, and expose the lie of the “Doofus Dad.”

By her prayers, Mary will also show us how to become the supernatural fathers we were intended to be. With her maternal guidance, when the Lord calls us home, we may rejoice to be reunited in heaven not only with our biological children, but with all those in whom we have generated spiritual life, along with the saints and angels who have watched over us on our pilgrimage to the Father of us all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father Carter Griffin was ordained a priest in 2004 for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. He was raised Presbyterian and converted to Catholicism while attending Princeton University.

After graduating college in 1994, he served for four years as a surface line officer in the United States Navy prior to entering the seminary. He attended Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland for two years of philosophy followed by the North American College in Rome for five years of theology.

Father Griffin served as the priest-secretary to the Archbishop of Washington before beginning doctoral studies in Rome in 2008. His doctoral dissertation, "Supernatural Fatherhood Through Priestly Celibacy: Fulfillment in Masculinity," was published in 2010.

In 2011, Father Griffin was appointed Director of Priest Vocations for the Archdiocese of Washington and Vice-Rector of St. John Paul II Seminary, where he now serves as Rector.

“Faith seeks understanding”: it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith, and to understand better what He has revealed; a more penetrating knowledge will in turn call forth a greater faith, increasingly set afire by love. The grace of faith opens “the eyes of your hearts” to a lively understanding of the contents of Revelation.

– Catechism of the Catholic Church, 158.

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Pope St. John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 5
Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in our Time

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