

A Father and his Son

I HAVE COME TO UNDERSTAND that there are things that a son must learn about himself that can only be learned through a father, or someone functioning as a father. One of those things is the special thrill of cooperative work, experienced when a young son is invited to work alongside his father on some project and then at some point is allowed to grab hold and do some operation by himself. The boy fumbles a bit and his father reaches to steady his hand or correct an angle, and for a moment it looks like it might end in disaster. But then suddenly the work falls into place and the boy hears his father utter those magic words, "Nice going, son." The pleasure such praise arouses in a boy cannot be overstated. But more important than that, a boy's introduction into cooperative work with his father, and the experience of being trusted with a piece of that work and of being able to accomplish it, all to the music of his father's praise, takes the boy out of himself and of that world his mother had nurtured him in since his birth. A new appetite is being aroused, moving the boy to leave that world and trail after his father, hungry for more of this male affirmation. And to the extent that the father stops to satisfy this need in his son, the child quite naturally becomes his.

A mature and healthy father is thus able to guide his son into experiences of the objective world, and open him up to the satisfactions of addressing that world, of confronting its problems and solving them, however minute the scale initially. And he corrects his son too, in a way that enables the son to accept it, teaching him the need to conform to a reality outside himself, to find the right angle, apply just the right pressure, use the correct tool, face a mistake like a man and re-do the operation until it is right, and so on. In the process, the son absorbs his father's values and way of seeing things, of walking and talking, and more importantly the boy absorbs his father's self-confidence, his patience and objectivity, and learns through all this the ego-pleasure of standing on his own two feet and coping. In short he discovers the pleasures and discipline of being a man. It is not something a mother can accomplish for her son, or a wife for her husband. Thus from the hands of a father, or an older man functioning as a father, the son experiences desires and satisfactions of a kind he otherwise would not suspect existed. Without a functioning father, unaware of the manly satisfactions that await his struggle with an objective order, the boy will seek gratification elsewhere, in imagination and in extensions of that easy, intimate, accepting world where the

mother's love was originally felt and cherished. In the process, the son withdraws from his father, assuaging the guilt with bitter reflections about the old man's indifference. The boy grows up a rebel, secret or overt, and the father of such a rebel becomes at worst a roadblock to be knocked aside, and at best an irrelevance, like an out-of-season window piece that no one pays attention to.

This is the story of many today. Young boys have a natural longing for a relationship with their fathers. By nature they look to him but increasingly, for whatever reason, he is not there for them, not in a way that really matters. It is not a issue of blame; many fathers today were essentially fatherless themselves. But whatever the case, the fatherless boy now looks to his mother and comes to believe that whatever it was he needed would come only from women's hands. But no woman, however loving and supportive, can ever quite make up for that father and the ineffable thrill a father confers when he tells the boy at his side, "Good work, son."

One can hear St. Joseph saying the same words to Jesus as the boy stood at his side in the family workshop and lent his small hands to some task. And is not this the same affirmation the mature Jesus received from his heavenly father that time at the river Jordan? This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. What sort of life does a man have when this affirmation was missing in his formative years? What restless lifelong hunger does its absence give rise to?

—*diarist*