## SAINTLY FATHERS AND MANLY VIRTUES

*Joseph Hagan, O.P.*

God is our Father. For Christians, this truth is a fundamental one, yet it has fallen on tough times.

I once led a retreat for high school students. The main talk focused on God as our Father. Midway through the retreat, a worried teacher pulled me aside. She was concerned that this discussion of fatherhood and God was problematic. A few students had strained relations with their fathers, she explained, and others suffered something worse. She thought that all this talk of God as Father would leave these students feeling alienated and angry toward God.

What a sad reality! God's fatherhood is a central part of Christ's revelation of God. This teacher's objection shows the need for good earthly fathers as well. A failure in earthly fatherhood can confuse our knowledge of God as our true Father. Conversely, virtuous fathers prepare their children to know and love their true Father, and to be His children forever. Of course, mothers also play a crucial role. They too are an image of God. Ideally, mothers and fathers are best when they work together. Yet each parent plays a distinct role.

What does virtuous fatherhood look like? Here the example of the saints is formative. Saints are our models, and those who were earthly fathers can help those who are fathers now. These saints can show how the grace of God works in our lives. This article focuses on three saintly fathers: St. Joseph, St. Thomas More, and St. Louis Martin. Each of these saints exemplifies virtues important for the modern father, such as humility, a love of truth, and holy detachment. I end with a brief consideration of St. Martin de Porres, to illustrate the connection between fatherhood and the need for mercy.

## St. Joseph: The Humble Head of the Holy Family

Among models of Christian fatherhood, St. Joseph is prime. His life exemplifies so many important virtues for married men, as well as for spiritual fathers. Here I would like to focus on his title as the head of the Holy Family, in order to show how Joseph's paternal authority was displayed through selfless service.

The comedian Jim Gaffigan has revealed something telling about how this idea of the father as head of the family has evolved in our culture. In one of his routines Gaffigan juxtaposes his style of fatherhood with how his own father ruled the family. His father was the unquestioned authority, the traditional head of the family. Now, in the 21st century, that's changed. Jim jokes that modern fathers are reduced to being vice president. Their main job is to toe the party line of president-mom, and to fulfill the "ceremonial role of attending pageants and ordering pizza." Gaffigan admits to accepting this limited role, feeling totally inadequate to be the head of the family. Perhaps this feeling of inadequacy is greater than ever.

It would have been easy for St. Joseph to feel entirely inadequate for the title of head of the Holy Family. His wife, Mary, was conceived without sin and is holier than the angels—literally. His son, Jesus, is the Incarnate God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, whose true Father is the unbegotten God. Joseph comes in a distant third. For most men, such inadequacy would be reason enough to get discouraged and just give up.

Joseph does anything but give up. He obeys God promptly, and fulfills his calling. At the angel's command, he takes Mary as his wife, caring for her during her pregnancy and labor. He offers two turtledoves to redeem the Redeemer and gives him the name Jesus. He leads Mary and Jesus to Egypt and back, protecting them from harm. He earns a living for the Holy Family by the sweat of his brow. Joseph was not head of the Holy Family as a domineering authority. Joseph instead showed his headship of the family by service and responsibility.

Elsewhere in the Scriptures we are presented with these two types of authority—the authoritarian and the servant. After the first sin, Adam dominated his wife Eve. The New Adam, Jesus Christ, redeemed man from sin, and He taught His disciples a new type of leadership: to lead as a servant, as the least. Jesus exemplifies this redeemed leadership, from washing His disciples' feet to dying on the Cross. And in Joseph, we see a forerunner of this leadership. Of the Holy Family, he was the least. Of the Holy Family, he was the servant.

Joseph is a patron for all fathers. To those who feel inadequate, Joseph exemplifies the courage to accept one's role and to fulfill it manfully. To those who tend to dominate, Joseph shows a way of leading through service and humility. To all fathers, Joseph shows a way of loving through the gift of self.

## St. Thomas More: Man of Truth

St. Thomas More was an impressive man. The first half of his biography reads as a string of successes: his flourishing career in law and politics, his commitment to loving and educating his children, and his friendships with some of the greatest minds of his age. We may envy these successes, but More's crowning moment came on July 6, 1535, as an executioner's axe ended his life.

More's example speaks loudly to us today, for his age shares much in common with ours. In both ages, many deviate from their Christian heritage, and some even deviate from natural truths evident to all of good will. They first demand license for their deviation, under the name of liberty or some human right. And having attained this license, they then demand the approval of others for their deviation.

In More's age, King Henry VIII demanded the right to rule the Church in England and to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Henry got what he wanted, but he could not endure the tacit disapproval of More. The king's insecurity and need for

approval is juxtaposed by More's integrity. More chose truth over political correctness. For this choice, More lost his head.

In our age, Christian men face a similar choice between love of truth and compliance with political correctness. Unlike More, we need fear neither king nor executioner. For us, there is the court of public opinion, the mob's witch-hunt, and the subtle blackball. What happens to the gynecologist who refuses to end a life within the womb? What happens to a family member that holds marriage as between one man and one woman, lasting until death? We may keep our heads but lose our promotion, our reputation, and even our friends and family.

To men of today, More's example offers three lessons: integrity formed by a life of virtue, meekness formed by a life of prayer, and hope for all formed by a life of charity.

St. Thomas More witnessed to truth not just with his death, but by his whole life. He was a man of integrity. By pursuing a life of virtue, he walked as a true disciple of Jesus Christ, the Truth Incarnate. Indeed, this virtue strengthened him to persevere until the end, seeking union with Truth.

Secondly, More suffered the king's wrath with meekness. More did not argue with self-righteous or arrogant speech. Rather, he humbly and quietly prayed for king and country. Aware of his own sinfulness, he simply begged God's forgiveness. By this meekness, he endured terrible injustices because he trusted in the justice of the Just One.

Finally, More faced his death with a firm hope in Christ's mercy for himself, and even for those who condemned him. At his trial, More ended his speech by invoking the example of St. Stephen and St. Paul. Paul consented to Stephen's death, but now they are forever friends in heaven. And so, More told the court: "… I verily trust and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your lordships have now in earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together to our everlasting salvation." Such hope is forged by a life of charity, a charity capable of loving one's enemies.

## St. Louis Martin: Presence and Detachment

Our last example of saintly fathers is St. Louis Martin, the father of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Of his many virtues, let us examine two. On the one hand, he was present to his family in ways both life-giving and intimate. On the other, he exercised a heroic detachment, suffering the loss of loved ones and freely surrendering his beloved daughters to cloistered life.

Many families suffer from an absentee father. Our culture can also glorify the independent male. Movies portray the self-sufficient man as some sort of hero, from *Rambo* to *The Lone Ranger*. Yet this type of hero can instill a false virtue of unholy detachment, to the detriment of the family.

In his *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot comments on this dearth of men engaged in meaningful relationships. He writes:

> Do not let me hear
> Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
> Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
> Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
> The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
> Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. (ll. 93-98)

The great folly of man has less to do with himself and more to do with others. The great folly is a fear of "belonging to another… or to God." There is a contrast, in other words, between folly understood as an *isolated* problem ("I'm a fool because I have foolish thoughts") and folly understood as an *isolating* problem ("I'm a fool because I feared to belong to another"). Against this latter fear, the deeper fear, Eliot offers the wise hope of humility, a humility that recognizes in our very fabric a need to belong to others and to God. In Louis Martin, we see this wisdom.

In his Thérèse's *Story of a Soul*, Louis appears on almost every page. The word "Papa" appears a hundred twenty-eight times in Manuscript A alone. He is present at the key moments

*St. Louis Martin*

of Thérèse's life before she enters Carmel. He teaches the child Thérèse about forgiveness. He beseeches the Virgin of the Smile to heal her. He witnesses her Christmas conversion. He supports her decision to enter Carmel. He journeys with her to Rome to beseech the Holy Father. And on Thérèse's entrance day, he takes her to the cloister door and kneels together with her, giving her his blessing.

The story of Thérèse's life is unthinkable without the presence of Louis. His role was vital, and he fulfilled his role thoroughly. And yet, Louis did not hover. He did not impose. His was a life-giving presence.

Even more, Louis matched his life-giving presence with a true, holy detachment. He suffered many losses. Four of his children

died in in childhood or infancy: Helene before turning six years old; Joseph before six months; Jean Baptiste near nine months; and Melanie before nine months. He also lost his wife, Zelie, after nearly twenty years of marriage. And of his five remaining daughters, he freely surrendered them to religious life. Only one remained with him as he declined, but even then, he knew that she awaited his death to enter Carmel. Louis even suffered the very loss of himself, being debilitated by strokes that left him paralyzed and dumb.

Note the shape of his detachment. He didn't actively burn any bridges. He didn't value a false virtue of independence. Rather, his detachment was passive. He remained present until his beloved wife or child was to leave him. For a man who lost so much, we would expect him to be protective of himself. Like Shakespeare's King Lear, he could have demanded that his beloved daughters care for him and sweeten the last years of his life. But Louis gracefully chose obscurity. He never turned his back on relationships, but he let others walk away toward God, when and how God called them. Yet God did not leave him orphaned. Through the cloister grille, God kept the Martin daughters at Louis's bedside in prayer. And Celine, who had not yet entered, attended to her father at his deathbed, invoking God's mercy as Louis breathed his last (see Sir 3:12-14). Louis freely offered all he treasured to God, and humbly received God's gracious return. This is the masculine virtue of holy detachment.

## Conclusion: A Father beyond Fathers

These saints provide us with ideals, not only for fathers but for all Christians. Their example may inspire us to greater virtue, but they may also reveal the failures within us and others. Becoming a father doesn't come with a user's manual. By way of a conclusion, allow me to draw upon one final saint whose life speaks to this relationship between the need for mercy in general and human fatherhood in particular.

At his birth, St. Martin de Porres was unclaimed by his earthly father. His baptismal register reads: "Martin, son of an unknown father." Later in Martin's life, his relationship with his father would mend, but his father's canonization process is not likely.

Martin's earthly father was a faulty image of the Heavenly Father, yet this placed no roadblock in his son's spiritual growth. The baptismal register named no earthly father, but baptism itself drew Martin into the Body of Christ, making him a true child of the Heavenly Father. Martin's life dramatically shows the unfolding of this grace of baptism. From a young age, Martin embraced God as his true Father through a life of prayer amid his chores and responsibilities. Entering the Dominican Order, Martin grew in the spiritual life by leaps and bounds. He became known for excelling in fraternal charity and his care for the poor. He entered into mystical prayer and even worked miracles. These are the fruits of this divine adoption.

Moreover, Martin in turn became a spiritual father to others. For his care of the poor of Lima, Martin was named "the father of the poor." Dominican novices also turned to him as a spiritual father. Though uneducated, Martin had the grace to remind these novices of learned truths from the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. In his spiritual fatherhood, Martin became an icon of the God the Father.

Martin's story gives us hope that God the Father is not limited by the failures and shortcomings of earthly fathers. By baptism, Christians are adopted as sons and daughters of God. Earthly fathers still have the great responsibility of imaging the Eternal Father, yet God's mercy is never outdone by man's brokenness.

*Br. Joseph Martin Hagan graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 2009. He spent the following year trekking around Ireland, serving with N.E.T. Ministries. Then, he returned to Notre Dame's Echo program and completed an M.A. in theology, while serving in the Diocese of Wilmington, DE. Br. Joseph entered the Order of Preachers in 2012.*