

GESTA DOCTRINAMQUE

Let the brothers reflect on and make known the teachings and achievements (gesta doctrinamque) of those in the family of St. Dominic who have gone before them, while not forgetting to pray for them (See Liber constitutionum et ordinationum 160).

FAMILY AND HOLY FAMILY

THE FATHER

Pierre-Thomas Dehau, O.P.

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Pierre-Thomas Dehau was born August 5, 1870, in Bouvines, a small town in northern France, to Félix and Marie Dehau. He entered the seminary at St. Sulpice at the age of eighteen and was ordained at Cambrai in 1894. After a brief assignment as chaplain of an agricultural school in eastern France, he was sent for theological studies at Fribourg, Switzerland, where he met the Order of Preachers. He entered the Dominican Province of France in 1896, taking the religious name Thomas.

He took up an apostolate of preaching homilies and giving retreats. Blind from a young age, he was never able to write books—all the works of his that we have today come from notes of his lectures, homilies, and conferences. In many of these, we see his conviction that contemplation is not reserved to religious, but

is rather a gift made available to all. He died in 1956, while serving the Dominican nuns in his hometown of Bouvines.

This text is taken from a series of conferences which were preached by Fr. Dehau in the Church of Notre Dame des Victoires. Published in 1947 under the title *Famille et Sainte Famille (Family and Holy Family)*, these conferences reflect upon each member of the family—father, mother, and child—and their counterparts in the Holy Family. The excerpt which follows is taken from the chapter concerning fatherhood, before his treatment of St. Joseph.

Honora patrem tuum et matrem tuam ut sis longaevus super terram.

*Honor your father and your mother that you may live a long time
on the earth.*

— Exodus 20:12

“IF I AM A FATHER, WHERE IS THE HONOR WHICH I AM DUE?”

Pater noster qui es en coelis. Our Father who art in heaven. Saint Paul teaches us that it is from God who reigns in the highest heavens that all fatherhood is descended in the heavens and on the earth. All possible fatherhood comes from God. The fatherhood of God is the absolute, infinite fatherhood. One is a father insofar as he resembles God, when he does those fatherly things which God does in relation to us. This “us” corresponds to our Father, because “our” is nothing other than the possessive adjective of “us.”

“OUR FATHER,” IN THE NAME OF THE WHOLE FAMILY

The family, the immense family, in whose name we speak when we say “Our Father,” is composed of all beings. Among these beings, there are younger ones and older ones, as there are in all families. In a family, there are the small children, the children who do not know, and then there are the older children who begin to know, to form their mind, to fill it, but not without difficulty. It

is absolutely the same thing in the immense family of beings. All of the beings inferior to man—minerals, vegetables, animals—are like the youngest of this family. The oldest are the spiritual beings, that is humans and angels: those who know. When we pray, when we say, “Our Father,” it is in the name of all of this world.

The inferior beings, these young ones in the great family of the Father who is in heaven, are perfectly obedient beings; these little ones obey. Look at physical nature, it obeys magnificently. In all of this material world, even with regard to living beings, to plants and animals, there is never a moment of disobedience! These children who are very small obey all the same. They know nothing other than that it is God and they obey.



Follower of Ignaz Günther — God the Father

When it concerns the older ones (we are not speaking of angels, but of man), these eldest ones, are the ones who know. Oh!

They never know enough! Understand well that man never knows enough about God. Despite men not knowing even elementary things, they ultimately have the faculty to know, the faculty to get to know God. They can get to know God and at the same time, this is a strange thing, at the same time that they can come to know him, they are able to disobey him . . . and they don't dispense with him! They can disobey him, why? Because the magnificent gift of intelligence which God gave to man, which puts him infinitely above the inferior creation, brings with it the faculty to disobey, precisely the faculty to rebel, saying, I will not serve, *non serviam*, while all these young ones of which I spoke to you at the same time serve magnificently, obey magnificently, never disobeying. Without a doubt their obedience is not meritorious, because it is not free. From this point of view, it would not even merit the great name of disobedience. This would be a rather material execution of the will of God. But in the end it is very faithful and always faithful. Under this aspect it can serve us as a model.

The eldest ones, one could well say, disobey the majority of the time, because in the end who fully obeys God? There are the saints. And still the saints complain that they have not obeyed well enough, they complain of disobeying from time to time, of committing at least small imperfections. The only one who can say: I am perfectly the servant, *ecce ancilla*, I serve perfectly, is the most Blessed Virgin. It is why she is the Mother, you see, because these two qualities of servant and motherhood are absolutely inseparable in the most Blessed Virgin. When the archangel came to tell her of her divine maternity—because he could not speak of another thing in the mystery of the Annunciation—she responds: here is the servant of the Lord.

There is an infinitely close link, in the most Blessed Virgin, between her quality of servant and her quality of Mother of God. By the one, Mary sees her own lowliness, *humilitatem ancillae*; she proclaims herself a servant before Elizabeth, as she proclaimed herself a servant before Gabriel. It is this look of Mary, if one could say it, that God saw himself, *respexit humilitatem*; it is this

all encompassing humiliation of Mary to which God responds by exalting her, by the divine maternity, to the edge of the blessed Trinity, according to the gospel law: the one who humbles himself will be exalted. This is also why the word of Mary to Gabriel, *ecce ancilla Domini*, is intimately related and welded, as it were, to the word of Jesus to John: here is your Mother, *ecce Mater tua*. The servant of the Lord can only be the Mother of God and consequently the Mother of man, her human maternity flowing from her divine maternity. It is like a marvelous chain of graces, of which these two words are the principal links, linking and uniting all the others.

From our Mother, we return to our Father. When we say “Our Father,” we speak in the name of all this family, of all the young, of all the old which I will show you shortly. It is absolutely necessary that we do this. Why? Because it is absolutely necessary that we represent, opposite the Father who is in heaven, the youngest and the oldest.

The youngest, why? Because all these inferior beings who are obedient are not capable of saying to God, “Our Father.” They cannot say this to him because they cannot come to know him. All the inferior creation needs what man expresses in clearly perceiving a sort of filial tenderness which dwells obscurely and vaguely in all beings. It does not express itself except in man, and man can only express it perfectly by the *Pater*. As for these eldest, these sullen ones, these rebels, these prodigal children, ah! They also have serious need that we pray in their name. Why? Because they do not think, or because they have forgotten to speak of God and to God.

When we pray, we never forget that it is in the name of all beings and that it is especially in the name of sinners. Prayer is the proper act of one who is destitute. Sinners are the truly miserable ones. One must pray for their misery and in the name of their misery; this is the great, the supreme mercy.

Ah! Here is an extremely important thought. The most Blessed Virgin, the Mother of Mercy, expresses very precisely her

intention when she demands that one pray to her, when she begs us to pray. “But pray thus, my children!” she said at Pontmain (Apparition of Our Lady of Pontmain, Pontmain, France, January 17, 1871). I do not need to cite for you her other words. Recall Lourdes. Recall how she formed the young Bernadette herself in teaching her to pray.

I beg this of you, and of myself too, that in her name we forget none of these things. When one enters here, at whatever hour—happily, and it is necessary to be happy in blessing the Lord and his divine mother—when one enters here, in this dear church of Our Lady of Victories, one sees the souls who pray, and who pray very well. One sees the pious souls absorbed in their prayer, evidently enjoying and infinitely moved from their contact with God. But sometimes, even here, it happens that they rejoice of a manner, oh, I am not going to say egotistical, but forgetting a little too quickly that, when one speaks to God, one must say, “Our Father.” We must always pray for everyone, and especially for those who don’t pray. By the fervor of our prayer, by the very loving manner in which we address ourselves to God, we must stoop to balance the dreadful oversight of these rebels: the sinners. And this we must do as soon as we say Our Father, as soon as we say *Pater noster*. In Latin, *noster* is placed after *Pater*, in French [and also in English], *notre* [our] is placed before *père* [father]. The language requires it thus. Each of these two manners of placing the words has its beauty and, as it were, its own revelation. *Pater* coming before *noster* envisages the first lightning at the base of the abyss of the divine paternity. The adjective *notre* [our], pushed to the first place, forces us to not forget our brothers because one makes reference to them even before naming the Father. But whatever the place of this word, *notre*, or *noster*, we grasp and embrace in him and through him all this poor humanity, and especially all the misery of sinners.

You will pray in this way, Our Lord tells us. He tells us, by the same fact, you will desire in this way, because the request can only be the expression of desire. Saint Thomas makes this very

simple remark: Our Lord, in teaching us the order in which we must ask, in placing our requests in order, also places, by the same deed, our desires in order. He shows us what we must desire first. We must only desire our daily bread, which is very necessary, in the fourth place; and we must desire before all the sanctification of the name of God. Our Lord thus rectifies the whole order of our desires.

FROM THE FIRST TO THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

And now I return, or rather I arrive at the subject of our discussions: the family. There are two commandments of God which are united in an extremely close manner: the first and the fourth. I can even say that one cannot understand these commandments well without understanding how they function together. This simple pairing suggests right away some very curious and interesting considerations.

Why is the fourth commandment formulated “Honor your father and your mother”? Why is the first formulated “You will love the Lord your God”? Why do we not say “You will honor God,” and, “You will love your father and your mother”? Why are these commandments formulated in the first way and not the second?

I believe, my brothers and sisters, that the reason is very simple. It is not difficult to love one’s father and mother, but it is difficult to honor them as one ought. It is not difficult to honor God, all people have done this in very imperfect and clumsy ways, all people have honored the divinity under the ideas and images at which they arrived themselves, but only the true religion tells us, “You will love the Lord your God.”

The divine form of the fourth commandment, “Honor your father and your mother,” was always extremely necessary, but it is now more necessary than ever. This formula, which dates to Sinai since it was given in the Decalogue itself, is a singular reality for us, the people of the twentieth century.

I believe this commandment is now more necessary than ever, because I notice that one can no longer know to honor his mother and his father well. One loves them well, that's understood. One loves his father and his mother well. It would be very difficult to do otherwise! But is this the honor that the Holy Scripture expresses in such a strong manner when God himself says, "If I am a Father, where is the honor which I am due?" *Si ego Pater ubi est honor meus?* (Malachi 1:6). *Honor meus*, you see? My honor as Father, this honor, where is it?

I believe there are many fathers at the moment who would be able to say this and who, maybe, are not sufficiently conscious themselves of this honor of fatherhood which, as all honors, is a burden, a weight. An old, extremely accurate Latin dictum—Latin is the language of the law—proclaims that honor, all responsible honor, is a weight, *honor, onus*; and so, the more honors which one confers to the people who are great, for example in the social and civic domain, the greater the responsibilities, the heavier the burden.

Yet there is not a greater honor than that of fatherhood, because all fatherhood, in heaven and on earth, is a participation in the fatherhood of God, of the fatherhood of God in relation to all beings, as we have said. We lift up our vision and our hearts infinitely higher, *sursum corda*, to this fatherhood which is formed at the breast of the intimate life of the blessed Trinity, which connects the first person, the Father, to his Son who is at the same time his Word. This supreme fatherhood is the model and the measure of all the others which are nothing other than participations in it. The fatherhood of man is noble, it is holy; to us priests, our spiritual fatherhood is something absolutely divine. All fatherhood in heaven and on earth is something divine, at least in some respect, insofar as it is a certain participation in the divine, the infinitely divine, fatherhood. If we see all this well, we see by the same fact and with evidence what honor is due to fatherhood. We see why God said, "Honor your father." We see why all fathers must say to themselves, honor yourself, honor in yourself this

sacred fatherhood. While this honor, *honor meus*, is due to a father, to his fatherhood, it is not given to him often enough. And he must feel this suffering, that he suffer from this lack of honor. It is not necessary that he be content with being loved. Surely, he must be loved by his children and he must love them! Supernatural charity comes here to help, it comes to elevate infinitely all the feelings of nature; it is necessary that there be love, it's understood, but it is necessary too that there be respect, and even fear. It is difficult for us to understand this.

It is very curious to see that which the Church fathers, such as Saint Augustine, said regarding the highest and most beautiful forms of fatherhood. Take religious fatherhood, and it is not the only example, the fatherhood of a superior in relation to his inferiors in the religious life. In the rule of Saint Augustine which must be read to us (sons in St. Dominic) each week, something is said which I beg you to notice carefully: "Evidently it is necessary that the father, the spiritual father, be loved more than feared, however it is necessary that he be feared. The one and the other are necessary, to be loved and to be feared; however, he should desire more to be loved than to be feared."

Certainly, no man would like to be more feared than loved by his children. But isn't it necessary that love come with this *reverential fear*, to use a beautiful old phrase which designates respect? This respect necessarily contains a little fear. It is this respect and fear which, under the influence of developed passions in the adult man and even in his nascent passions, already present and active in the child, disappear too easily from our way of life.

The psychology of the child is very simple, often too simple. He loves, but easily dispenses himself from respect, so that he doesn't grasp this notion too high for him, such that it disturbs him and that he reach out to get rid of it. It is because this respect, corresponding to the honor of which we have spoken, has always been very rare and has become even more so—it is for this precise reason that the commandment of God insists on this respect and this honor. God knows very well that one will always

love his parents, that there will always be love between parents and children. But God knows still more, if I dare to say, that there is rarely enough respect.

That which I tell you in this moment is true of all ages, but certainly of ours. When one reaches a certain age, as is unfortunately my case, one can compare. One can compare the manner in which one raises children today with the manner in which one used to raise children. One cannot forget certain observations, seeing as these are those of our young childhood, that is to say, of the era when we were raised ourselves. I dare say that we loved our parents better, more than one loves them now. When there is more respect, there is more true love. Children don't show enough respect to their parents, because their parents don't demand it of them.

Love presupposes order. In those places where there is disorder, there must not be, there cannot be, complete love. Love doesn't go on its own all the way to the place where there isn't enough respect. This lack of respect or of sufficient respect is itself a disorder and, inevitably, a risk to others.

It happens that the fourth commandment of God is not obeyed. It happens that some Christians, who may be very conscientious, but not aware enough, some Christians who would not disobey the other commandments of God for anything in the world disobey, in all, this one, because the precise point on which the divine formula focuses is honor and respect.

There is then a lacuna, a void, something gaping. It concerns the family. That is to say the social unit, at the root of all, equally so in the Church and the State. Yet the family will be Christian or it will not. One can try everything in favor of the family and one can realize perfectly, precisely because one has tried all the rest without success, that outside of Christian and Catholic solutions there is no other way, there isn't a single other means of salvation.

You see the capital importance of the smallest word and of its smallest nuance about the essential questions touching these familial connections. I believe that many Christians who recite

the commandments of God every day, or nearly, are not attentive enough to this word, *honora*, or to its nuance. Yet, note that this word and its nuance are everywhere. Everywhere where the commandment of God is expressed to us, it is there by this word and with this nuance. Among the translations of the Decalogue, such as we are given in the Bible, there can be some subtle differences, but never on this point here.

I thus ask you urgently, men, and you also, women, because motherhood, we have said, is a participation in fatherhood, an immediate participation, I ask you to pose to yourself the question from Holy Scripture which God himself poses: “If I am a Father, where is the honor which I am due?” Put yourself as the head of the life of a family like that which directs itself around you and through you. If you have been given some spiritual fatherhood, in teaching, for example, one must also require, as in all fatherhood, that there be this honor and this respect. I ask you to ask yourself simply, very simply, this question: where is the honor which I am due as a father? Does it exist? Does it exist enough? Do I enforce it enough, these rights which I do not have the right to touch because they are the rights of divine fatherhood which I represent? I am bound to respect these rights. Incidentally, very assuredly and very necessarily, I cannot make them respected if I do not respect them myself, in all ways and under all aspects.

Here, men, it is absolutely necessary that I balance the doctrine by supplementing it, and that I preserve by the fact all sorts of misunderstandings and practical errors. You are fathers and we will never know enough to say how venerable this is. But, alas! You remain at the same time, as all of us, poor men full of faults, and this one does wrong to that one. You bear this treasure of fatherhood in fragile vessels, said Saint Paul, subject to all sorts of breaks and cracks. Keep vigil attentively, jealously, so that these faults of man do not harm the authority of the father. Especially, I put you on guard against an all too natural tendency, nearly fatal to all poor human beings who take on authority, an insidious tendency if it were not the majority of the time perfectly

thoughtless and thus even more dangerous, the tendency to want to shelter, to want to pass on as contraband, your human faults under the loyal banner of your fatherly authority. Do not fool yourself here; know well that the child, even very young, sometimes especially very young, is terribly perceptive in this area. You will not succeed in your heavy-handed attempts, or rather you will only succeed in insinuating in his spirit and in his heart some formidable questions and dire doubts about your authority, and especially about the usage which you make of it. I owed you this harsh, apostolic frankness because of my infinite respect for your paternal authority.

I am convinced that if you ask yourselves these big questions in a manner absolutely sincere, in placing yourself before the reality which is here, you will glimpse that all of you have at least some faults with which to reproach yourselves.

I ask you to make a resolution on this point. Every time that one finds oneself before a truth, especially a truth of this importance, one must always make resolutions. Truth wants to be practical, it asks you for practical resolutions. These will be different for each of you, according to your place, according to your children, and among your children each of them is particular. I admit all sorts of diversities; they do not prevent, they only qualify the necessity of this resolution that I beg of you, quick and vigorous, coming from all of your will and all of your heart.

Translated by Stephen Ruhl, O.P.

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