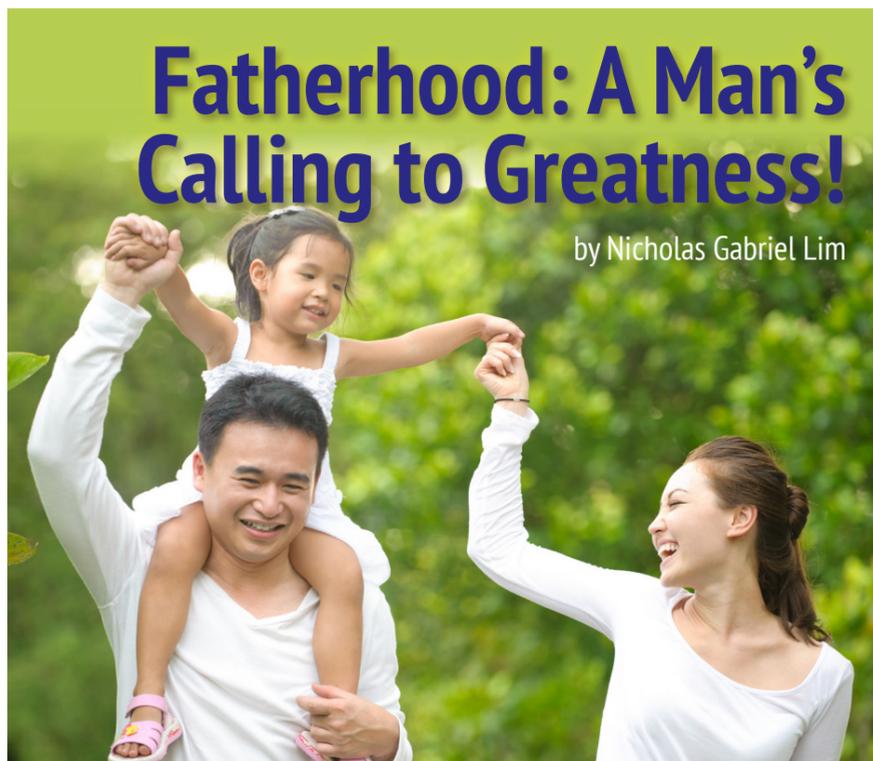




The Family Lifeline

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Fatherhood: A Man's Calling to Greatness!

by Nicholas Gabriel Lim

Growing up, I often wondered, “What so great about being a man when society is biased against him?” As it were, the law favors and protects women more; a masculine movement is seldom heard of to advocate the wellbeing of men; and there seems to be a perception that men are predisposed to “receiving” more in relationships than giving, especially in sexual relationships.

These questions did not help me as a young growing male individual learning about himself as a guy and trying to understand his being, let alone appreciate the purpose of God's plan for him in creating and designing him as a man. Sure! There are all the teachings of male sexuality and his place in society, but what so great about manhood?

It was not until I got married and had my first son, that I gained a greater understanding of the greatness that men have been called to. I realised I had asked the wrong question all along. The question should have been, “Are men called to greatness in the first place?” In fact, I would have been able to answer the first question only if I first knew the kind of greatness that men have been called to. In my prayers and reflections, it's come upon me that men have been made for and called to such greatness that sometimes I wonder even if I am fit to be a man.

The awakening came after my son was born. Of course, I wanted to be a good father to my son; I have seen in my living years the kind of detrimental effects of the absence of a father in a child's life. The late Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote that “fathers have the sublime mission of revealing and reliving on earth the very Fatherhood of God. His role is to ensure the harmonious and united development of all the members of the family.”

I sought to understand the “Fatherhood of God”; I could not identify with that. In fact, it created a dissonance in me. As Catholics, we call God “Father”. He is by right the Father of us all, but how did He get to be called by that name? Why am I called a Father too? Are there any connections? If I could find some answers, I could possibly come close to understanding the greatness that I have been called to. As it were, God is greatness itself, and I am called a “Father” as well. To me, that says a lot about man and his calling!

Catholic philosopher William E. May put it as well as anyone could for me: “We fittingly call God – and specifically, the First Person of the Blessed Trinity – ‘Father’, because He is the superabundant source of all that is, the ‘principle’ of everything, even within the Trinity. He is, as it were, the ‘wellspring of the joy of living’. He is the ‘Other’, the transcendent being where

many cannot physically touch and see, but who cares, and cares deeply for those dependent on him. He is rich in mercy, seeking reconciliation, watching over his creation with providential love, with a wise and loving plan for human existence. His Fatherhood is manifested in deeds, in what he does for his children.”

There is much more to understand from what May has summarized. To be a father to my son means that I am to be a source of what he will become – not just materially, but psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. This means also that I cannot be separated from my wife because it is through her that I am made whole. I can only be the source of everything to my children if I am filled completely. John Paul II affirms in *Familiaris Consortio (FC)*: “The sexuality of man and woman, by means of which [they] give themselves to one another through the acts mutual and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something merely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such” (n. 11).

Let me be the first to admit it has been – and it still is – a challenging journey to be with and understand my wife, especially when it comes to child-bearing. At the beginning stage, I experienced moments where I've felt like an absolute failure as a father. My son seemed to only allow his mother to attend to him and nurse him when he is upset or in pain, and comes to me only when he wants certain things to his advantage or pleasure. When that happens constantly, you cannot help but feel like you are constantly being taken advantage of. However, I came to understand my place when May talked about being the “Other” as a Father. This can be found in the Old Testament where God is typically revealed as the only God, who gives existence to everyone. He is revealed as an utterly transcendent being, as the wholly Other.

Dominican priest Benedict Ashley (OP) pointed out that the relationship of otherness is not well expressed by the child's relationship to its mother because she is more “same” than “other”, since her children develop within her body and are nourished at her breast. Instead, the relation of the child to his father is more a relation to an Other, but an Other who is still caring. This is exactly how our Father in heaven's relationship with us is like. This is why we call Him “Father”! In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Blessed John Paul II

affirms that the man – even with his sharing in parenthood – always remains “outside” the process of pregnancy and the baby's birth; in many ways he has to learn his own “fatherhood” from the mother (n. 18).

Therefore, I cannot expect myself to fulfill the role that is meant for the mother, instead, I need to live up to my calling as a Father “who cares, and cares deeply for my son who depends on me to provide for all his needs”. Like our Father in heaven, my fatherhood needs to “manifest in deeds”, in whatever I do for my children. As Ashley puts it, “(men) constructs, i.e., impose an order on things, whether it is the simple physical fact of initiating pregnancy, providing the home as shelter and protection, or the more spiritual tasks of disciplining the children physically and mentally, or undertaking the work of the wider social order. Where the woman allows a child to grow, the father *causes* the child to grow” (*Moral Theology and Mariology*, 1991, p. 140). At the same time, I am invited to prepare myself to have a big heart, to be ever prepared to forgive and seek forgiveness in this entire journey of being a father, and also as a husband. This is a high order! It's tempting to think that this is working against the very nature of man, who has a greater tendency of being more egoistic. To assist men to realistically live out this great calling, John Paul II reminded fathers of the leadership role they hold in the family, a role that is the husband's and the father's service to his family (FC, 25). This, to me, is God's plan for man!

In my own family, both my wife and I are very strong-headed leaders – leaders in our own right. How then do I assert myself as the leader? I reckon I must make decisions for the common good of the family, not in order to satisfy my personal desires. I must be self-sacrificing and self-giving in making choices for the well-being of all, for their harmonious and unified development. Asserting my leadership in this way does not mean I will get what I want. Rather, it means that I will be able to lead my family – as their “custos”, like Saint Joseph – as one who witness to the self-giving love of God himself. I will then, in exercising this role, be “rich in mercy”, “revealing” and “reliving” the very “Fatherhood of God” (Grisez, *Living a Christian Life*, pp. 629-633).

Tell me now if these were something every man would do? I personally believe so, because I believe it's in man's very being; it's what we've been created to do! This is the true greatness that every man is called to.



Family Life Society

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If you have a personal story to share on family matters and values, email susie@familylife.sg.

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