



Address delivered May 1, 1999, to the pastoral workers of the Diocese of Cheyenne

I. ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

Let's begin with a simple question: What do women want?

I said it was simple, not easy - and it's Sigmund Freud's question, not mine. In fact, when we're talking about God, it may not be the right question. Or rather, it's only half of the right question. Freud did not have a happy relationship with women or with God. And I can only imagine what he'd say about celibate male religious asking what women want. According to Freud, I should not even be here, since religion was supposed to wither away. It's too bad he can not join us. It would be a very entertaining session.

But even if it's incomplete, the question is still very important. Because they are like men to admit it or not, they are formed by women and take much of their meaning from women. And most men find a sense of permanence, and a future, only in the families and relationships they create with a woman.

So, again, what do women want? Well, if you're a young person of either sex, and looking for an answer from popular culture - here's what you'll find in the mass media in a week. This is an unscientific sampling. I just clipped a few news stories which I found especially revealing. But you can find dozens of others.

Here's the first, from the Denver Rocky Mountain News. The headline reads: "Sensitive men a turnoff."

According to the article, saying you're sensitive about Catherine Zeta-Jones will not win any points with her.

"'The whole' 90s-man thing - where men think women need to know the man's' innermost feelings' - is the worst thing ever invented, 'the Welsh actress told the May issue of Details magazine. 'I hate it when people say' I'm very sensitive. '"

Zeta-Jones stars with Sean Connery in the new movie Entrapment. She says she's not romantically involved with anyone right now. "I'm working six days a week," she said, "And if I'm in love, I want to be in bed with that person six days a week."

Here's another clipping, this one from the Denver Post. It's called, "Holy career change: Singer becomes a priest."

Irish singer Sinead O'Connor once ripped up a picture of the Pope on American television. But she's now been ordained as the first female priest in the Latin Tridentine Church, a tiny Catholic splinter group, by self-described Bishop Michael Cox. Cox had previously pioneered a phone-in confession service in Ireland.

"Anyone who knows me, knows what I've done makes perfect sense for me. I adore God and believe very much in the power of prayer, "said Miss O'Connor.

The controversial singer said she had already celebrated Mass four times. But she will study with Michael Cox for six weeks before starting her priestly career as "Mother Bernadette Mary." She also plans to use her new name in her music career.

And here's a final item, again from the Denver Rocky Mountain News. It's entitled, "McClachlan to pull plug on Lilith Fair."

Recording star Sarah McLachlan says it's time to raise a family. As a result, she'll close down her traveling rock-music festival - the Lilith Fair - after this year.

"We're all well into our 30s now, and we decided we wanted to have babies," the 31-year-old singer said.

Of course, having babies is completely normal. But it's also a little ironic. McLachlan is a strong supporter of "abortion rights." She also founded and named the Lilith Fair - which, some of you know, is a very popular, and mostly female, rock show. But Lilith actually was. . .? After we finish here today, look it up in your Webster's Dictionary. In Hebrew mythology, Lilith is a female evil-spirit who lurks in desolate places and preys upon young children. The similarity may just be ignorance, or a coincidence. But it's also a little strange.

I singled out three women celebrities because I had Freud's question in the back of my mind. But I could have chosen three men just as easily. Ted Turner, who spends a large portion of his fortune in a war against new life. Howard Stern, who makes a radio career out of jokes about promiscuity, infidelity and brutality - including banter about sex with the Columbine High School massacre victims on the same day they were killed. Marilyn Manson, who embodies sexual confusion, and whose music seems to be an ongoing invitation to violence.

None of the many men and women I know in daily life resembles these public figures in any way. But that should not comfort us. The behavior of media icons makes a difference - a big difference - because they set an example. They help to create a climate for good or evil. By the model of their own lives, they encourage certain actions. In other words, they tell young people what they should want.

The message our culture now sends to young and old alike, women and men alike,

about what they should want is not even subtle anymore: It's a message of confusion and disharmony; Contempt for convention; Aggressive sex; Self-absorption and greed. You'll forgive me, I hope, if my words sound a little dark, but I just buried three of the young people killed at Columbine, earlier this week.

I believe in the resurrection. I know that God will draw good out of this tragedy. But I would not wish the sorrow of those parents on anyone in this room. I believe it's a mistake to simply blame the media for the kind of violence we had in Littleton. But the media do not need to take responsibility for helping to create the habits, expectations and desires in our young people who can lead in very troubling directions.

What does the human heart want? What does the human heart want? What does the human heart want? What does it need? Whom does it long for? God created men and women to complement each other, to complete each other in Him, to share in His community of love. We love God best by loving and serving each other sacrificially. That takes many different forms. But it's the family, the love between a husband and wife, the mother and father, which is the glue of everything else in society. Children learn the language of love - the vocabulary that enables them to understand God - by watching their mother and father. They need both. Mother-love and father-love are not the same thing.

This is why faith in God weakens the divorce rate climbs. When motherhood is derided and men abandon their roles as fathers, God seems to disappear. The reason is simple. The family is a kind of sign or sacrament - in human experience - of whom God is. Obviously I do not mean that divorced persons can not be holy, or that children from broken families can not find God. But I do not believe that it is more difficult in the absence of that "living community of love" which the family can provide. Children with absent fathers will struggle harder in their search for God. And since most children remain with their mothers after divorce, recovering fatherhood is the fundamental step toward restoring the presence of God in our culture.

II. THE CURRENT TERRAIN

These have been a tough couple of decades for fathers in particular, and men in general. In saying that, I need to underline that he should not be excused his abusiveness, and no father should be excused from the abandonment of his children. Much of the trouble men find themselves in these days is of their own making. If men act like bullies or drones, women will very reasonably act to defend themselves and their children. But today, the critiques of men in our society go a lot deeper than just correcting bad male behavior. They attack men's identity and undermine the whole idea of fatherhood. In the process, women and children are hurt, families are damaged, and our understanding of God Himself becomes confused.

Let me outline three criticisms, or problems, which make our times especially hard for fathers.

The first problem is with Dad's genes. I mean the genes in Dad's blood - not the ones we wear. And it's best described in a 1996 book called *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence*. How's that for a title. One of the authors, Richard Wrangham, is a Harvard professor of Anthropology. The other, Dale Peterson, is a science writer. Their idea is simple: Most apes are violent. Humans and chimpanzees have very similar DNA. Both species murder their own kind; Battle for breeding rights; And dominate their females. Male aggression in both these species comes from ecological pressures which encouraged violent male leadership at an early evolutionary stage in order to survive. The rest is history. . . Including our own.

But one ape species is different. The bonobos, a special kind of chimpanzee, live in a remote forest in Zaire. According to Wrangham and Peterson, the bonobos evolved under friendlier ecological conditions. This reduced the need for male dominance. It also allowed females to bond into groups. Today, these female groups restrain male behavior and enforce a kind of pacifism. As a result, bonobos not only do not rape and murder each other, they also enjoy a lot of recreational sex.

Now, if you're beginning to get suspicious about the kind of "science" involved here, you're not alone. Even the authors admit they stretch a point or two. But their concluding logic is very important. Let me quote it directly: ". . . Just as nonaggressive strains of other mammals can be bred by artificial selection, so a peaceful strain of human could be bred too. With some concerted worldwide

action, we could probably get measurable results within a few generations. Society could, through its own reproductive choices, actually breed a kinder, gentler man - with a temperament less like chimpanzee's, more like bonobo's. "

As you'd expect, the authors have a pretty hostile view of the traditional family and marriage, which they see as a trap for women cooked up by patriarchal power.

Dad's second big problem is economic. Marx and Engels were wrong about a lot of things. But they were probably right that capitalism - if left to its own devices - naturally undermines most traditional institutions, including the family. Or as Neil Postman once put it, the real radicals are not Marxists who quote Lenin, but television executives in conservative suits who just want to sell their products. . . And do not much care which traditions and beliefs get dumped in the process.

Children now watch 5,000 hours of television before they enter kindergarten and 16,000 hours before they graduate from high school. The average American sees 1,000 commercials a week, and 1 million before he or she is 20. And what commercials teach is this: The best things in life are not free; In fact, they cost quite a bit of money. . . But we should get them anyway, because otherwise, we will not be happy. Consumer capitalism encourages appetites; Which require spending; Which encourages debt; Which demands more work to earn more money; Which gets spent on bigger appetites; And so on. That's its nature. The result, in many families, is the elevation of money as the only real measure of value. What do you do if you do not get paid for your work - and obviously, stay at

Home mothers do not get paid - your work is somehow inferior. Which helps you drive more and more women into the workforce.

My point is this. Our economy has changed. Many men do not play the same, clear, solitary provider role for their families they once did in the past. At the same time, family members are taught by the mass media to see themselves as self-contained consumers. So the internal economic life of the family has also changed - from a common purpose shared by all family members, to a collection of competing individual interests. In other words, Dad's muscle work is not as valuable as it used to be. And even a good male "brainworker" can rarely keep up with the costs of consumerist family life.

The final problem men face is philosophical - or more accurately, political. Most men would agree that many good things have come out of the women's movement since the 1960s. Real feminism resists abortion and is naturally pro-life. But a certain kind of modern feminism is not just pro-woman, but anti-male. In the words of one feminist scholar, "Socialist feminists see [the traditional] family structure as a cornerstone of women's oppression: it enforces women's dependence on men, it enforces heterosexuality and it imposes the prevailing masculine and feminine character structure on the next generation. "

She goes on to stress that the difference between socialist feminists and plain old women's-rights activists is that socialist feminists support "a possible transformation of 'physical' human capacities, some of which until now have been biologically limited to one sex. This transformation might include possibilities for insemination, for lactation and for gestation, so that, for example, one woman could inseminate another, so that men and non-parturitive women could lactate and that fertilized ova could get transplanted into women's or even men's bodies . "

This is pretty strange stuff, but I'm not exaggerating. I'm quoting a respected scholar at a mainline university.

What should we make of all this?

First, each of these three tendencies is inhuman. Each turns the human person into an object. We are determined by our genes, so we have to breed better pacifists. We are determined by what we earn and buy, so we have to earn and buy more. We are determined by the limitations of our gender, so we have to rewire our biology to serve our politics. These are just bad ideas. Nowhere in any of these trends is there any room for fathers, mothers or families as we traditionally understand them.

And not surprisingly, who else is absent? God.

The biggest delusion of the 1960s, '70s and '80s was that women and children could survive and even prosper without husbands and fathers; That divorce could be a good thing with little or no impact on the children involved. Just the opposite is true.

The evidence is clear. The breakdown of intact, two-parent families severely damages children. Worse, the single-parent and step-parent households increase, our social fabric weakens. There's no mystery to the data: Children need fathers, and we all suffer if fathers disappear. What is David Blankenhorn, the author of *Fatherless America*, can say that "fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems from crime to adolescent pregnancy

To child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women. "

Author Robert Samuelson puts it another way: "The only solution [to our contemporary problems] is to reconstruct, somehow, families that provide the love, sense of self-worth and discipline that children need to develop into responsible, self-sufficient adults. But no one really knows how to do this. . "Of course, that's not quite true. I think the solution exists, and we can find it in our faith.

III. WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

There is an old saying that the greatest gift to father can give his children is to love their mother. That's the importance of a father: the witness he gives through his love. I have many memories of my own father. I remember and cherish his love for my mother. I always believed in it, because it was always there. My father taught me that fidelity was not just possible, but a source of joy and freedom, satisfaction and friendship. I might have learned that without him, but not in the same way, and not with the same intimacy. I also taught me how to choose to love. Fathers choose to love and choose to remain with their children in the way mothers do not, because motherlove is frankly just more intense, more natural, more organic. Nothing in fatherhood is automatic, or biologically directed, the motherhood. Real father-love is entirely free-will act of self-sacrifice. Lived well, it gives us a window on God's own fatherhood.

Of course, it's misleading to draw too many parallels between the fatherhood of God and human fathers. God is wholly other, and neither male nor female. But Scripture says, "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph 3: 14,15). And Jesus Himself told us to call God "Father." It's the language God chooses to reveal Himself, and it's through a human father that the best child learns how to integrate justice and mercy; How to engage with the world; Our purpose beyond the family; The nobility of strength when it's ruled by love; And the creative fruitfulness of work. A father's love completes the family - and in that communion of persons, the child gets the first inkling of who God is, the Trinity of persons in a community of love ... like the family.

Looking out from within the love of a family, we can see the poverty of so much of today's culture. If men are simply predators and inseminators looking to spread their seed, and if women really need them only as a way of getting children, well. . . Then marriage is just a contract of mutual utility, with the sexes using each other as a means to an end. But people are better than that. Our motives and yearnings are higher than that.

So what do we do to restore fathers to their place in the family and in the culture, and through that, to renew our language of God?

This is where a speaker usually offers a program. We really need a tax code that really favors families. We also need social welfare policies that deliver help where it is needed, without encouraging families to breakup in the process. But those are political issues, and they're always debatable. The real work is on the personal level, and it's both simpler and tougher.

We live in a curious time. We read books like Tom Brokaw's The Greatest Generation. We revere the values which the generation of the 1940s embodied - especially the fathers and brothers and sons who fought in World War II. But how much of it, I wonder, is just our nostalgia for a life we have in the intention of choosing. . . Because it would demand the hard work of conversion. You see, that's the heart of the matter. The revolution begins in the individual soul. When men and women decide to live scriptural lives, sacramental lives, then and only then, will the world begin to change.

It sounds pious and impractical, but it was impractical for the first Christians to oppose the Roman Empire. It was impractical to abolish slavery. Societies change when families change. Families change when individuals change. Turn off the television. Buy less. It sounds easy - but try it. Spend time with your kids. Keep Sunday holy. Pray together. Choose to be faithful. Spouses, choose to subordinate yourselves to each other. Husbands and fathers: Be the leaders you were meant to be. Claim it, and it will be yours. Goodness is magnetic.

Preparing these remarks, I noticed that I would be speaking with you on the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker. This is one of my favorite feast days, because Joseph was a man's man - a man accustomed to labor, sweat and the burden of supporting a family. Scripture says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Ps 127: 1). It's always struck me that God the Father put His only Son into the care of a carpenter, a builder. And Joseph, in his faith and obedience, allowed God to use his own human talents to build the Living Tabernacle. Joseph protected and taught, formed and provided for, the Redeemer of the world.

Joseph was a living witness of the meaning of manliness; The nobility of human labor; And the dignity of married love. Surely, Jesus must have admired and loved him with all his heart. So if we hope to restore the identity of fathers in our families and in our culture, if we hope to rebuild the integrity of family life in our communities. . . We should look first to Joseph.

We have no better model.

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