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FATHERHOOD AND SONSHIP (II)

Conventional wisdom argues that if God is called Father, then he should also be called Mother. Such language is not altogether unknown in Scripture and Christian tradition. Famously, Jesus compares himself to a mother hen: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!" (Luke 13:34). Nonetheless such language is rare, and is overshadowed by the over-whelming testimony of Jesus to God as Father and himself as Son. The most one can legitimately say is that maternal qualities are attributed to God the Father and the Son. In such category we may place the language of God's "tender mercy" and Jesus' "compassion". Just as in a human family the father is not afraid to join the mother in her commitment to and compassion for their child, so the language of God the Father and God the Son does not imply an absence of "feminine" attributes.

Why not the language of God as Mother? The reason for this may be rather straightforward: the image of motherhood is not that helpful when applied to God. One may speculate, for instance, that the intimate bodily union of mother and child in womb and in nursing is an image suggestive of pantheism (the conflation of Creator and creature). The sharp Biblical distinction of Creator and creature is better represented by the image of the father, whose love for his child is as strong as that of a mother, but involves a greater degree of otherness.

In the language of Scripture and Tradition, the feminine imagery of mother and bride has chiefly been assigned to the Church (e.g. Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 21:2). The language of the Church as Mother or Bride, and of God as Father and Christ as Bride-groom implies both distinction (alterity, otherness) and complementarity. Yes, it does imply subordination, yet it also implies superordination: if the Church's authority is derived and dependent on Christ, a delegation of the authority granted him by the Father, it is real authority nonetheless. Both Cyprian and Calvin declare that you cannot have God for your Father if you do not have the Church for your Mother.

Sociologically, the language of the divine Mother arguably opens the way to an understanding of human motherhood as self-sufficient. The involvement of the male is insignificant, perhaps even unnecessary. (John Miller suggests that prehistoric cults of the mother goddess may have preceded the discovery of the male role in procreation.) While

some single mothers may raise children with heroic determination, there is plenty of evidence that women and children fare best when there is a father committed to the family and bound to it in matrimony. The family – conventionally regarded as a patriarchal institution subordinating women to male interests – must be looked at again, as one that subordinates men to the interests of women and children. Though men, women, and children have different roles in the institution, the institution serves the common good, and not just the interests of the male head.

That is a reading supported for instance by the old wedding vows (found in the 1662 English prayer book): while the woman did promise to “obey” as well as “love, honour, and cherish” her husband: the man giving her a ring made this declaration: “with this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and all my worldly goods I thee endow”. The woman’s obedience is matched by the man’s total self-giving. We may look for greater equality and autonomy today, even as in the forms of the 1928 Prayer Book, but one cannot fault the older vows for a lack of mutuality.

It goes without saying that even the best of language can be hijacked by hypocrisy. But hypocrisy, as the saying goes, is the tribute vice pays to virtue: the language condemns such abuses and recalls errant males to their proper vocations. Some fathers are a disgrace to the name, and even good fathers have their limits. Yet Jesus chose the word “Father” as the best way he knew to name God. What we have to do, therefore, is to recognize that our idea of God as Father does not depend finally upon our experience (good or bad) of human fathers: for what is imperfect and finite in human fathers is perfect and infinite in him. And where human fathers – and human mothers – fail us, that is precisely the point where we need to learn what it means to have a Father in heaven. “When my father and mother forsake me, the Lord taketh me up” (Psalm 27).

We call upon God as Father: this is an irreducible, non-negotiable pillar of the Gospel which Christ has given to us, and must ever remain the undisputed and unobscured center of Christian prayer and witness. But the doctrine of the divine Fatherhood finds practical expression both in the structure of the Christian family, and in the structure of the Christian ministry. We cannot surrender those without impairing the power of the Gospel to redeem and perfect human existence.

GGD

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