

"Father in Heaven and Father on Earth"

Homily of June 20, 2004

by Father Iomar Daniels

He was born in 1933, the youngest of eleven children. And his mother died when he was twelve years of age. He was raised then by his aging dad and a spinster sister. Living in very difficult economic circumstances, he had to finish school at fourteen years of age and go immediately then into the workplace where labor was tough and very physically demanding. Then he went on to marry at twenty-nine years of age and fathered eight children. At the age of forty-six he was visited with cancer and became very seriously ill. He then died two years later, wasting away to a skeletal sketch of his former self.

Now, he won't be remembered for any heroic deed and he won't be remembered for any dramatic trojan-like achievements. He won't go down in history like our father-in-faith, Abraham, or the founding fathers of countries such as this one, the United States of America, people such as Washington and Madison and Jefferson. But he will never be forgotten by my mother, my four brothers, my three sisters, or indeed by myself. He won't be forgotten because he was a good father and a good husband. He won't be forgotten because he was a good and kind person, good and kind soul. And he won't be forgotten for how he patiently suffered, as cancer ate away at his once- strong, muscular body. And he won't be forgotten when in the last moments of his life, when all else had failed him, even his mind, what came from the depths of his soul was a prayer that he had learned as a child, in Gaelic, "Hail Mary full of grace...."

When I remember my father on a day such as today, I remember him not for anything he specifically said, or for anything he had specifically done, outside of the natural fatherly care and love that he lavished upon me. What I will remember him for was the kind of person he was. He was, as I said, physically strong. But he had a very gentle spirit. He was kind and generous, loving and patient. And he wasn't in any way authoritarian. (I usually associate that characteristic with my mother.) Indeed he was a person you could take refuge in, in times of trouble. And he was non-judgmental. So, in a sense, I found a very strong hint, just a hint, of God in my father. And we always addressed them then as Jesus addressed His father, as "Daddy," the Aramaic being "Abba." And Jesus certainly addressed His heavenly Father this way when He found Himself in the great crisis of His life. In the agony in the garden, he cried out, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from Me. But, not what I will, but what you will." And Jesus, in addressing God, His Father, in this way was doing so with filial intimacy. And this is how we should address our parents all the time. Respect your father and your mother.

So, on this Father's Day, I will very briefly now, explore the question, "Can we find God in our

Heavenly Father, if we don't find God in our own earthly fathers?" Father Joyce has recommended a book in this week's newsletter, a book titled, "Father Joe, the Man That Saved My Life." The author of that book, Tony Hendra, doesn't choose to talk about his paternal, natural father because he wouldn't have an awful lot to write about and he certainly felt that the relationship could have been much better. So he chooses another father, a monk, a most unlikely character, a character he describes in a cartoon-like way. He found, in this figure, this monk, paternal care, paternal understanding, and paternal warmth. So, it must be acknowledged on a day like today that, not all of us have a good godly experience of our fathers, of our paternal fathers.

Now, we come to a theological understanding of God as father in both the Old and the New Testaments. In the Old Testament it is revealed that the father is someone who expresses love, as the father would express it for his son or daughter, paternal care, compassion, and forgiveness. He is the one who helps to create a family, a domestic community, just as Yahweh created the community Israel. And what is essentially significant in this understanding of God as father is that it is not centered on power. It is not centered on authority. But it is centered on communion, bringing people together. It is centered on unity.

So the idea, then, of fatherhood, especially the fatherhood of God, was not new to Jesus or to His generation. What Jesus did then with this idea was to broaden it and deepen it. For example, when exhorting us to have courage in the face of persecution, He says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet, not one of them falls to the ground without his father's knowledge. Even the hairs of your head are counted. So, do not be afraid." And then he presents the love of our Heavenly Father as a model of charitable love, with the challenge to love even our enemies. He presents the father's forgiveness in the provocative parable of the Prodigal Son. So, it is primarily in and through Jesus' life and His ministry that we come to know God as Father.

But God cannot, cannot be confined to the patriarchal image of fatherhood. As our catechism of the Catholic Church states quite clearly, "In no way is God in man's image. He is neither male nor female. God is pure spirit in which there is no place for the differences between the sexes. But the respective so-called perfections of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfection of God, those of a mother and those of a father and those of a husband. And then St. Paul, as we heard earlier in our second reading, says "There is not male or female." And while it can be difficult for us then to get beyond the traditional, idolatrous, stereotypical, patriarchal presentation of God as father, it is relevant for us to know that when Jesus prayed to "Abba," His daddy, He was not praying to an aggressor or to somebody who was highly competitive or to a father who controlled or who had power over Him, His son. No. He was praying to a father who had qualities that could be ascribed to either a woman or a man, the same kind of traits that I witnessed, in some small way, in my own father, gentleness, kindness, patience, love, not overwhelming or authoritative, and then prayerful in the face of suffering and death. This was the spirit of my father, and this too is the spirit of our heavenly father.

So, yes, we can experience a heavenly maternal father in God. And, yes, we can see God in our

fathers and mothers. Of course, we are very restricted in speaking of all of this by our limited human way of thinking about a God who remains largely and mostly incomprehensible. However, we can experience God as fatherly when we talk of Him in human characteristics and in human terms and in human values, which are not male or female, but common to each and every one of us.

So, on this Father's Day, when I remember my own father, I never will forget him, for he made me what I am. Though he may be gone, memories linger on. How I miss him, the "old man."
Amen.