

POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE

January 28, 2015

On Fatherhood



Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

We continue the series of catecheses on the family. Today we will let ourselves be guided by the word father. A word that is more dear than any other to us Christians, because it is the name with which Jesus has taught us to call God: Father. In fact, the meaning of this word received a new depth beginning with the way that Jesus used it to address God and to manifest his special relationship with Him. The blessed mystery of the intimacy of God, Father, Son and Spirit, revealed by Jesus, is the heart of our Christian faith.

“Father” is a word known by all – a universal word. It indicates a fundamental relationship whose reality is as ancient as man’s history. Today, however, we have come to the point of affirming that ours is a “fatherless society.” In other words, the figure of the father,

particularly in our Western culture, is symbolically absent, vanished, removed. Initially it was perceived as a liberation: liberation from the father-master, from the father as a representative of the law imposed from outside, from the father as censor of the happiness of the children and obstacle to the emancipation and autonomy of young people. In fact, at times authoritarianism reigned in some homes, in certain cases, in fact, it was oppressive,” parents that treated their children as servants, not respecting the personal needs of their growth; fathers who did not help them to undertake their path with freedom, but it is not easy to educate a child with freedom. Fathers that do not help them to assume their responsibilities to build their future and that of society: this is certainly not a good attitude.

However, as it often happens, we pass from one extreme to another. The problem of our days does not seem to be so much the invasive presence of fathers, but rather their absence, their hiding. Fathers sometimes are so concentrated on themselves and on their work, and at times on their own individual fulfilment, that they even forget the family. And they leave the little ones and young people alone. Already as Bishop in Buenos Aires, I perceived the sense of orphan-hood that youth live today. And I often asked the fathers if they played with their children. And the answer was bad, eh! In the majority of cases {they said}: “But I can’t because I have so much work ...” And the father was absent from that child who was growing up. And he did not

play with him, he did not spend time with him. Now, in this common course of reflection on the family, I would like to say to all the Christian communities that we must be more attentive: the absence of the paternal figure in the life of little ones and young people produces gaps and wounds which can also be very grave. And, in fact, the deviances of children and of adolescents can in good part be traced to this absence, to the lack of examples and of authoritative guides in their daily life – to the lack of closeness, to the lack of love on the part of fathers. The sense of orphan-hood that so many young people live is deeper than we think.

They are orphans, but within the family, because the fathers are often absent, also physically, from home but above all because, when they are home, they do not behave as fathers, they do not have a dialogue with their children. They do not fulfil their educational task; they do not give to their children – with their example accompanied by words –, those principles, those values, those rules of life that they need, just as much as they need bread. The educational quality of the paternal presence is all the more necessary the more the father is constrained by work to be far from home. At times it seems that fathers do not know well what place to occupy in the family and how to educate the children. And then, in doubt, they abstain, they withdraw and neglect their responsibility, perhaps taking refuge in an improbable relation “on par” with the children. However, it is true that you must be a companion to your child but without

forgetting that you are the father. However, if you only behave as a companion on a par with your child, you will not do the child any good.

However in this also, the civil community with its institutions has a responsibility, which we can say is paternal, towards young people, a responsibility that sometimes is neglected or exercised badly. It also often leaves orphans of the street that we are sure to come across, orphans of teachers they can trust, orphans of ideals that warm the heart, orphans of values and of hopes that sustain them daily. They are filled perhaps with idols, but they are not given work; they are deceived with the god of money and are denied the true riches.

And now it will do well to all, to fathers and to children, to hear again the promise Jesus made to his disciples: "I will not leave you orphans: (John 14:18). He is, in fact, the Way to follow, the Teacher to listen to, the Hope that the world can change, that love can overcome hatred, that there can be a future of fraternity and peace for all.

One of you might say to me: "But, Father, you have been too negative today. You have spoken only of the absence of fathers, of what happens when fathers are not close to their children." It's true. I wanted to stress this because next Wednesday I will continue this catechesis bringing to light the beauty of paternity. Therefore I chose to begin from the dark to come to the light. May the Lord help us to understand these things well. Thank you!