

The Knights of Columbus presents
The Veritas Series
“Proclaiming the Faith in the Third Millennium”

Becoming a Real Man of God

by

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Bishop of Fall River
October 23, 2007

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Printed in the United States of America

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When David's time to die drew near, he charged Solomon his son, saying, "I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong and show yourself a man, and keep the charge of the LORD, your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances and his testimonies"

(1 Kings 2:1-3).

SHOWING ONESELF A STRONG, FAITHFUL MAN OF GOD

Over the past several decades, for many reasons, men have been suffering an identity crisis. Whereas in former days, a son would clearly have grasped his father's instruction, "Show yourself a man," today such a curt instruction might not be so readily understood. The messages our culture broadcasts about what it means to be a "real man" are inconsistent and confusing. In movies and on television, the images of men vary widely from violent, take-no-prisoner pseudo-superheroes, to smooth-talking, machismo-driven womanizers, to sheepish and vulnerable women-fearers who seem to want to be one of the girls more than one of the guys. Professional sports figures often leave men and boys empty of genuine role models, too. Rare is the positive image of ordinary, hard-working men who are faithful to God, to the Church, to their wives, and to their families and friends.

Within the Church, as well, it is not as easy as it once was for men and boys to find living examples of what it means to be a "man of God." Priestly vocations are down, and so, therefore, is the number of priests with whom other men can identify. Except for the Knights of Columbus, male-oriented groups like the Holy Name Society, once a staple of every parish, have all but disappeared. Many charitable and liturgical activities are now so dominated by women – even those, like the Saint Vincent de Paul Society and altar serving corps, which once were monopolized by men – that many men have begun to feel out of place, as if religion and service of God in the Church are mainly female enterprises. As the disproportion of women to men at Mass has grown, so has men's uneasiness.

Within this context, it is urgent to return to the question of what it means to be a man from God's perspective and explore his vocation in the Church and in the world. Does man's God-given mission differ from woman's, and if so, how? Are there any role models men can turn to in order to learn how to become the men their Father in heaven calls them to be? How can men today arm and defend themselves against the cultural phenomena that are weakening their identity and diverting them from their God-given tasks?

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

To discuss the question of what it means to be a man, we need to return to the origin of the human person. We learn from the beginning of the Book of Genesis that "God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

We find here two central and related truths. First, the human person is created in God's image; to see ourselves as we really are, therefore, we need first to look to the God whom we reflect. Saint John, inspired by God in writing his beautiful first letter, tells us that "God is love" (1 John 4:16), which teaches us quite a bit about God. In fact, many teachers of the Catholic faith have seen in those three words an indication of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity.

As we know from the human experience of love, there is always one who loves, one who is loved, and the bond of love that unites them. For God to be love, he could not have been unitary or "all alone" before the creation of the world. He needed, rather, to be this three-fold reality of love existing in a unity – an eternal lover, beloved, and love between them – all at the same time. Some of the great saints throughout the centuries have, in their teachings about the Blessed Trinity, attempted to "name" the persons of the Trinity on the basis of this reality of love, saying God the Father is most like the eternal lover, God the Son is the eternal beloved, and God the Holy Spirit is the love between them – so strong

that it assumes its own personality. The Blessed Trinity is an eternal communion of love, or, better, a loving communion of persons.

Since man was created in God's image, we would expect man to exist in a loving communion of persons. This is the second truth we see in the passage from the Book of Genesis: God created man not just as a "him" but as a "them," and not just as a "them" of two or more "hims," but in a very specific way: "male and female [God] created them." God created the human person male and female to reflect his love, and made it possible for man and woman to live in a loving communion of persons so strong that their love itself could take on personality. That's precisely what happens in the loving communion of persons we call marriage, in which, by God's design, man and woman can "make love" by literally becoming "one flesh" in their offspring, a child. The son or daughter is a fruit of their love, and by the child's participation in that communion, a means by which that love can continue to grow and flourish.

So it is not some biological "accident" that there are men and women. This "original differentiation" is part of God's plan from the beginning. God made man and woman equal in dignity and similar in so many respects, but also different and complementary in so many other respects – at the level of the sexual organs, their minds and personalities, and even in their cells, chromosomes, hormones and so much more. These differences in particular are caught up mysteriously in the image of God. These complementary divergences, so to speak, are meant to be "calls to communion," to elicit the recognition on the part of both that they need the other in order to become all it means to be human. These differences urge them on inwardly to give of themselves with love, to remedy what the other lacks, and to welcome and receive from the other what they are incapable of being or doing on their own.

Phrased in another way, the original and complementary differences of man and woman were to help each learn how to love. We see this truth in inspired literary form in the Book of Genesis. After God had accomplished the first five phases of creation and pronounced them "good," and after He had created man, He now pronounced things "very

good.” Adam had named all of creation and lived in harmony with it. It was before original sin and he was living on good terms with God. But then God said something was not quite right: “It is not good that man should be alone.” So God created Eve from Adam. Eve was meant to be a “fitting helper” for Adam, one who would help him to become fully human. Adam’s original solitude helped him to recognize both that he was different from all the rest of creation and from God, and that he needed another to help him to experience the fullness and the joy of human life. When Eve was created and Adam beheld her, that’s what happened: Adam cried out with joy (Genesis 2:18-23).

This recognition of the need for the other was what led to their quest for a loving unity, which would help them become whom God created them to be, and open them up to live in a communion of love with him. Eve’s vocation was to help Adam overcome his original solitude and loneliness and teach him how to love. She would help him to learn how to love another; and, through the analogy of human love, she would help him learn how to love himself and how to receive and reciprocate God’s love. Adam’s vocation was to help Eve to learn to do the same. Woman has a crucial role in man’s vocation and vice versa.

REAL LOVE

The original difference between man and woman, from the first man and woman to every man and woman, is meant to help us learn how to love. But that obviously raises the question of what true love is.

Love is not merely a warm feeling of attraction or admiration for another person. Jesus Christ told us during the Last Supper what true love is, and then put that message into body language the following afternoon on the Cross. “Greater love has no man than this,” he said, “that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Love is not merely “wishing” another the best, but a willingness to choose to give of oneself – even to the point of sacrificing one’s own interests, desires and life – for someone else. This is the type of love that will lead to genuine fulfillment and

happiness, because this is the type of love that will help us become the real image of God.

Each of us is called to give of himself unselfishly to others just as Christ did. Jesus himself called us to this love twice during the Last Supper, when he said, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34; 15:12). The first apostles learned to live by these words and called their fellow Christians to the same self-giving. Saint John said clearly that love is not words, but deeds: “By this we know love, that [Christ] laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren...Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16, 18).

This laying down of one’s life does not mean only the willingness to make the “supreme sacrifice” for another, but the willingness to die to oneself so that the other may more fully live. In marriage preparation, I often ask would-be grooms whether they love their fiancée enough to take a bullet for her. Never has one said no. Then I ask whether his answer would be the same if the “bullet” took one of the following forms: being abstinent before marriage; giving up smoking if she asks; being on time if he is habitually late; cleaning up after himself better; patiently telling her what happened that day at work if she requests it; learning the faith better to help pass it on to her more completely; or making the time and the priority to pray with her. Those are the types of grenades on which many men refuse to dive! But these gifts of oneself are so much more valuable than almost any material gift one could give, and they are a far greater sign of real love than any ring could symbolize. When a future husband and wife begin to love each other through sacrifices like this, their marriage can become what it is meant to be: a sacrament, a visible sign and reflection of Christ’s love for his Bride, the Church, because Christ who “loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her” (Ephesians 5:25-26).

MEN AND WOMEN LOVE DIFFERENTLY

The ultimate vocation of man is the same as the calling of woman: to love as Christ loves, which means to give of oneself unselfishly to and for others. This type of life will allow one to be a true image of God and to grow into God's holy likeness. Our focus on Genesis also showed us that part of this loving of others involves lovingly receiving the other's gift of self. The mutual giving and receiving of self-gifts is what brings about the communion of persons.

But while man and woman are both called to give of themselves to the other and to welcome the other's gift of self, how each does so varies. Many students of Pope John Paul II's theology of the body have developed his insight that there is a profound complementarity in the way man and woman love. The Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Angelo Scola, has phrased it in this way: "Men receive love by giving love; women give love by receiving love."

This is true on several levels.

At the level of physiology, it's obvious in the design of the human act of making love. A woman has been made by God to receive love, and she gives of her love to her husband principally by receiving within her own body the bodily gift of her husband. Man experiences the real welcome of the love of his wife when he is embraced in giving of himself in this way.

We see the same complementarity, too, at the level of psychology. One of the fastest ways for a woman to frustrate a man is not to allow or appreciate his sacrificing himself for her. Men, for example, *want* to pick up the tab on a date, because they show their affection for a woman by saying she is worth the effort at work to make the money to take her out. One of the quickest ways for a man to frustrate a woman, on the other hand, is not to allow her to receive him into her life. When a wife, for instance, asks her husband to describe for her what his day was like and he refuses, it wounds her deeply, because she wishes to receive him and his experiences into her life.

We see this complementarity illustrated unmistakably in the familiar tradition of the marriage proposal and the engagement ring. Man gives the proposal – he offers himself, his heart, his vulnerability, his future to the woman – and the woman accepts or rejects the proposal. He generally proposes with a ring, which is a very costly sign of his fidelity and love. If she accepts the proposal, she accepts the ring. In receiving the ring, she gives the man one of the greatest joys of his life. The woman does not give the man in return, for example, a watch, because it would be pointless. The very fact that she has accepted the man's proposal and received the symbol of his commitment and love and placed it on her finger is enough of a sign of her love for him in return.

SAINT JOSEPH AS AN ICON OF AUTHENTIC MASCULINE LOVE

These truths about human love in general, and masculine love in particular, are very beautiful, but for men's lives to shine with their beauty, these insights need to be made practical. What does masculine love look like in practice? What are the virtues that show forth genuine manly love?

The first illustration to which we can turn in order to see how man is called to love in a masculine way is the example of Saint Joseph. After all, he taught Jesus what it meant to be a man according to his human nature, so if God the Father considered him a good enough teacher and model for Jesus, then we can certainly consider him trustworthy as well.

Saint Joseph's holy, masculine, virtuous life can be summarized under four titles: fatherhood, chaste love, obedience, and action.

First, Saint Joseph demonstrates to us two characteristic elements of *fatherhood*.

He was a *protector*. He guarded Mary's life and reputation against the possibility of death by stoning as a result of her having become pregnant outside of marriage. Even before Joseph received the word of the angel that Mary had conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, Joseph, a just man who must have been filled with questions and suffering, protected

Mary. But that was just the beginning. He protected Jesus and Mary from Herod's envy and murderous soldiers, even at the cost of his job in Nazareth, guiding them on the difficult escape route into Egypt.

He was also a *provider*, which is the other main attribute of fatherhood. Until his death, in many quiet ways known only to God the Father, he worked hard to provide for Mary and Jesus, passing on to Jesus his own trade. He had a strong reputation in his hometown for his work, such that Jesus was known by all as the "carpenter's son" (Matthew 13:55). But Saint Joseph provided more than just food, clothing and shelter for the Holy Family. He also enabled, according to his means, their spiritual nourishment, taking them to the Temple for the Jewish rites and feasts. We see a glimpse of this at Jesus' presentation as well as when Jesus was found in the temple at the age of 12 (Luke 2:27, 46-50).

As both a provider and a protector, he demonstrated how to be a man who puts others' needs ahead of his own. This leads us to the second characteristic.

Saint Joseph is a model of *chaste love*. His life shows us that the full gift of self toward another does not necessarily have to involve genital relations. He loved Mary and that meant that he was willing to dedicate himself to what was best for her and for the divine Son she was carrying. He put all his love and his life at the service of their vocations, and in so doing he fulfilled his own vocation. Chastity is a virtue that helps a person to have self-mastery – to control one's sexual impulses rather than be controlled by them – so that one can give to others in the way that is best for them. Chastity is what allows man to be a protector of women rather than a predator. In his chaste love of Mary, he learned how to grow as a man, and in her chaste reciprocal love, he was blessed beyond measure.

Thirdly, Saint Joseph is a model of the virtue of *obedience*. Three times he obeyed God through the message of the angel in a dream (Matthew 1:24, 2:14, 2:21). At God's command, he took Mary as his wife and trusted that the child she had conceived was of the Holy Spirit. At God's command, he awoke in the middle of the night and fled with Mary

and Jesus to Egypt. At God's command years later, he took them home with him to Nazareth. He obeyed these divine imperatives immediately, even though it meant believing, beyond human understanding, in the virginal conception of the Lord; even though it meant an arduous and lengthy journey through a desert to a faraway land; even though it may have cost him his livelihood in Nazareth; even though he could have easily dismissed the commands, literally, as "dreams." He was so prone to hear God's word and put it into practice, however, that at the merest indication of the Lord, he didn't debate or negotiate, but obeyed. Saint Joseph never saw obeying God as incompatible with his own good, but rather as the foundation for his own good. God's omnipotence was not seen as a threat to his manliness because Saint Joseph didn't equate manliness with being in control, but rather with being responsible and responsive to God and others. His obedience made him capable of sharing mysteriously in the fatherhood of God the Father.

Lastly, Saint Joseph is a man of *action*. He never says a word in sacred Scripture and yet his actions are remembered to this day. He knew that the body language of his deeds was far more eloquent than his words. He was a "doer of the Word" and not just an "idle listener" to it (John 1:22). Like his foster son according to the law, he put his stock in "truth and action" more than in "word or speech" (John 3:18).

Saint Joseph's life is an illustration of authentic masculine love. Although none of the men reading this booklet will be asked by God to wed a virgin pregnant with the Son of the Eternal Father, every man is called to be a protector and a provider, whether as a dad, a priest, a teacher, a coach, a diligent employee or a benevolent employer. Every one of us is called toward the self-mastery of chastity so that our sexual desires always serve the good of those we love. Every one of us is called to see the will of God as the greatest enabler of our manhood. In obeying the will of God we become most like Christ, who came, not to do His will, but the will of His Father, which is the sole path to having "life to the full" (Luke 22:42; John 10:10). And every one of us is called to be a humble man of works and not just words.

THE VIRTUES OF A SOLDIER OF CHRIST

Another way to illustrate the virtues of a real man of God is by reference to a good soldier. The relation between a man of God and a soldier will seem either somewhat obvious or a stretch depending upon your larger views of the military and military interventions. If you do not see the connection at this point, I ask you to bear with me briefly, because I think its relevance will soon become apparent.

A good soldier, especially one fit for battle, generally has the following ten traits, among others:

- He is willing to give his life to protect others.
- He is task-oriented, and lets his actions speak for themselves.
- He does his duty, even when it is unappreciated.
- He is a man of honor, who is loyal to others and to his principles.
- He is rooted in discipline and strength.
- He may be tender and compassionate but never soft.
- He sees himself as part of a unit, a band of brothers, greater than himself.
- He follows the chain of command, without considering it demeaning.
- He is courageous, even and especially when heroism is required.
- He sees sacrifice as an opportunity to show his character and demonstrate love.

The practical and theological relevance of these observations for our discussion can be seen very readily in the fact that all ten of these traits can be said, without a stretch, about the God-man Jesus Christ.

- He was willing to give his life to protect others – Jesus willingly gave his life to save us. He is the Good Shepherd who made good

on his promise to give his life for his sheep (John 10:11). Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he handed himself over, he demanded that his disciples be let go (John 18:8).

- He was task-oriented, and let his actions speak for themselves – from his earliest days, when he announced he was “about the Father’s business” (Luke 2:49), his whole life was dedicated to accomplishing that mission. He lived by the same principles he taught, not to be distracted from his purpose (Luke 10:4), which not even the devil could do by promising him all the power of the world (Matthew 4:9). He let his actions also speak more loudly than his words. As he said once when challenged by the Pharisees, “Even if you do not believe me, believe the works” (John 10:25, 37; 14:10). He backed up each of his discourses with miracles that testified to his power, the greatest miracle and message of all being what he said from the pulpits of the Cross and the empty tomb.
- He did his duty, even when it was unappreciated – Jesus fulfilled his mission even when one of his apostles thought he was less valuable than 30 silver pieces, when the rest of his hand-picked men ran away, when he was hammered to wood by those for whom he was dying, when he was mocked by four different groups as he agonizingly hung from the Cross, wondering all the while, “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). He was the “grain of wheat” that fell to the ground and died, knowing that that seed would hit hardened, rocky, weedy soil in addition to good, but he did it anyway (John 12:24; Luke 8:5ff). Yet, at the end of it all, he cried out in triumph, “It is finished!” (John 19:30) which was the equivalent of “mission accomplished.”
- He was a man of honor, who was loyal to others and to his principles – Jesus kept his dignity, even when being tempted by the devil, tested by the hypocritical Pharisees, beaten by the brutal guards, and mocked by thieves and passersby. He was loyal

to his disciples, never abandoning them though they abandoned him; to Israelites, despite the many times they broke God's covenant; to sinners, no matter what their sin. He was knightly in his protection and care for women in need and danger, like the woman caught in adultery, the woman at the well in Samaria, and the woman who washed his feet with her tears in the house of Simon the Pharisee.

- He was rooted in discipline and strength – He called himself the “stronger man” who would overpower the devil and divide his spoils (Luke 11:22), who could calm even the winds and the sea (Matthew 8:27), who would repeatedly say to his frightened followers, “Do not be afraid. It is I!” (Matthew 14:27). His strength was shown most when out of discipline he did not use it, when tempted in the desert or on the Cross. His power was always used not for his own benefit but for others, to teach them the discipline that makes disciples.
- He was tender and compassionate but never soft – He who was “meek and humble of heart,” who cared compassionately for parents and widows, for the woman caught in adultery, for the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 11:29; Luke 7:12; John 8:3; Mark 6:34), was also capable of driving the money changers from the temple with a whip, calling the Pharisees “whitewashed sepulchers” and telling forgiven sinners to “go and sin no more” (John 2:14; Matthew 23:27; John 8:11).
- He saw himself as part of a unit, a band of brothers – Jesus came from heaven to earth to form a family with the same Father in heaven (Matthew 12:50). To that family, the Church, he gave his whole mission. To the twelve whom he associated most intimately in this task, he gave his own power to turn bread and wine into his Body and Blood and to forgive sins in his name (Luke 22:19-20; Matthew 16:19; John 20:19-23). To the Church he gave his whole message (Matthew 28:18-20). He said that all

members of the Church were a part of him, as branches on the vine (John 15:5).

- He followed the chain of command, without considering it a threat – Jesus said simply, “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me,” “I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me” and “not my will, but thine, be done” (John 5:30; John 8:28; Luke 22:42).
- He was courageous, even and especially when heroism was required – Courage is doing what ought to be done in spite of one’s fears, a virtue Jesus showed us time and again, but especially during his agony and on Good Friday. Despite asking for the cup of suffering to pass from him, he drank it to the dregs, sweating blood-filled perspiration, being beaten, scourged and crucified for our sake (Matthew 26:39).
- He saw sacrifice as an opportunity to show his character and demonstrate love – “Greater love has no man than this,” he said, “that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13) and he evinced that love in hundreds of little ways and unforgettably through his supreme sacrifice.

The real Christian man will seek to embody these same virtues. They will help him to become a real soldier of Christ. They will help form him to be another Christ and train him to love others as Christ loves.

FORMING VIRTUOUS, MASCULINE MEN

How can we help boys to develop these authentically masculine virtues and become real men of God?

Some of the answers to that question are obvious. We do so, first, by becoming authentically masculine role models for boys. Since boys sadly will not often find these role models today on the television or movie screen or on the diamond, court, field or rink, every dad, uncle, priest,

Little League coach and school teacher must take it upon himself to model for the young people the masculine virtues described above.

Another way is by opening up their minds to the great masculine role models in Western Civilization, like Homer's Ulysses, Victor Hugo's Jean Valjean, Shakespeare's Marc Antony or Esther Forbes' Johnny Tremain. Such examples can plant deep seeds, as can introducing them to the heroic stories of the great martyrs like Saints Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Thomas More, and the North American Martyrs.

A third way is by facilitating their involvement in activities, like sports, that can be a training ground for the formation of these virtues, and reinforcing them with praise when we see those good habits burgeoning within them.

THE PERVERSION OF MASCULINITY

But perhaps the greatest way we can focus on cultivating virtuous men of God is by explicitly naming and recognizing those elements in modern life that are trying to "reprogram" our young boys toward a counterfeit version of masculinity. It was once not a problem for boys to grow up to be masculine men; it happened naturally through the culture. It's only in the last half-century, as our culture has changed, that raising boys to become real men of God has become a problem in need of a solution.

There has been what can be aptly described as a perversion of masculinity. If authentic masculinity shows itself in the unselfish gift of oneself toward others, then the corruption of masculinity is manifested when a man becomes a taker rather than a giver.

In his discussion on lust in his theology of the body, Pope John Paul II described how lust can change a man's whole approach to life. Rather than seeing others as invitations to give of himself in love, as subjects worthy of love, he begins to see others as objects whom he can use for his own gratification and from whom he can take for his own benefit. Rather than

be responsible for them and a guardian of their good, he begins to take advantage of them. This process of changing from a lover to a luster can occur, as Saint John says in his first letter, through lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes or lust for money or power (1 John 2:16). Since love always involves a responsibility for the one loved, the perversion of masculinity is seen in the attempt to divorce love from this responsibility.

That's why, if we want to help cultivate authentically masculine virtues, we need to examine the contemporary challenges to raising boys to be true men of God, to see how they attack a boy's formation in responsible love. Once we see what our culture is doing wrong with respect to raising boys, we will more clearly see what we need to do right.

FIRST CHALLENGE: OUR CULTURE NO LONGER CULTIVATES RESPONSIBILITY IN YOUNG MEN

In former days, boys were trained in responsibility from early ages, which trained them in authentic love. By the time they were 8 or 10 years old, they were given real responsibility on the farm, for example, and the family depended upon them to do their chores well for the family's well-being or even survival. Higher mortality rates among their fathers often made young boys precociously the "men of the house." In non-agrarian households, they were apprenticed or sent out to work at very early ages, in order to support their families. Older boys were generally given supervisory roles in the protection and discipline of younger siblings, who were generally quite numerous. Boys and girls were both marrying as teenagers and were called upon to provide for a family at much younger ages than today. All of these factors, which counted on a young man's being trustworthy and responsible at a very early age, helped him to learn how to give of himself in responsible, dutiful love of others.

Today, this education in responsibility is not being cultivated as it once was. One of the consequences of a culture in which many more people are going on to college and to advanced degrees is that, for many, real direct responsibility for others is deferred. Families, moreover, are

much smaller today, so young boys often have much less responsibility for siblings than in past days; with smaller families, the odds that a child will be spoiled also increases. Marriage is being delayed until, in many circumstances, the late 20s and 30s, and the responsibility associated with marriage put off beyond the real formative years.

We consciously have to help young boys become more responsible, more masculine, by giving them real responsibility at young ages. Overprotective parents, who do not cultivate trust and responsibility in their children, harm their kids. Chores should be given, not just as means to accumulate allowances, but to take genuine responsibility for the good of the home. For college-bound children, they should be encouraged to link their studies today with the responsibilities they will have later, as husbands and fathers, professionals or priests, brothers or celibate apostles. The more they make the connection between what they are doing now with those whom they wish to love later, the more they will grow in responsibility in the present and for the future.

SECOND CHALLENGE: THE CULTURE OF IRRESPONSIBILITY IN SEXUALITY

Rather than a means to help boys to become truly responsible and loving men, our contemporary attitudes toward sexuality encourage them to become irresponsible “takers” rather than “givers.” Young people are encouraged by our culture to become consumers of others for the sake of their pleasure, rather than responsible lovers, caring for and treasuring the others’ gifts and never trying to take advantage of them.

This is seen, first, in the scourge of pornography, which is plaguing men of all ages, but is becoming more and more prevalent among computer-using young people. Pornography forms men to reduce women to their sexual values in isolation from their personal dignity. Rather than protect women from exploitation, men begin to prey on them, across various media. Pornography drives men to substitute fantasy for reality and to seek simulated unions with virtual feminine ideals, which makes it much more difficult for them to appreciate and form chaste relationships

with real women. Pornography, in short, deforms man's capacity for love by making him lust. It transforms women in man's mind and heart from a subject to an object and trains him to think he can use others as instruments for his own gratification without any responsibility for their good.

Another evil fruit of the culture of irresponsibility in sexuality is abortion. Rather than force men, young or old, to take responsibility for children they father, abortion, especially among teenagers and collegians, trains them in irresponsibility, even to the point of allowing and encouraging the killing of one's own offspring to save one from the consequences and duties that flow from sexual activity. Abortion just continues the irresponsibility that had probably been involved in the sexual relations that led to the conception of the child.

This leads to the next factor in the culture of irresponsibility in sexuality. The general support in popular culture for the use of contraception encourages young men (and women) to divorce sex from the natural consequences of sexual activity. This allows men – and even young boys – much more easily to use women for their own pleasure rather than learn how to love through sexuality linked to genuine responsibility for the other's good. To be responsible, sex must be tied to a loving gift of self to another person and a welcoming of the other's self-gift. There is no real gift if only given for an hour, or a night; rather, a true exchange of self-gifts is bound to a real commitment to another not just temporarily but for life, and not just privately but publicly. Such a mutual commitment happens only in marriage. Moreover, it must embrace the other person as a whole. The use of contraception in sexual activity — whether by unmarried individuals or married couples — contradicts the meaning of the exchange of self-gifts because it rejects that part of the person most made for the act of making love, the person's fertility, which is tantamount to the rejection of the person.

THIRD CHALLENGE: AN INCREASED EFFEMINACY IN OUR CULTURE

In recent years, particularly with the onset of political correctness in the early 1990s, there has been a push toward effeminacy in various segments of our culture. Authentically masculine virtues, like those of soldiers we described above, are considered vices or weaknesses by many today, and are attacked as discriminatory and demeaning of women. Radical movements of women at colleges and universities, dedicated to “smashing the patriarchy,” have diminished appreciation for masculinity in general; they have in general rejected men’s attempts to give of themselves – or any type of chivalrous behavior – as products of an oppressive culture, and many times men, after having had their attempts at virtue denigrated, stop giving and stop seeking to be virtuous. What began perhaps as a necessary correction of chauvinism has gone too far.

This radical feminist movement has not led to an exaltation of authentically feminine virtues, but to their perversion. That’s because effeminacy and femininity are not the same thing. Femininity describes genuinely womanly traits in a woman and in itself is a full development of the female personality. Effeminacy refers to a softness, a lack of perseverance, which was first used in the ancient world to tease women as the physically weaker sex. It was later applied to men who were soft and lack perseverance in this sense. For that reason, effeminacy is, paradoxically, a corruption of both femininity and masculinity.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, the greatest teacher of the Middle Ages, included effeminacy under the vices opposed to perseverance. He said that it can be caused by a weak temperament or by one’s becoming so addicted to pleasures that he cannot bear their absence. Whatever its cause, effeminacy renders one a wimp when facing struggles and difficulties.

We see the push toward effeminacy especially in academics, athletics and discipline. In many parts of our educational system, there has been a gradual weakening of standards in order to make room for those who find genuine achievement too difficult. In sports, there has been a tendency in many places to focus more on self-esteem than winners and

losers, on “everybody plays” philosophies than genuine goal-based competition. Winning is obviously not “the only thing” in sports, but striving to win is important, because if it does not matter whether one wins or loses, sports no longer serves as a training ground for striving to achieve difficult goals. With respect to discipline, genuine “tough-love” is rarer today, as it seems many parents and teachers are more prone to wanting children to like them than to teach, train and discipline them, even at the risk of the children’s displeasure.

FOURTH CHALLENGE: THE PUSH TO NORMALIZE HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOR

The push for the normalization of homosexual behavior in our culture has also clearly promoted effeminacy. While homosexuality and effeminacy are distinct, they are often found together in individuals with same-sex attractions. Effeminacy, historically, has been a characteristic of the larger pro-homosexuality movement.

Beyond effeminacy, however, the movement in favor of full acceptance of same-sex behavior is presenting other challenges to the formation of authentically masculine men. The logic that attempts to justify homosexual activity is the polar opposite of the type of manliness I have been trying to sketch here, for two major reasons.

First, the meaning and purpose of the original difference of man and woman is totally discounted. Man’s good is no longer seen in complementary relation to woman’s and in fact, as the push for same-sex marriage becomes stronger, marriage is conceived as a potentially man-less or woman-less institution, one in which a husband or a wife is optional rather than required. Such a notion obviously changes the meaning of marriage, the understanding of love which leads to marriage, and the significance of maleness and femaleness upon which marriage is based.

Second, the model of homosexual relations is contrary to man’s personal good. In a pre-papal book, the future Pope John Paul II called it “harmonious egoisms”: the consensual using of each of other for

gratification, in which two “I”s remain two “I”s and never become a genuine communion of persons, a “we.” The paternal meaning of masculinity is rejected in the very act made by God for it to be expressed. While two men may genuinely love each other, the mutual utilitarianism involved in homosexual activity, rather than “making love,” actually corrodes the love that may exist between them. Statistics in fact show that the more sexual a same-sex relationship, the more quickly it leads to a break-up. In same-sex activity, men, rather than taking responsibility for the other’s good, spiritually, psychologically and medically, actually become consensual consumers of the other.

THE GOOD NEWS FOR A RECOVERY OF AUTHENTIC MASCULINITY IN OUR MODERN SOCIETIES

The above survey illustrates some of the contemporary challenges to authentic masculinity and the formation of Christian men in our society. But these challenges are not the only factor in the cultural and ecclesial equation – there are also several signs of hope. I will mention three.

The first is that we are aware of the situation and are no longer being caught by surprise. We’ve diagnosed the problem of deficient masculine formation in our culture and that is a big step forward in working toward a solution. Recent organizations, conferences and movements – like Catholic Men’s Conferences, Promise Keepers and the Million Man March – have been joining venerable ones like the Knights of Columbus in reaching out in particular ways to men to help them to live up to their vocation to be responsible lovers in giving themselves to others. It is almost as if a sleeping giant has been awakened.

The second is the clear and recently reiterated teaching of the Church on issues related to manhood. The various cultural challenges have been the occasion for the Church to state her teachings with even greater directness. From Pope John Paul II’s 1981 document on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, and his famous catecheses often called the Theology of the Body, to Pope Benedict XVI’s and the U.S. bishops’ clear teachings

against same-sex marriage as well as policies against the priestly ordination of effeminate men or those with deep-seated same-sex attractions, the Church is giving us clearer teachings about marriage, love and masculinity than perhaps at any time in her history. The more the Church drinks from this well, the more capable we will be to serve as light, salt and leaven in the reformation of our society.

The third sign of hope is that virtuous women are starting to reassert themselves against radical feminists and are working to take back the culture. Women who look at marriage as a beautiful institution, who view abortion as a most unwomanly choice, who look toward men with genuine affection and not as enemies or oppressors have arisen to say forthrightly that the radical feminists do not speak for them. Because of the complementarity of the sexes, the more authentically feminine women influence our culture, the easier it will be for men to be authentically masculine, and vice versa.

THE SACRAMENTAL SPIRAL

This last sign of hope is a good point on which to conclude our reflections. Since God created man in His image, male and female, and since the communion of spouses, male and female, is meant to be an image of the Triune God who is an eternal Communion of Persons in love, in order that society and persons learn how to love, become fully human and more and more like God, we must have real men and real women who know how to complement and love each other. When real men and real women learn to love each other fully, consistent with their original differentiation, an upward spiral of love develops, love is shown, and the whole world gets a glimpse of God who is love. And how urgently our world needs to see Him!

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