Fatherhood and Obedience

(*Note: In these thoughts on fatherhood, I use masculine pronouns and the terms for male persons. Female readers may adapt them to their own roles, just as men so often make similar adaptations when taking the Virgin Mary as their role model.*)

"Obedience" probably springs to many minds when the word "father" is mentioned, but most probably think of the obedience owed to the father, not the obedience the father himself must show. The same is true of the roles in society that are like a father's in the family. If we think of a father as someone to be obeyed, we think the same of a king (or president or prime minister), a boss, or a teacher. As children, subjects or citizens, workers, and students, obedience should be our first response to legitimate authority—though we should never obey blindly. But if a father, a ruler, or a boss should think of himself as an authority whose word is law simply because of the position he holds, he has completely misunderstood his role. That is what we learn from both Pope Francis in his new apostolic letter[i] and from the example of St. Joseph.

In the great hall of the graduate school I attended, the first dean had had these words carved over the high table, so everyone would see them every day: NEC VOCEMINI MAGISTRI QUIA MAGISTER VESTER UNUS EST CHRISTUS. Once we puzzled out that the words meant "Neither be ye called masters: for one is your master, Christ" and recalled that many of us were working on a degree called "Magister in Artibus" and that the rest wanted to be called not just "master," but "doctor," that seemed a troubling message for us. In Matthew's gospel it comes just after Christ's warning, "call none your father upon earth; for one is your father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 23:9-10). The Lord's point is not that we should stop addressing our priests as "father" or calling our own fathers "Dad," or even that we should stop working on our master's degrees. It is that everyone in an earthly position of authority is a stand-in for our real father and master, who is

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This essay was written at the request of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet as part of their observance of the Year of St. Joseph proclaimed by Pope Francis, December 8, 2020-December 8, 2021, and published on their websites and social media.

God himself. If we forget that we must act not as our own will dictates but *in persona Christi*, we will become petty tyrants. As Dr. Johnson said, "The regal and parental tyrant differ only in the extent of their dominions, and the number of their slaves" (*Rambler* No. 148). An abusive father, a humiliating teacher, a tyrannical employer, and a despotic ruler all fail in their first duty: obedience. Anyone taking on a fatherly role must first obey the rules, the law, and, in the largest sense, the will of God.

A father only has real authority when he is seeking the good of his family. A boss only has authority when he is seeking the good of his enterprise as it serves the community. A political leader only has authority when he seeks the good of his nation and the world. A teacher only has authority when he first seeks truth and then the welfare of the student. And all must put justice and mercy above the interests of themselves and their own families, professions, businesses, or nations. Fathers—including "City Fathers," "Pastors and Masters," Patrons, Patriarchs, and every "old man" in the back office—must think less of being obeyed than of obeying whatever rules govern them and still more the will of Him who is Lord and Father of us all.

St. Joseph is, as Pope Francis points out, an excellent model for us all as we enact the role of father in our various spheres. We can imagine him wanting what we all want. To be, at times, the center of attention. To enjoy the respect of his community. To build something he can pass on to his own descendants. When he became betrothed, he must have seen himself closer to all those goals. But one by one, in obedience to the Father, he gave them up. His son—and even his wife—became the center of attention. (He never thought that "all generations would call *him* blessed.") He at least risked having everyone laugh at him as that contemptible thing, a cuckold. He fled from all he knew to live as a refugee and returned from exile to a place that was not his own. And he knew that nothing he had, even his name and lineage, would pass on to the heir of his own body.

In obedience, he accepted the role of foster father. And even there, like so many parents, he learned before he was ready that his child no longer needed his protection and was ready to go about his real business alone.

We must all take seriously our roles as father—whether we rear children or guide and protect God's children in some other way. But we mistake our role if we think of ourselves as in fact fathers, teachers, rulers, or bosses. Whatever the world and its DNA tests, organizational charts, and rosters may tell us, we are never the real father—only foster fathers. We are not kings—only viceroys. We are not the real owners of anything—only managers. We are not teachers—only teaching assistants. We have one father, one king, one teacher—the one who owns the universe. We must, like St. Joseph, learn to give up our own hopes, risk the world's ridicule, and perhaps leave all that is familiar in order to protect those who have been entrusted to us. We must obey Him who has given us his trust. Finally, we must be ready to find that in whatever role we have been given, we are no longer needed. If we have played our roles well, we will rejoice not that we have been obeyed, but that we have been obedient and that our children—our foster children—have flourished. We trust that St. Joseph now rejoices in the glory of the Son and that his earthly disappointments do not trouble him. As we strive to be good fathers in our different ways, let us trust we will one day join him, rejoicing in the Glory of the Father as reflected through the Son and thus through all those who had become members of His mystical body. Our earthly children, our students, our employees, and all people to whom we have attended with paternal care will be among those through whom the glory of the Lord shines.

—Brian Abel Ragen

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[i] *Patris Corde:* Apostolic Letter of the Holy Father Francis on the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church. December 8, 2020. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html