

**Who Am I Now? Father, Son, Brother—  
Making Sense of Priests' Complex Web of Relationships to  
Bishops, People, and Each Other**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Father Tony Cutcher called and invited me to speak about priests in the context of the Synod on the Family and, more specifically, about the ways that we speak about priests in family terms—father, son, and brother. I told him that I was happy to accept the invitation. At the time, I thought that the development of this topic would be easy. I had studied and written about priests' ministry and life. I had a special interest in the formation of presbyterates as communities of priests with their bishop. Still, as I pursued this topic, I began to realize how complex and how important it is. So, I certainly won't claim that I have a last word on priests as fathers, sons, and brothers. At best, I will offer you something that can begin your own reflection and conversation which can, I hope, lead to further development.

There are numerous references, especially in more recent Church documents, to priests in the familial language of father, son, and brother. So, for example, priests are said to be sons in relationship to their bishop but also brothers with him. Priests are to be fathers to their people but also brothers as well. Certainly, priests are to be brothers to one another in a given presbyterate.

Given those references, some questions easily arise. Who exactly are we as priests at any given moment? Do these family titles have any special significance? Do they help us understand who we are and what our purpose is? Can these titles—father, son, brother—be misunderstood and lead to difficulties? These are some of the questions that I would like to take up in this presentation.

Before I explore the topic and the questions linked to it, let me share with three anecdotes that capture some of my personal experience with the strange way that these titles, especially “father,” can make an entrance in our lives.

I remember very clearly a moment shortly after I was ordained. I was in the parish, and an elderly (to me at that time, not so much now!) woman approached me. She said, “Father, I’m having some terrible problems with my family. And I want you to help me.” Almost instinctively, I wanted to look around and see who she was talking to. It couldn’t be me. I was too young to be “father,” and I certainly didn’t have the wisdom to resolve complicated family issues. And besides all this, she was like my grandmother. How could I possibly be a “father” to her? Of course, she was talking to me, not someone else. And, eventually, I got over the strangeness of older people calling me “father” and expecting me to give them guidance. I think that many of us, when we are newly ordained, need to get over our own sense of strangeness about being called “father” by our older parishioners.

A second experience came when I arrived in a parish to become its pastor. In the early weeks after my arrival, people kept asking me, “What should we call you?” I couldn’t quite understand their question. So, I would say, “You can call me anything you want, but just don’t let it be a bad name!” Eventually, I got the background on their question. My predecessor had arrived and announced, “Just call me Steve.” After I knew the history of the question, I said, “You can call me what you want, but I do want you to know that I am here to be your priest and I am here to care for you as your pastor. I hope that will be a friendly relationship, but I’m not just another friend on the block.”

A third and final experience has to do with my relationship as a priest with my bishop. From my time in seminary and throughout my priesthood until now, a very dominant image of the bishop was that of a father, even when the relationship was informal. And that worked, because the bishop was always older. Now, that’s all very strange, because my bishop is younger than me. In fact, I first knew him when he was a seminarian and I was already ordained. You know the old advice about treating your altar boys well, because who knows where they will be in relationship to you in the future.

These three anecdotes tell us that family language applied to priests isn't straightforward. It may need some explanation and qualification. The anecdotes also tell us that something important is in play when family language is applied to priests. And leads to my first point—the importance of family titles applied to priests.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY TITLES APPLIED TO PRIESTS**

Before we consider the importance of family titles applied to priests, we do well to take a look at some examples of this usage. Here are four passages taken from the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* [*Presbyterorum ordinis*]:

“Priests exercise the function of Christ as Pastor and Head in proportion to their share of authority. In the name of the bishop they gather the family of God as a brotherhood endowed with the spirit of unity and lead it through Christ in the Spirit to God the Father.” N. 6.

“On account of this common sharing in the same priesthood and ministry then, bishops are to regard their priests as brothers and friends...” N. 7

“All priests, who are constituted in the order of priesthood by the sacrament of Orders, are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood; but in a special way they form one priestly body in the diocese to which they are attached under their own bishop.” N. 8

“Even though the priests of the new law by reason of the sacrament of Orders fulfill the preeminent and essential function of father and teacher among the People of God and on their behalf, still they are disciples of the Lord along with all the faithful and have been made partakers of his kingdom by God, who has called them by his grace. Priests, in common with all who have been reborn in the font of baptism, are brothers among brothers as members of the same Body of Christ which all are commanded to build up.” N. 9

Notice in these passages how family language gives expression to the multiple and complex levels of priestly existence: who we are (identity), what we do (ministry), for what purpose (mission). These references already tell us, in a general way, that using the family language of father-son-brother captures important dimensions of priestly mission and ministry. There is, however, a specific determination of great importance embedded in this language of family.

Family titles capture a fundamental understanding and conviction about the sacrament of Holy Orders and priestly mission and ministry in the Church and in the world. Being a priest is a relational reality. In other words, we are constituted as priests in our existence and in our ministry and in our mission by relationships.

At first, the relational underpinnings of priesthood may seem unexceptional, even commonplace. That, however, is not at all true. From the time of the Council of Trent until the Second Vatican Council, the distinctive markers of priests rested in their special *powers* to consecrate the elements of bread and wine and to forgive sins and, secondly, the distinctive *jurisdiction* they exercised in the Church. With the Second Vatican Council, relationships become paramount. In the first place, of course, this means relationship to Jesus Christ. Priests are empowered to act in the name and person of Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the Church. [See *Lumen gentium*, n. 10; *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 2] The relational dimension continues in the Church. Their very ordination is an action that situates priests in a relationship to their bishop and other priests. They are, at ordination, incorporated into the presbyteral order. Finally, they are in an essential relationship with all the baptized, that is, in a mutually ordered relationship. *Lumen gentium* says: “Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are one the less ordered one to another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.” (n. 10) In simpler language, in the Church it makes no sense to have priests without people or people without priests.

The familial-relational language of priest as father-son-brother captures the essential conviction that priesthood is constituted by multiple relationships.

## **Cautions**

The language of family applied to priests has validity and truth. At the same time, we need to exercise some caution in our use of this language. Like so much religious language, priest as father-son-brother has a metaphorical quality. A literal application of this language can easily misrepresent the truth contained within it. So, for example, in a religious context “father” and “mother” have historically, in particular circumstances, been used to dominate and even exploit

others and not to serve them. This language has created and underwritten environments that have been paternalistic, maternalistic, and infantilizing. Even the seemingly more inviting language of “brothers” and “sisters” has its own downside. The fraternal sense of relationships within the community of faith (and ministry) can cloak an unreal idealization of relationships with sometimes crushing consequences. The story of Cain and Abel is cautionary in this regard, as are the extensive studies of mimetic rivalry of Rene Girard.

In addition to these cautions about the misuse of family language applied to priests, we also need to consider how Jesus realigned family relationships in his teaching and practice. We find a key text in Mark’s gospel:

“Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for me.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’” Mark 3:31-35

Jesus highlights an entirely new set of relationships in the eschatological family of God, relationships not based on blood and kinship but on doing the will of God. And, at the center of this new family of God, is Jesus himself. A similar shift is evident in John’s gospel when Jesus connects discipleship and a familial relationship with him:

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple ‘Here is your mother.’” (John 19:26-27)

The Letter to the Ephesians locates this new sense of belonging to the family of God in the context of the Church. And it is the same Church that priests serve through their ministry.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God [*oikoi*] built upon the foundation of the apostles with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” Ephesians 2:19-20

With these cautions and qualifications in mind, we can explore the implications and practical consequences of identifying priests as fathers-sons-brothers in the Church and in the family of God.

## IMPLICATIONS AND PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES

### 1> the priority of relationship over function

Using and applying the language of family relationships to priests and bishops (father-son-brother) expresses the priority of relationship over function. In any family, there are necessary “functional aspects,” such as working to provide food and shelter, identifying a regular routine of family life, and assigning household tasks and responsibilities. Still, all those functions do not define the family. In fact, they are instrumental in serving the relationships and the bonds among family members. The goal and essence of family life is a set of flourishing relationships. This priority of relationship over function also helps us to understand the nature of ministry in the Church. Let me illustrate this from some personal experience.

In the late ‘70’s, I was trying to help a group of parishioners in Waukegan, Illinois (by the way, the birthplace of Jack Benny) to understand lay ministry in the Church. We were just beginning to explain lay ministry and to encourage laity to minister in the Church and in the world. The talk did not go smoothly. Finally, a frustrated woman said, “Father, just tell us what to do.” At that point, I realized that this woman had identified ministry with the work that she did. Of course, in the Church it might be a different kind of work, but it was work nonetheless. Then I explained, “I think you may be understanding ministry as parallel to the work that you do on your jobs. It would be more accurate to think not about how you work on the job but how you serve your family. In your family, you do a number of things. You work hard for and with your family. That work, however, is neither the heart or goal of your family life. What you do is meant to serve the relationships and the bonds that hold you together. Now, think of ministry that way, as something you might do, a work or function, but always geared toward building the relationship of people with God and with each other.”

The sense of family—and our own identification with the language of father-son-brother—helps us to avoid succumbing to a business model of church life and ministry. Of course, we would never blatantly surrender to a business model with its emphasis on products, market share, and profits. Subtly and sometimes not so subtly, however, the functional business mind-set can insinuate itself in parish ministry.

Ultimately, our roots are in the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17. The Second Vatican Council took that prayer and in a remarkable way helped us to understand the relational and, indeed, Trinitarian scope of our life:

“...the Lord Jesus, when praying to the Father ‘that they may all be one...even as we are one’ (John 17:21-22), has opened up new horizons closed to human reason by implying that there is a certain parallel between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of the sons [and daughters] of God in truth and love.” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 24)

The prayer of Jesus with the language of family embedded in it expresses not only his desire for those who would follow him, it also expresses our self-understanding today. With this sense of who we are, priests can hold up a vision for themselves, their staffs, and their people that brings the sense of family to the fore.

## **2> An integral sense of ongoing formation**

Over the years, the ongoing formation of priests has occupied a good portion of my attention. When we consider priests under the rubric of father-son-brother, we also come to know that ongoing formation must be whole and integral. I mean that being father-son-brother and being a good and effective father-son-brother depends in great measure on being more human, wiser, more faith-filled, and more practical-minded. In other words, what we have come to know (especially since *Pastores dabo vobis*) as the four pillars of formation—human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral—take on a distinctive shape when priests are situated in a relational world, when they are not mere functionaries. We can consider how living these family or family-like relationships has formative and transformative impact on us.

## **3> We are humanized**

Participation in family life, including the family of God, humanizes us. This life necessarily makes us more aware of others, more attentive to them, more communicative, and more collaborative. The typical daily challenges that we face in family life, when we hear “Are you crazy? Don’t you see? What does *that* mean?”—all these challenges batter our defense mechanisms and make us a bit more human, more vulnerable, and more in tune with reality. And short of

intensive and extensive psychotherapy, this family way is the only to get beyond intellectualization, denial, and projection—all of which keep us distant and disconnected. Ideally, family and the family that is Church provide the safe place where we can lower our defenses.

#### **4> We are formed as disciples**

Recently, I had the task of collating all the surveys and soundings in the Archdiocese of Chicago in preparation for the upcoming synod on the family. The first question was this: *How has family life been a grace or a blessing from God for you?* I was so moved by the many responses that seem to converge in a few extraordinary elements. Family, in the first place, is where people learn to love and be loved. It is also the place where people are schooled in self-giving that generates new life in others. Growth in self-gift in generative and faithful love seems to capture the heart of Christian discipleship. It is a sharing in the sacrificial consciousness of Jesus Christ, who loved us and laid down his life for us. If priests lived out their family relationships in the Church as father-son-brother, they will certainly grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

#### **5> We are formed for conflict**

It may seem strange to speak of formation for conflict, but there is an important truth here. Anyone who has lived in a family knows the inevitability of conflict in different forms. Thomas Oden in his book *Game-Free: A Guide to the Meaning of Intimacy* suggests that conflict capability is a requisite for a truly intimate relationship. If people cannot be in conflict (and emerge from it still together), they cannot experience genuine intimacy. Family life, when it works well, enables us to engage in struggles that we have with each other without ripping us apart from each other, because there is always a secure base of belonging. This fits a pattern evident in the New Testament, for example, in the Pauline corpus and more specifically in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians as well as in Matthew's gospel which has been described as a "gospel for a community in conflict" (see Matthew 16-18). Although conflicts in the Church seem to take us by surprise, they are inevitable in a family understanding of church and a community that has not yet arrived at its pilgrim destination. Priest-family members of this church community can learn how to be in and manage conflict and struggle and help people to move toward reconciled relationships.



## **6> We learn flexibility of spirit and how to shift roles**

Family life, whether lived in an ordinary family or in the church family of God, inevitably entails members shifting roles, sometimes in dramatic ways. For example, parents care for children. There comes a time, however, when children care for parents. Recently, when I was reflecting on the domestic church, I realized how parents bring their children to the Church for sacraments, especially baptism, first penance, first Eucharist, and confirmation. Later, those same children will bring their parents to the Church for anointing and, perhaps, the last sacraments. At different points in our personal history, we assume different roles. That requires a certain flexibility of spirit and willingness to change. So, too, priests who live and serve in the church family of God as father-son-brother are called to be formed with that same flexibility of spirit and willingness to move in different roles. This reality of change for priests becomes most poignant when, either because of age or some diminishment of illness, priests who have served others in the community allow themselves to receive the care and support of the community.

Our awareness as priests of being father-son-brother in the family God enables us to be formed in the different ways that occur uniquely in family life. We also do well to watch and learn from the families we serve in parishes. They can mentor us into being the father-son-brother we are meant to be.

### **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: KEY TO DISCERNMENT IN MINISTRY**

If, indeed, priests are fathers-sons-brothers in the family of God with all that means as we have considered it, then these relationships becomes an important key in the continuing discernment of priestly ministry and life. They help us to develop our own particular examination of conscience with questions grounded in the realities of daily life: how am I living? are the particular elements of ministry and life properly aligned—how I deal with time, energy, efforts? am I “operating” well—effectively in my connections, effectively in getting things done, purposefully in orienting my mission? And then there is the most important question that underlies every other one: am I truly embedded in the family of God

as father-son-brother, so that I am intimately engaged with the people entrusted to me, so that—in the words of Pope Francis—I carry “the smell of the sheep”?

## **LIVED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ADDRESS PROBLEMATIC SITUATIONS**

I sense that if we were truly immersed in these family relationships of father-son-brother in their authentic sense, we would go far in addressing a number of problematic behaviors that can impede and even undermine priestly ministry. For example, it is difficult to be a true father-son-brother and, at the same time, engage in clericalism, that sense of privilege and isolation that sets one apart. Similarly, sexual misconduct—in whatever form it might take—is simply incompatible with being in a familial relationship with people. The so-called “Lone Ranger Syndrome” with its individualistic, if not idiosyncratic, and isolated approach to ministry is unsustainable if priests are connected with their people and the Church in the context of family.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Extraordinary Synod on the Family which took place in October, 2014 and the upcoming Ordinary Synod which will again address the family in October, 2015 have focused our attention in the Church on family life and relationships in an unprecedented way. As priests, we need to take up this reflection and consider our own place in the Church as the family of God. Historically, the language of family and family relationships has described us: father-son-brother in relationship to our bishops, our people, and each other. In these remarks, I have tried to identify the importance of these images that can seem to range widely and, at times, be susceptible to manipulation and even misuse. They remain, however, critical for our self-understanding and for the ways that we serve in the Church. For priests, there is a great complexity latent in the multiple relationships that constitute us in the middle of the People of God. And we need to clarify who we are and what that means for us and for our people and the Church at large. We also need to embrace and purify that identity in the family of God. What I have attempted to do in these remarks is really only a beginning that begs for much further and more precise development through reflection and prayer.

In the meanwhile, I can say that we do have ways to navigate through the complexity. We have in our history men and women who have lived out the reality of family relationships in the Church in positive and productive ways. We also have, by God's grace and gift, Pope Francis who evidently stands among us as a father, a son, and a brother. We can learn from our history, from our Holy Father, and from each other. What matters most, finally, is our willingness to learn, so that we can truly be the father, son, and brother that God wants us to be.