

## *The Cultural Struggle for/ Or: The Culture War about the "Father"*

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There is no doubt that Alexander Mitscherlich's book "On the Road to a Fatherless Society", which was published in its first edition in Munich in 1963, represents the signature of a long social process that reached a peak in the mid-1960s. The authority of father figures in private and public spheres was visibly wearing thin/ or: was increasingly exhausted. A new era for the legitimization of authority and the interaction of the sexes was ushered in.

**Excursus 1:** How did this come about?

### *Church in Transition*

The Church was and is involved in this process of change. She was and is characterized, so to speak, by a father structure. The title Father is associated with a great wealth of power, which refers to the people entrusted to him: for the "Holy Father" the universal Church, for the bishops the dioceses (at consecration rituals the bishop is addressed with "venerable father"), for the pastor the parish. The recent disputes in the context of pastoral and synodal processes show how much this principle still applies and is questioned at the same time.

The following event, which falls precisely at the time of Father Kentenich's conflicts with the Church, shows the imprint of the ecclesiastical image of the Father/ or: shows what influence the Church's image of the father had/, in this case of the Father in the Family. In 1953, the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany forced the abolition of the legal figure of the male head of the family. The German bishops reacted with protest because they saw the God given order of being undermined.

**Excursus 2:** Emancipation of men and women

### *Father Kentenich and the Development of the Father Image*

It is interesting to note that Joseph Kentenich's personal development as a child who had to grow up without a father, as a student, as a priest and founder of Schoenstatt communities, ran parallel to the indicated social development of the father image.

Father Kentenich took up these developments with great sensitivity until his death in 1968. He did so according to his faith filled principle that in crises God wants to draw particular attention to certain values in light of the signs of the times. In concrete terms, this means that parallel to the dismantling of the traditional image of the father, he tried to create a new image of the father, which was to be the model, both for the Schoenstatt communities he founded, as well as for families, and for the Church.

Father Kentenich was initially guided by old-proven ideas with regard to the families. He understood the father in the family as the figure and institution toward whom everything converged in the sense of ultimate responsibility. Thus, he also had the idea of a hierarchical image of marriage and family. It was not until the 1950s that he saw the image of a partnership marriage gain influence. He was open to this development and recommended to wait and see which image would eventually prevail.

### *Fatherhood: Loving and Caring Accompaniment*

It is precisely this recommendation, however, that makes it clear that the basic category of the father image for Father Kentenich was not first of all the external structure, but the loving and caring accompaniment and the resulting "natural authority" of the father. Love had the absolute primacy for him.

This vigilance of Father Kentenich for further developments in general and the development of the image of the family, the father, and the mother in particular, makes it clear that he held the idea of engaging in new processes of transformation. In another context, he took the view of the movement's ability to perceive social and ecclesial processes and to interpret them in the light of faith. He held the view:

*"What someone used to do alone in the past, you have to do afterwards as a team. So the question is: what currents are there now? If you can't or don't do that, then you'll have a wooden or stone society." (1964)*

*"It may also be taken for granted that a movement of renewal of the designated magnitude must be thrown into the middle of all spiritual currents of time in the world and Church. It must be stirred and shaken, it must come to terms with them, it must grow from them, it must absorb what is valuable and overcome and strip away what is questionable." (1952)*

### *Proclaiming this Image in Word and Deed*

Father Kentenich tried to plant this image of the father in various ways in the Schoenstatt Movement. As the first example we mention how he made himself available to individuals and to individual communities as a fatherly/ or paternal companion. The aim for him was to inspire people and communities, not to maintain the upper hand over the different life processes according to a hierarchical structural model. His principle of "freedom as much as possible, bonds as few as necessary, cultivation of the spirit as much as possible" relied less on obedience to a father figure, than on inspiration and freedom.

Because of the obvious need for a loving father for all communities of life, he wanted his communities to see themselves as families. The successful "natural family" was the model for the loving care of the members towards each other. However, the emphasis on a new image of the father should not be understood in the sense of a primacy of the father over the mother. Mothers have always been more likely associated with the qualities of loving and merciful affection and appreciation. In this regard there was a clear deficit and an overlay with regard to the fathers due to authoritarian behavior. Here, Father Kentenich saw an urgent need for development.

### *The Father Image Open to Transparency*

For Father Kentenich, a decisive task of the figure of the Father in the various forms was his character of transparency. A father should always be understood as one who refers to God as the loving father of humankind. With this task of being a father, he did not connect a claim to power or of disposing, as was often the case in tradition. He was much more concerned with an inner authority that could provide orientation and also challenge to make one's own decisions and personal growth. All with paternal duties are to represent God as a loving father. And this applied to paternal tasks in families, in "family-like" communities, but also to parishes, dioceses and the entire church, who should see herself as a "familia Dei."

Thus, being a father in the various communities of life was not an instrument of domination for Father Kentenich but an important opportunity to lead people to a relationship with God marked by love and freedom. This makes people capable of authentically saying "Our Father in heaven."

### *Further Development of Image of the Father*

It must be taken into account that a reshaping of the image of authority and of the father in society and the Church will take a long time. The first contours are beginning to appear. For example, the image of the man as father can only be formulated in the reciprocal relationship to the image of the woman as mother. The respective profiling of both images is then less about differences than about convergences. In this context, for example, is it not a remarkable process that political parties try to

occupy their top positions with a woman and a man together? As in other events, does this perhaps indicate a sign of cultural history that wants to be taken seriously in society and in the Church? It will be a real challenge to perceive and accept the signs of the times and to interpret them from faith in God's guidance.

### *Excursus1: How did this happen?*

#### *Authorities in Crisis*

With the two world wars in the first half of the 20th century, the question increasingly arose, especially in Germany, of how the authorities that had led into those crises were legitimized. The abdication of William II, the last German emperor and king of Prussia, called for a new state order in 1918. The Führer cult of the so-called Third Reich that soon followed plunged the world into a disaster, killing more than 70 million people. The derivation of the authorities and father figures "by God's grace" was thereby reduced ad absurdum.

#### *Changes in the Social Situation*

Especially during the Second World War and after its conclusion, it was also becoming apparent that women were often the ones who stabilized the different areas of life, not least because of the absence of men. It is true that men still officially presented themselves as the designers/shapers of politics and society. In the first German Bundestag, only 6.9 percent of the seats were held by women. But since the 1960s, the social situation has changed fundamentally.

#### *Change in the Image of the Father*

The figure of the father in the family also changed inexorably. The father, due to his participation in God's world government provides royal and priestly duties for his family, was sometimes turned into a caricature. An image of the Father emerged that was based solely on the authority of the respective personality and the appreciative devotion to his children or those entrusted to him. In ever-new search movements, the image of the father continued to develop into the present day, also as a counterpart to a new image of the woman and mother.

#### *Changing Power Structures in the Family*

The image of the father, the power structures in the family, and their justification have undergone rapid development over the past 100 years. As an example, a summary follows of how the Catholic magazine "The Christian Family" (Essen) justified the primacy of man in marriage and families from 1885 on, which is also the year of Father Kentenich's birth, until the 1950s:

"The father as king stands at the head of the family as God's representative by divine mission and divine appointment: 'The king in this kingdom (of the family), the unrestricted, free ruler, is the father. Inalienable, natural rights and powers are an outflow of God's power and assigned to him by the dear God. His house, his domestic hearth, but above all his wife and child constitute his kingdom: their soul, their life, their honor.' The honorary title 'Father' indicates that in the person of the father lies 'origin, power, care, and benefits'. The image of God and that of the father are in correlation: characteristics of one can also be expressed by the other. Just as the Father demands reverence for his person and has the right to give rules and commandments to his children and to monitor their observance, just as he has the duty

to take charge of his house and his children, so God is entitled to power and leadership, which people are to respond to with reverence, obedience, and trust. Conversely, the image of God justifies the father's rights and duties. The 'royal glory of the Father's mission' means 'participation in God's creative power' and 'participation in God's world government.' As God's creation continues, so the man has honor and continuance beyond death in the children.

The Father is the first authority in the family and thus 'the object of unconditional respect and veneration.' This authority is suited to him by divine direction and natural advantages before the woman. He is entitled to the general supervision of the family, since his mind, will and energy are more developed than those of the woman. The insistence on authority is the foundation of education and order. For the same reasons, he is also the first educator of his children. The supreme principle of education for him is setting a good example. The goals of his educational activity are piety, simplicity, self-control, obedience."

*(from: H. Brantzen, Family Spirituality. On the example of a Christian weekly newspaper, Mainz 1984, 92)*

## *Excursus 2: Equality between Men and Women*

"In 1953, the German Federal Constitutional Court enforced the equality of men and women by abolishing the legal figure of the male head of the family. The resistance of Catholic bishops emphasized that it was in the nature of marriage that it needed a decision-making authority, and that this authority could only be given to the man because he had been created before the woman. To want to abolish this irreversible dependence "does not generate legitimate equality for women, but rather 'egalitarianism' and contradicts the divine natural law" (Ulrich Sander). The episcopal statements saw in this decision the destruction of the "Western order of marriage and family." Anyone who justifies the hierarchical idea of marriage with the law of nature and the will of God basically removes this question from the grasp of the legislator. Whoever wants to argue with God does not cut a good figure."

*(from: Guido Bausenhardt, No Election Shepherd's Letter, in: basis – Interpreting the Signs of the Times, 51(2017) Issue October 18)*