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## True fatherhood

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

'What if your father is a fool?' He spoke carefully, without rancor. But the earnestness in his eyes betrayed a sea of emotions under the studied calm.

I felt a roomful of eyes watching me, waiting for an answer. I was leading a Bible study at a homeless agency. The room was crowded with men whose specific histories were unknown to me. But one thing I knew. They were all turning to God for answers and salvation from hopelessness.

We were discussing the fifth commandment, "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Ex. 20:12). The discussion up to this point had been quite predictable. But this question caused me to pause.

Turning to the one heavenly Father, I silently prayed. In the gracious stillness of communion with divine Love, differences in human perspective disappeared. I realized what the questioner meant, and as I prayed to know how to respond, he proceeded to speak.

His father was an alcoholic, rarely at home while he was growing up. Didn't provide for the family. Was boastful, self-indulgent - "a fool." Others nodded assent. One man summed up the mood: "How can I honor someone who hasn't done anything honorable?" Underneath all the comments there seemed to be an unspoken anguish that perhaps their sons were saying the same about them.

Each one of us has a higher nature than what's apparent to the eye, a spiritual identity created by God. This spiritual nature is wholly good, expressing the qualities of God. This ideal man is not a fool, but the beloved image and likeness of God. By making a distinction between the man made by God and what we might call the counterfeit mortal personality, we can honor the Godlike nature of the individual while at the same time rejecting the sin. This never condemns the person or condones the sin. Rather, it condemns

the sin and still conceives of the individual as God's child. Recognizing the nature of man as inherently good is the highest way to honor our heavenly Father-Mother and our human father and mother.

The effort we make to turn from unhappy material memories and see God's man uplifts us. As we discern the actual, spiritual identity of our human parents, we feel freer to realize our own spiritual nature. God is the source of identity. He endows us each with wisdom, self-government, constancy. How encouraging to discover that God is our Father. We inherit His nature, and it is all good, all worthy.

And if our parents have made or are making mistakes? Can't we still learn from them? Recognizing the rightness of doing good and being good, the wisdom of perseverance and self-control, we can honor our parents by not imitating any ungodlike behavior.

The hour had ended, but the men stayed. We were coming to the conclusion that no one is beyond redemption. Each one can recognize his spiritual nature and express it. It's never too late! Not only had we discovered a basis from which to honor our fathers, but we were discovering that we could be honorable and begin to honor ourselves. It wasn't too late for us either.

Probably every man in that room had fathered a child. The initial despair of ever being worthy to be honored by their children was giving way to hope that if their own fathers deserved honor, so did they.

Honoring our father also means being a better son. The perfect model for sonship is Christ Jesus. He showed all of us, sons and daughters, how to be who we really are, the child of God. By following his example, we can learn to overcome temptation, resist anger, handle disapproval. Jesus showed how to live in obedience to our divine Father-Mother while still honoring our human parents.

We concluded the discussion with a benediction that caused a holy silence to fill the room. It's from "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," by Mary Baker Eddy, and is actually one of the six basic tenets of Christian Science: "And we solemnly promise to watch, and pray for that Mind to be in us which was also in Christ Jesus; to do unto others as we would have them do unto us; and to be merciful, just, and pure" (Pg. 497).