

they often converted their pagan husbands and then started whole new Christian families.

In the context of the times, it is hard to avoid concluding that the attractiveness of Christianity for women, based on Christianity's radical insistence that a man should love his wife and family, and treat them as beings equal to him in the sight of God, was in fact one of the main reasons why the Christian religion took over the Roman empire.

And of course, Christianity also insisted that a man should avoid all sexual contact with a woman if he was not married to her. This itself flew in the face of customary practice in the non-Christian world at that time.

The major sociological lesson in this is that the Christian model of fatherhood and family life has contributed enormously to the tempering of what might be called "natural" male behaviour.

Indeed, it can be argued that under the influence of Christianity, humanity in the past 2000 years has in fact witnessed the transformation of the human male, from a self-directed creature motivated primarily by his own desires, into a socially-directed creature motivated primarily by the desire to care for his wife and children.

The importance of marriage today

However, as writers such as Blankenhorn and Miller point out, fatherhood and the father-involved family are tenuous social institutions. They depend, in the long-term, on the viability and acceptance, by men and women and by society at large, of marriage as the cornerstone of family and social life.

Perhaps reflecting the unhappy life experiences of some men and women, marriage itself receives its share of criticism today. It is not uncommon to hear it said that marriage is an outdated institution. This is belied by the high number of people still turning to marriage. In the larger states of Australia each year, tens of thousands of couples marry.

Again turning to popular culture, we see this reflected in movies like *Love, Actually*, starring Emma Thompson and Hugh Grant. Despite the bizarre post-modern twists and turns of the movie's various romantic plots, many of the couples in the story finally seek marriage, or return to it, as the solution to their deepest yearnings.

However, side-by-side with this continuing turning towards marriage, we are also witnessing the growth of what can be called a sub-culture of *de facto* parenting. With all the recent attention given to the growth of single-parent families, the point is sometimes missed that the characteristic experience of many children who live today in "single-parent families" is in fact daily contact with another man who is not their father.

Many *de facto* fathers, of course, do an outstanding job of caring for these children who are not their own offspring. However, with something of the order of a million children in Australia now said to be living in a household with only one of their natural parents, it should hardly be surprising to us if problems of violence and abuse start to increase.

These and other problems may be seen as emerging directly from the abandonment, in some quarters of society, of the stringent Christian insistence on the exclusive moral claims of the sacrament of marriage. The Catholic teaching on marriage – that all sexual activity should be reserved for marriage alone, and that marriage, once properly entered into, cannot be dissolved before death – are seen as hard by many people.

However, this seeming hardness should be weighed against the benefits brought to the human race, and human societies of the past 2000 years, from the widespread embrace by human beings of the reality of the God revealed through Judaism and Christianity – the God who is our loving Father.

This God has not only given laws to the human race. He has given human beings a model for living, through which males in particular, born with their weak and sinful natures, can become transformed, over time, into willing agents of love, teaching and social improvement in the world about them.

Paul Gray is a journalist and broadcaster based in Melbourne. Apart from his regular column in the Herald Sun, he writes on religious affairs for other newspapers and magazines and presents a weekly current affairs program 'Gray Matter' on Christian radio stations around Australia.

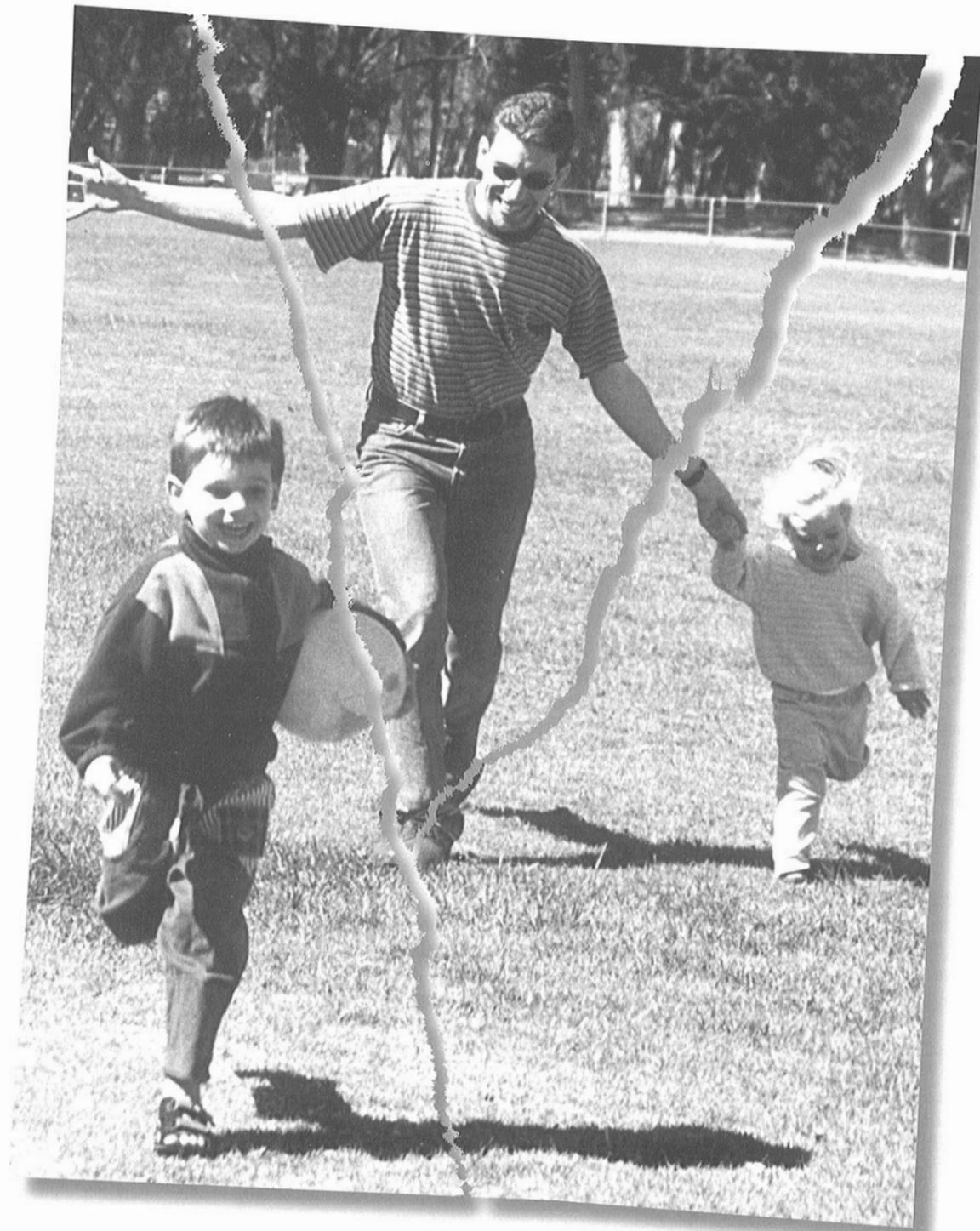
Questions for Reflection

1. Who are the positive male role models in your life?
2. The Latin word for man is related to our word 'virtue'. What are some good habits that make a man a good example to young men?
3. When a father is abusive or absent, where can young men and women look to find positive male 'father figures'?
4. How can we teach young men to be good fathers?
5. How would the world be different if all fathers were good fathers?

God, in other words, endows on men a new dignity, a dignity which flows from the lifetime's work which is fatherhood. This is a dignity which is sometimes not recognised as it should be in today's world. But as some recent developments in popular culture remind us, acknowledgement of the true dignity of fatherhood is never far away, even in the minds of those who may not yet have heard the full message of Christian salvation.



Father-Hungry



Published six times a year, INFORM is available from:
Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney Locked Bag 888
Silverwater DC NSW 1811

Tel: (02) 9643 3660 Fax: (02) 9643 3669 Email: info@caec.com.au
Published with ecclesiastical approval. ©2004, Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney.
EDITOR: Father John Flader LAYOUT & PRINT: InPress (02) 9791 0412

INFORM

faith & life matters

INFORM - 60c per copy (minimum order: 10 copies per issue) Single subscription \$10 per year within Australia 6 issues annually or with Alternatives (Newsletter of the Catholic Adult Education Centre) \$15 per year. Single copy of every backissue of INFORM still in print - \$40 per set.

Our society is characterised by a growing problem of children who don't know their fathers. In this article well-known Melbourne journalist and broadcaster PAUL GRAY reflects on this cultural phenomenon in the light of Christian images of fatherhood.

Hunger for the father is a feature of our times. In an era when growing numbers of people are raised in circumstances where contact with the man who fathered them is minimal or non-existent, it should come as no surprise to learn such a hunger is there.

One obvious way to measure this father-hunger is to look at popular imagery. In Australia in recent years, major feature films, television documentaries and award-winning books have dealt in-depth with the issue of a younger person coming to terms with their father.

Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* was made into a successful feature film, and is also a novel. It relates the powerful story of a young woman who returns to Tasmania in search of her alcoholic father, whose house she left as a teenager to go interstate and build a career.

Now that she has built this career, and finds herself unmarried and pregnant, she feels obliged to visit her sad and lonely father, to revisit the family tragedy which had driven them apart, and hopefully to rebuild the loving father-daughter relationship which had been lost. The movie is devastatingly powerful – and in some respects, a bleak portrait of the human ability of human beings to tear themselves apart emotionally.

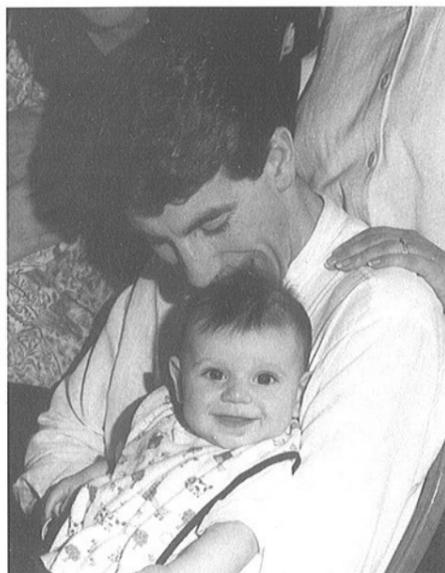
Yet *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* is an affirmation, also – an affirmation of love. In its presentation of the almost heroic efforts of two damaged people to reach out to each other – a father and his daughter – there is a powerful message for our times. It is a message that even under all the stresses of modern living, the relationship between father and child remains one of the most important in our lives. To save it is, thus, to affirm an important part of ourselves as human beings. Interestingly, the book version of *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* also won prestigious literary prizes for fiction.

Another book which has won significant awards for non-fiction is also a study of a young person's relationship with his father. This is *Romulus, My Father* by the philosopher Raimond Gaita. Again, it is a powerful story of the tempestuous, but highly valued relationship between a young person, in this case the author himself, and his father who died some years before the book was written.

Gaita uses this story as an affirmation, not so much of love as of the virtue of decency which he saw his father as embodying, despite the many emotional hardships visited on his family during all the years that Romulus and Raimond Gaita lived together. Romulus's wife – Raimond's mother – had abandoned the family home when Raimond was a very young boy. As they were recent migrants, this left the family in great difficulty, and in the book Gaita does not over-romanticise his father's ability to cope.

But cope he did, and in *Romulus, My Father* our community now has a much-admired book which pays a fine tribute to the importance of the achievement of an ordinary man who rose to the difficult task of being a father to his son.

Elsewhere, as we let our eyes roam through today's media, we gain a clear sense of the growing importance of the father-figure, in many people's lives. There is also another Australian feature movie which came out in late 1998, *Dead Letter Office* by Melbourne director John Ruane. *Dead Letter Office* is about a young woman whose hunger to discover the whereabouts of her father, who left when she was young, is so great she secures herself a job inside the Dead Letter Office of a modern metropolitan postal service. She believes, rightly as it turns out,



that the investigative resources of the Dead Letter Office will help her find her elusive father sooner than she could do it herself. A bittersweet romantic film, *Dead Letter Office* also shows us the emotional tragedy of losing one's family, from the point of view of a father: a sub-plot which mirrors neatly the central emotional drama of the storyline.

Yet again, we are being told through this movie that the need to re-connect to our fathers, particularly in circumstances where the original father-child relationship has been prematurely broken, in violent or tragic circumstances, is a vital, and relevant one today.

Experience tells us that fathers are important. Just as the bond with the mother remains an important part of every human being's life, even into adulthood, so is the relationship with our father a natural and vital aspect of our human personality. Unfortunately, this important aspect of personal life has in a real sense been denied within our culture in recent decades.

It is, perhaps, as a backlash against this common denial of the importance of fathers that we are now

witnessing an upsurge of artistic and media interest in the figure of the father. Regardless of its cause, there is no doubt that this is now a significant cultural theme.

Fatherhood and "genuine manhood"

American researcher and author David Blankenhorn has put forward the idea that contemporary Western society has lost "the fatherhood script." Arguing in sociological terms, Blankenhorn suggests that society in recent decades has lost its sense of the value and importance of fatherhood, and that this loss leads to a lack of support for fatherhood in terms of customs, habits and general attitudes throughout society.

Blankenhorn writes from an American perspective. The problems associated with fatherlessness which he describes in his book *Fatherless America*, and in other writings, are more acute in the USA than in Australia.

Nevertheless, Blankenhorn makes important points about the nature of fatherhood itself, and of fatherlessness, which are highly relevant to any society in which a significant and growing number of children are raised without the presence of their father in the home.

What points does he make? Blankenhorn says that in general terms, fatherhood, more than any other male activity, helps ordinary men to become "good men." It makes men "more likely to obey the law, to be good citizens, and to think about the needs of others," he says.

"Put more abstractly, fatherhood bends maleness – in particular, male aggression – towards prosocial purposes."

The model of fatherhood Blankenhorn speaks of here is the traditional model encouraged by Christianity – the model of the married father who lives with his wife and children, and orients his life to caring for them.

Both child well-being and the general well-being of society, including the safety of local communities, depend in a significant way on the health of this fatherhood model in a society, Blankenhorn argues. The absence of fatherhood, or the presence of fatherlessness, is therefore a direct cause of growth in child disadvantage and loss of safety in a society.

This is particularly obvious from social trends in America today. Writes Blankenhorn: "In the United States at the close of the twentieth century, paternal disinvestment has become the major cause of declining child well-being and the underlying source of our most important social problems, especially those rooted in violence."

Blankenhorn makes this point using powerful social science evidence relating to four issues in particular:

- fatherlessness is a primary generator of violence among young men
- fatherlessness is a major cause of rising domestic violence against women
- fatherlessness is a direct cause of increasing rates of childhood sexual abuse, and
- fatherlessness is a major cause of poverty and disadvantage among children.

The Judeo-Christian idea of fatherhood

If the fatherhood "script," to use Blankenhorn's term, has been lost in some parts of Western society, this implies that Western society, at one time in the past at least, did indeed have such a script. Where did it come from?

Prof. John W. Miller is a Canadian Professor of Religious Studies who has made a close study of the historical and anthropological impact of the Judeo-Christian idea of fatherhood. In his book *Faith, Fatherhood and Culture, Why We Call God "Father"* (Paulist Press), Miller argues that the traditional Western understanding of what constitutes true fatherhood comes directly from the introduction into human consciousness, in Old Testament times, of the Jewish understanding of God.

The God of the Jews, says Miller, is a God who is all-powerful, constant, and above all, all-loving. This was a radical departure from the understanding of deity then prevalent throughout the Middle-Eastern world, where masculine deities were commonly



supposed to exist but were generally thought of as weak or malevolent.

The Jewish understanding of God had a direct and inspirational impact on the Jewish model of fatherhood. Miller argues that following the example of their God, fathers in ancient Israel were encouraged to become actively involved in the lives of their children, particularly as teachers.

Miller argues that this was an historic breakthrough for the human race, because previous to this, relationships between men and their children, in most societies, were more remote. By contrast, the ancient Israelites insisted that the fatherly teaching role was to be carried out "through daily contact and conversations between themselves and their children."

Eventually, this fathering tradition spread worldwide, bringing with it an increased consciousness of the reality of the divine father – the central, radical notion that informs Judaism and Christianity.

"The bonds between men and women in marriage were gradually strengthened, as were men in their roles as caretakers of children."

An important conclusion that follows from the work of Professor Miller is that fathering, in the positive sense in which we understand it, is not something that occurs naturally in every human society.

Rather, it is a social tradition, first given to the world by Judaism, and further enshrined in human consciousness through the impact of Christianity.

Christian marriage and the taming of men

Fatherhood, in the traditional Jewish and Christian understanding of the term, is biologically a masculine phenomenon. In today's cultural climate, in which insistence on the equality of the sexes is held paramount by many people, the necessarily masculine aspects of fatherhood are enough to raise suspicions against it, in some circles.

To counter-balance this concern, it is important to remember an important point about the Judeo-Christian fatherhood model. That is, through its emphasis on the loving role of the father (both the divine father and the human father), the Judeo-Christian fatherhood model in fact leads to a strengthening of co-operation and respect between the genders.

In Christian tradition, the linkage between fatherhood, marriage and love has always been emphasised. Although there has been some variety of marriage



custom and practice even within Christian societies of the West over the past 2000 years, it is nevertheless true that Christian teaching has always emphasised the central importance of mutual love within marriage.

To Christians, the love a man holds towards his children grows naturally from the love he shares with his wife. In this sense, far from being a cause of the further oppression of women, the Christian ideal of fatherhood is intimately linked with the process of liberating both women and men from the curse of lovelessness. It is also a cause of the further advancement of society.

This liberating impact of the Judeo-Christian model of family life is often overlooked today. In a perverse reversal of facts, Christianity itself is sometimes blamed for contributing to oppression and marginalisation of women. An interesting contradiction of that viewpoint emerges from Rodney Stark's book *The Rise of Christianity*, a study of how Christianity came to dominate the Roman Empire by the fourth century AD.

Stark cites some of the most recent sociological research into the early history of Christianity, to show that one of the main reasons Christianity took off as a mass religion – and perhaps one of the main reasons it eventually took over the Roman empire, early in the fourth century – was that it was appealing to women.

"Christianity was enormously appealing to women," writes Stark, "because within the Christian sub-culture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Graeco-Roman world at large."

It is easy to see why. In early pagan Rome, women were treated as chattels – or slaves, in effect. Roman women were frequently married off as children, and were often made to endure the grossest forms of degradation from their husbands. Death from undergoing abortion procedures was common.

Christianity, on the other hand, forbade all this – it imposed stricter standards on the treatment of women, including restrictions on the sexual behaviour of men, it forbade abortion and it discouraged child marriage.

One effect of this seemed to be that women flocked to Christianity. It is said that in many early Christian communities, women outnumbered men by as many as five to one. When they married non-Christians,