

Nurturing Masculinities: Constructing New Narratives of Fatherhood

Jacob Kohlhaas

DESPITE CALLS FOR GREATER ATTENTION to the study of fathers since the late 1970s, until recently research on fatherhood was likely to come through research on motherhood; either via direct report or through research tools originally designed to study motherhood.¹ While there are important and significant similarities across parental experiences, patterns in experiences of paternal caregiving retain distinctive features. This essay is not intended to proceed from an essentialist perspective in regards to gender and parenthood, but instead simply recognizes that practices and patterns of parenthood have varied and continue to meaningfully vary by gender.² In addition, the use of maternal reports to track paternal practices creates inaccuracies in the research.³ For example, parents tend to downplay the impact of their own unhealthy ways of managing conflict on their children while believing the same actions in their spouse are more harmful.⁴ Finally, past research overrepresented white, middle-class fathers (a demographic relatively adaptable in renegotiating fatherly roles),⁵ while too quickly ascribing variances from this norm to racial

¹ Lori Roggman, Hiram E. Fitzgerald, Robert H. Bradley, and Helen Raikes, "Methodological, Measurement, and Design Issues in Studying Fathers: An Interdisciplinary Perspective," in *Handbook of Father Involvement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda and Natasha Cabrera (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 2.

² For responses to gender essentialism, see James V. Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 22–38; Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), chapter 4; Mari Mikkola, "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/feminism-gender/.

³ V. Jeffery Evans, "Foreword," in *Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement*, ed. Randal D. Day and Michael E. Lamb (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), x.

⁴ Marcie C. Geoke-Morey and E. Mark Cummings, "Impact of Father Involvement: A Closer Look at Indirect Effects Models Involving Marriage and Child Adjustment," *Applied Developmental Sciences* 11, no. 4 (2007): 221.

⁵ Evans, "Foreword," x.

differences rather than historical and economic factors.⁶ The contemporary field of fatherhood studies is more careful in accounting for such biases, yet fatherhood remains a complex and moving target. Experiences and understandings of fatherhood vary both across demographics and across time. Moreover, the personal and social beliefs attached to fatherhood are difficult to untangle from research methodology and interpretation. Consequently, fatherhood research is “inescapably value laden.”⁷

The present essay will proceed with its own value-orientation based in the Catholic moral tradition while utilizing social scientific research in fatherhood studies to consider how human relational potentials are encouraged or limited by narratives surrounding fatherhood today. Such narratives will be sketched within both contemporary American society and Catholic magisterial teaching, which are linked by the broader socio-historical backdrop of the modern industrialized West. This context gave rise to the influential differentiation of the father as public-provider and mother as private-nurturer. While both American society and Catholic teaching continue to develop and contain significant diversities in their conceptions and presentations of fatherhood, the narratives they each provide tend to remain similarly limited in important ways regarding diverse expressions of paternal care. This essay contends that contemporary implications of basic Catholic moral commitments suggest an obligation to promote narratives that support more expansive understandings of male capabilities in childcare and domestic life than are presently realized in Catholic teaching.⁸ This appraisal roots itself theologically in the dignity of all human persons and the role of

⁶ Ronald E. Hall and colleagues argue that “a dominant theme in the study of Black family life has been descriptions and analysis of what has been referred to as the ‘disorganized’ and the ‘matricentric’ family structures, implying a reduction of the male role.” This association with race has been so influential that the same family systems have been largely ignored among similarly economically situated white families. Ronald E. Hall, Jonathan N. Livingston, Valerie V. Henderson, Glenn O. Fisher, and Rebekah Hines, “Post-modern Perspective on the Economics of African American Fatherhood,” *Journal of African American Studies* 10, no. 4 (Spring 2007): 113.

⁷ Rob Palkovitz, “Involved Fathering and Child Development: Advancing Our Understanding of Good Fathering,” in *Handbook of Father Involvement*, 132.

⁸ As a Catholic father, educator, and theologian, I have personal and professional interests in how fathers come to understand themselves in changing contexts. Throughout the last decade, my wife and I have traded periods of being the primary caregiver with being the primary income earner and navigated dual full-time employment. The motivation behind this essay comes from this experience of negotiating parental roles and my own limited experience as a primary caregiver. In these times, I became aware of both the remarkably low social expectations placed on paternal caregiving (in sharp contrast to expectations from mothers) as well as the complex social influences surrounding men who undertake traditionally female parental functions.

interpersonal, familial, and communal solidarity as an expression and realization of that dignity. Consequently, safeguarding and encouraging the individual capacity to express love, concern, and care through relationship with others is fundamental to the full realization of personhood and therefore ought to be protected and encouraged as among the most basic of human needs and obligations. In particular, the essay explores this moral theological commitment in light of contemporary experiences of fatherhood. It seeks to identify ways in which male parental experiences are truncated by prevailing narratives and offer pathways to support fuller realization of human capabilities in male caregiving.

FATHERHOOD TODAY

Fathers today, particularly those of the white, heterosexual, middle to upper income ilk (to which the author belongs), are increasingly likely to find themselves occupying social positions related to their parental practices that are simultaneously privileged and restrictive.⁹ Such men are heirs to cultural patterns of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity that tend to carry forth social power on their behalf.¹⁰ Yet, those whose experiences deviate from the norm can find themselves trapped within its restrictions.¹¹ The challenges faced by the central occupants of hegemonic masculinity are not the pressing issues of justice faced by those who do not fit within its norms and influence (i.e., those marginalized by race, class, income, sexuality, etc., and the intersectional identities among these). Nonetheless, felt disruptions in masculine norms are worthy of attention as they have prompted naïve and narrow-minded reactions such as those popularized within the ever-changing men's rights movement. Such views cling to positions

⁹ "Research indicates that men with higher levels of educational attainment contribute a substantial amount more to childcare than men with lower educational attainment (Sullivan, 2010) and may be best placed to take action towards achievement of 'new' models of fathering (Dermott, 2008), which suggests they may be more likely to experience the demands of intensive parenting" (Fiona Shirani, Karen Henwood, and Carrie Coltart, "Meeting the Challenges of Intensive Parenting Culture: Gender, Risk Management, and the Moral Parent," *Sociology* 46, no. 1 [February 2012]: 28).

¹⁰ Hegemonic masculinity has been an influential concept in social analysis of gender for several decades. More recently, the limitations of the concept itself and the pluralities of gender hegemonies have been emphasized. Although the concept still remains useful and is commonly invoked, emphasis on singular and uniform conceptions of hegemonic masculinity have declined as research has shifted towards the particularities of diverse contexts. See R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 829–859.

¹¹ Hegemonic masculinity is itself propped up by hegemonic femininity which likewise reinforces norms and restrictions for acceptable expression of womanhood. See Mimi Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (February 2007): 85–102.

of privilege over and against the equitable inclusion of others and gain traction through the unfounded presumption that threats to “traditional” male scripts constitute threats to men themselves.¹² Present renegotiations of masculine norms create an opportunity for shaping narratives about fathering that are more robust and inclusive. Advocating for this expansion does not require assent to either male normativity or privilege. Rather, it requires concern for diverse expressions of human dignity that allow for rich and rewarding participation in familial and social life.¹³

At present, a small but growing fraction of fathers are primary caregivers for their children, while an increasing share of spouses are negotiating dual full-time employment and confronting an ideal of equitable co-parenting that lags behind in actual practice. American parents generally espouse egalitarian parental ideals but tend to be frustrated with the difficulty of achieving these in reality. Although nearly three quarters of US women are employed outside the home, they retain the majority of domestic duties and frequently report unmet expectations of paternal involvement in childcare.¹⁴ Married women

¹² The men’s right movement, a subset of the larger men’s movement, is a broad, primarily Western, phenomenon that encompasses many concerns but is generally united by a perception of unequal treatment of men in contemporary societies and criticism or outright rejection of feminist social gains. Groups within the movement display varying levels of misogynistic and violent thought. Recently some groups have shifted to presenting men’s health as their primary concern, using this focus to advance grievances regarding the social determinants of men’s wellbeing while repurposing certain feminist lines of argumentation. See Michael Salter, “Men’s Rights or Men’s Needs? Anti-Feminism in Australian Men’s Health Promotion,” *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 28, no. 1 (2016): 66–90. Representative websites include A Voice for Men (www.avoicformen.com), Return of the Kings (www.returnofthekings.com), and the National Center for Men (www.nationalcenterformen.org). Powered largely through the internet, these organizations have recently found convergence with the Alt-Right and other extremist political groups. The predominant influence of white, male, and often Christian identifications further suggests the gravity of the need for rethinking social and religious narratives of masculinity. See “Male Supremacy,” The Southern Poverty Law Center, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy.

¹³ As a rule, those who occupy the positions of greatest privilege have the least experience contending against the systems that provide that privilege. Marginalized experiences provide key resources for understanding how prevailing social scripts can be rejected, revised, and expanded. For this reason, while neither same-sex nor single parenthood meet the approval of Catholic moral teaching (depending on the originating circumstances of the latter), the experiences of male parents in such contexts provide valuable perspective on how parental capacities are negotiated in the absence of direct female mothering.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Scott Turner, *Families in America* (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2002), 49. Female income tends to increase women’s marital power and equitable division of household labor. However, when women out-earn their husbands the trend in shared labor drops significantly. This suggests that out-earned men devote increased attention to work outside the home. See Rebecca Glauber, “Race and Gender in

are more than ten times as likely to be unemployed outside the home in order to provide care for children than are their male spouses, among whom less than 2% are similarly situated.¹⁵ However, the number of single-parent households headed by fathers has increased from 1% to 8% in the last two generations.¹⁶ Moreover, about half of all US two-parent families are now headed by parents who are both employed full time. Despite similar employment among spouses, the vast majority of these families are split between those with wives providing most of the childcare and domestic labor and those with more equally shared arrangements between partners.¹⁷ Fathers are also significantly more likely to use the plural “we” when describing their parental responsibilities, suggesting a shared parental identity, while mothers favor the singular, suggesting a self-understanding as primary parent.¹⁸ In relationships where mothers are relatively more breadwinning and fathers more caregiving, women also become more likely to represent themselves as co-parents.¹⁹

Sociologist Andrea Doucet argues that American culture is actually far less welcoming of egalitarian parenthood than opinion polls suggest. Men are much more inhibited and viewed with greater suspicion in communal settings including children or when expressing interest in the children of others.²⁰ Moreover, widespread belief in “men’s incompetence in caregiving” is communicated in a variety of

Families and at Work: The Fatherhood Wage Premium,” *Gender and Society* 22, no. 1 (February 2008): 11.

¹⁵ The number of stay-at-home fathers more than doubled between 1990 and 2010, but declined again as the unemployment rate fell. See Gretchen Livingston, “Stay-at-Home Moms and Dads Account for One-in-Five US Parents,” September 24, 2018, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/24/stay-at-home-moms-and-dads-account-for-about-one-in-five-u-s-parents/.

¹⁶ Gretchen Livingston, “The Rise of Single Fathers,” *Pew Research Center*, July 2, 2013, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/07/02/the-rise-of-single-fathers/. This number includes some households with unmarried adult partners.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, “Raising Kids and Running a Household: How Working Parents Share the Load,” November 4, 2015, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/11/04/raising-kids-and-running-a-household-how-working-parents-share-the-load/.

¹⁸ “The relative representation of one’s parental self and one’s partner in arranging and planning narratives may denote the extent to which the parental self, at a superordinate level, is a ‘self-as-sole-executive-parent’ as compared to a ‘self-as-coexecutive-parent’” (Joseph H. Pleck and Jeffrey L. Stueve, “A Narrative Approach to Paternal Identity: The Importance of Parental Identity ‘Conjointness,’” in *Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement*, 84).

¹⁹ Pleck and Stueve, “A Narrative Approach to Paternal Identity,” 103.

²⁰ Some evidence suggests that mothers tend to set the course for fathers’ involvement. See Brent A. McBride, Sarah J. Schoppe, Moon-Ho Ho, and Thomas R. Rane, “Multiple Determinants of Father Involvement: An Exploratory Analysis Using the PSID-CDS Data Set,” in *Conceptualizing and Measuring Father Involvement*, 323.

social contexts.²¹ Glenda Wall and Stephanie Arnold similarly contend that more involved fathering is “undermined by images and texts that position fathers as part-time, secondary, less competent parents with fewer parenting responsibilities and greater breadwinning responsibilities than mothers.”²² Many of these social biases flow from models of parenthood that are both inherited from and projected onto past generations. For example, the traditional “Breadwinner” (dependent on industrialization and therefore traditional only in a historically shallow sense) continues to exert significant influence.

The “Breadwinner” model was disrupted repeatedly throughout the twentieth century but ultimately began being dismantled by women’s increasing participation in the workforce.²³ Second-wave feminism may have initially led to a reactive “hardening” of masculine concepts (as evidenced by late-twentieth century cinematic artifacts such as *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, and *Robocop*), but notions of masculinity were relatively quickly renegotiated with a new vision of fatherhood that reworked traditional gender binaries.²⁴ This “New Man” was tough but sensitive and skilled in both his profession and domestic life.²⁵ Contemporary fathers influenced by the “New Man” ideal still tend to emphasize the financial support they provide their families but also value their role in childcare and emotional investment in their children’s lives.²⁶ Moreover, such fathers tend to limit investment in work and adult friendships for the sake of relationships with their children. The developmental benefits of this tradeoff for children appear significant. Paternal involvement plays an important role in children’s “cognitive competence, school performance, empathy, self-esteem, self-control, well-being, life skills, and social competence.”²⁷

²¹ Andrea Doucet, “‘It’s Just Not Good for a Man to be Interested in Other People’s Children’: Fathers, Public Displays of Care, and ‘Relevant Others,’” in *Displaying Families: A New Concept for the Sociology of Family Life*, ed. Esther Dermott and Julie Seymour (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 84, 91.

²² Glenda Wall and Stephanie Arnold, “How Involved Is Involved Fathering? An Exploration of the Contemporary Culture of Fatherhood,” *Gender and Society* 21, no. 4 (August 2007): 511.

²³ Non-white women have a longer history of substantial rates of employment and, in contrast to white women’s trends, employment among African American women dropped from the 1960s to 1990s. While necessity remains a significant factor, today education is a strong predictor of female employment. See Paula England, Carmen Garcia Beaulieu, and Mary Ross, “Women’s Employment among Blacks, Whites, and Three Groups of Latinas: Do More Privileged Women Have Higher Employment?” *Gender and Society* 18, no. 4 (August 2004): 494–495.

²⁴ Evans, “Foreword,” x.

²⁵ Angela Smith, “Bulging Biceps and Tender Kisses: The Sexualisation of Fatherhood,” *Social Semiotics* 28, no. 3 (2018): 318.

²⁶ Rachel M. Schmitz, “Constructing Men as Fathers: A Content Analysis of Formulations of Fatherhood in Parenting Magazines,” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 4.

²⁷ Rob Palkovitz, “Involved Fathering and Child Development,” 131.

Still, adjustment to this vision of fatherhood can be difficult as “many men lack knowledge of child development, developmentally appropriate parenting skills, and sensitivity to children’s needs.”²⁸

At the same time, socially dominant expectations of parenthood itself have become more challenging. Particularly among the upper classes, “intensive parenting” (more widely known as “helicopter” or “bulldozer” parenting) gained influence.²⁹ This model of parenting tends to emphasize “nurture over nature” and associates parenthood with assuring children’s developmental path to success, particularly financial success.³⁰ The raised stakes of intensive parenting tend to undermine confidence in parents’ own capacities and thereby encourage greater reliance on professional support.³¹ Thus, the “New Man” fathers are seeking greater parental involvement at a time when parenthood itself is increasingly held to higher expectations and parents are simultaneously undermined as incapable of meeting them. These shifting expectations may have been a factor in the slow growth of male caregiving; however, their differentiated impacts along gendered lines limit any strong claim in this direction.³²

Perhaps more tellingly, men typically have limited awareness of the actual challenges involved in realizing their ideals of engaged fathering. Many men who expect strong co-parenting relations with their spouse are shocked by the barriers paid employment places on this expectation. These men tend to recast their ideals by turning to less direct parental investment, such as responsibility for their family’s long-term financial security. Paradoxically, their drive for greater involvement can reinforce the centrality of financial provision in fatherhood. Not surprisingly, while these men still understand their efforts as expressing involved parenthood, such efforts go largely unrecognized by their spouse unless men also participate in direct care giving and demonstrate awareness of their parental role through their

²⁸ Many new mothers likewise lack these skills despite cultural presumptions of innate female capabilities in caregiving (Turner, *Families in America*, 49).

²⁹ Annette Lareau has described prominent models of childrearing that differ by social class, namely, “concerted cultivation” and “accomplishment of natural growth.” See Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 2–3.

³⁰ Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart, “Meeting the Challenges of Intensive Parenting Culture,” 29.

³¹ Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart, “Meeting the Challenges of Intensive Parenting Culture,” 26.

³² Mothers appear to have borne the brunt of the anxieties associated with intensive parenting, whereas standards for fathers tend to revolve around meeting the minimal expectations of this model (e.g., awareness of food allergies at a child’s birthday party). Moreover, men tend to acquiesce more readily to the limits of their parental abilities and appeal to “doing my best” over external measurements of parental performance (Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart, “Meeting the Challenges of Intensive Parenting Culture,” 30, 35).

daily lives.³³ As such, it seems the “New Man” model is difficult to translate in practice and susceptible to reverting to a subjectively redefined “Breadwinner” model when faced with barriers.

Despite the rise of more involved ideals, fatherhood remains primarily positioned as a supporting parental role to motherhood.³⁴ Moreover, not all forms of fatherly involvement are valued equally. While the “New Man” is idealized as both income earner and emotionally invested caregiver, the “Househusband” is stigmatized as ineffectual and incapable of either successful employment or fully caring for his children. Conversely, men who are primary income earners tend to be “framed as absent from their children’s lives.”³⁵ As such, well-intended fathers are positioned between failing in their parental ideals or failing in their manhood.

Bradford Wilcox presents yet another model of fatherhood that seems to more readily overcome these challenges. Wilcox argues that contemporary conservative Protestant discourse, replete with ideals of male authority in a servant leader model, has made the greatest strides in actualizing increased paternal investment while maintaining clear lines of gender distinction.³⁶ This “Soft Patriarchs” model of fatherhood has offered men “a ‘patriarchal bargain’ that accords men symbolic authority in the home in return for their exercise of greater responsibility for the well-being of their families.”³⁷ Despite the clear gains in certain areas relative to other cultural trends, this conservative Christian model of fatherhood still fails to fully realize reflexive adaptability or fully equal co-parenting through negotiated parental roles. For instance, fathers in the “Soft Patriarchs” model are relatively more involved with their children, and happier for it, but they also report some of the lowest levels of sharing in domestic chores.³⁸ In fact, Wilcox finds, “men who hold profamily attitudes tend to be gender traditionalists” and as such are more likely to live in households where labor is more clearly divided by gender.³⁹ Expressions of appreciation for women’s labor also vary by

³³ Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart, “Meeting the Challenges of Intensive Parenting Culture,” 35.

³⁴ Schmitz, “Constructing Men as Fathers,” 7.

³⁵ Schmitz, “Constructing Men as Fathers,” 12.

³⁶ John Wall, “Fatherhood, Childism, and the Creation of Society,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 1 (March 2007): 53.

³⁷ W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9.

³⁸ Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs*, 149. Though not statistically significant, Wilcox found religious involvement to have reverse impacts on household labor for conservative and mainline Protestant men. Nominally affiliated conservative men do slightly less household labor than their active coreligionists, while active mainline Protestant men do slightly more than active conservative Protestants, but less than nominally associated mainline Protestants.

³⁹ Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs*, 148.

theological commitments and religious involvement. Active mainline and conservative Protestant men tend to show the greatest appreciation for their wives' efforts. Meanwhile, nominally affiliated conservative and mainline Protestant men, respectively the religious affiliations that share domestic labor least and most, show the least appreciation for their wives' labor.⁴⁰

The responses in Wilcox's study do, however, provide compelling grounds for the role of religious messaging in shaping parental practices.⁴¹ The "Soft Patriarchs" model is especially pronounced among conservative Christians who frequently attend church and identify religion as central to their lives.⁴² Conversely, conservative Christian fathers who rarely attend church score the lowest in paternal investment among all groups studied. Consequently, even as the "Soft Patriarchs" model raises concern regarding the extent of its adaptability and equitability, it also demonstrates the influence religious narratives about fatherhood can have on men who are exposed to them.

NARRATIVES AND INDIVIDUAL FUNCTIONING

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio writes: "Consciousness begins when brains acquire the power ... of telling a story."⁴³ From a functionalist psychological perspective, social and self-narratives help establish self-understanding and interpret individual behavior.⁴⁴ For example, men's perception of their role as fathers appears to be a powerful predictor of their involvement with children.⁴⁵ Contemporary fathers who appropriate parental functions associated with motherhood may encounter psychological conflicts if resources do not exist for balancing their parental and gendered identities.⁴⁶ Highly socially scripted identities (e.g., the "Breadwinner") require integrating fewer conflictual dimensions of the self-concept but can also be devastated by the loss of one important dimension (e.g., unemployment). Conversely, high differentiation creates potential for adaptable identities but requires greater effort to integrate these

⁴⁰ Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs*, 152.

⁴¹ Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs*, 165–176.

⁴² Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study," www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/.

⁴³ Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, Amia Lieblich, "Introduction," in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, ed. Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 3.

⁴⁴ Martin Albrow, *Sociology: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 110–11. See Peter T. F. Raggatt, "Unity Versus Multiplicity," in *Identity and Story: Creating Self Narrative*, 16.

⁴⁵ McBride, Schoppe, Ho, and Rane, "Multiple Determinants of Father Involvement," 334.

⁴⁶ Schmitz, "Constructing Men as Fathers," 19.

various dimensions.⁴⁷ Integration may be less about constructing a single seamless narrative than an individual's ability to harmonize the interactions of multiple synchronic narratives as circumstances require. This personal positioning takes place alongside social positioning as societal expectations exert influence on the individual's interpretations of self.⁴⁸ Low integration carries the risk of experiencing cognitive dissonance caused by conflictual perceptions.⁴⁹ Individuals are highly motivated to avoid the discomfort of dissonance, which may be especially pronounced when the concept of self is involved, and will therefore adjust perceptions and behaviors in order to avoid it.⁵⁰

Sociologist Andrea Doucet's extensive research on primary caregiver fathers reveals that these men tend to emphasize their own masculinity and do so according to traditional conceptions of gender.⁵¹ This pattern suggests attempts to overcome dissonance through asserting key aspects of identity (i.e., masculinity) to trump dissonant factors as well as emphasizing more global narratives (i.e., our family works) to overcome inconsistencies in the actual details of their lives.⁵² The apparent inability of many men who are primary caregivers to construct new self-affirming narratives without resorting to social stereotypes or factors beyond their control is problematic and may help explain why men so easily resort to subjectively redefined traditional models when challenged. Fulfilling traditional models of

⁴⁷ Jennifer D. Campbell, Sunaina Assanand, and Adam Di Paula, "Structural Features of the Self-Concept and Adjustment," in *Psychological Perspectives on the Self and Identity*, ed. Abraham Tesser, Richard B. Felson, Jerry M. Suls (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 68.

⁴⁸ Raggatt, "Unity versus Multiplicity," 16.

⁴⁹ Eddie Harmon-Jones, "An Update on Cognitive Dissonance Theory, with a Focus on the Self," in *Psychological Perspectives on the Self and Identity*, 120.

⁵⁰ Individuals experiencing cognitive dissonance may respond by "adding consonant cognitions, subtracting dissonant cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, increasing the importance of consonant cognitions, or by using some combination of these routes" (Harmon-Jones, "An Update on Cognitive Dissonance Theory," 120).

⁵¹ Doucet, "It's Just Not Good for a Man to be Interested in Other People's Children," 88.

⁵² "Self-Consistency" theory posits that dissonance involving one's concept of self must be addressed by disproving the threatening cognition or reevaluating the self in order to restore a reliable self-concept. "Self-Affirmation" theory posits that individuals are motivated to maintain the existing integrity of their concepts of self and therefore will respond to dissonance by affirming the "global integrity of the self." This may be done by reaffirming significant but unrelated components of a self-concept. Despite fulfilling "mothering" functions, the men appear determined "to distinguish themselves *as men*, as heterosexual males, and as fathers, *not* as mothers ... they must actively work to dispel the idea that they might be gay, un-masculine, or not men." A similar phenomenon has also been documented among men who work in traditionally female occupations (Doucet, "It's Just Not Good for a Man to be Interested in Other People's Children," 84, 88, 123).

fatherhood offers similar possibilities for adjustment with far less complexity in developing self-identity and conflict in social positioning. Still such reversions do not meet the equitable parental standards to which many couples aspire and may not be possible for men within certain familial circumstances.

Restricted conceptions of maleness may also lead to reduced adaptability and greater stress in encountering changing circumstances and appear to have profound influences on male children.⁵³ John Cicero argues that children who are raised with rigid concepts of masculinity and femininity are more likely to hold self-constructs that deny specific aspects of their personalities. This is evidenced by men who deny their own needs for “emotional warmth, support, and nurturance on self-report measures” but measure equally with women on “projective measures—where they don’t realize what they are endorsing.”⁵⁴ Many men may lack the individual backgrounds and supportive social narratives to adapt readily to involved caregiving, yet their own failure to do so increases the likelihood that their sons will face the same challenges.

To understand the lack of narrative resources for contemporary shifts in paternal possibilities, brief sketches of developments in American media portrayals of fatherhood and the presentation of fatherhood in magisterial documents follow below. These are at least potentially important sources of narrative formation for Catholic fathers today, although they differ in substantial ways. On the one hand, both American culture and magisterial teaching on the family are largely indebted to the effects of industrialization in shaping homes and conceptions of parental roles. On the other hand, American media is much more diverse and inconsistent in its various portrayals of fatherhood than is magisterial teaching, which attempts a consistent and internally referential vision of the family within which its vision of fatherhood is situated. Moreover, media presentations are delivered directly to consumers whereas knowledge of Catholic magisterial teaching is generally filtered through a process of promulgation to the public through sermons, books, radio, and other media. Along the way, these teachings are made more accessible but also subject to the concerns and contexts of their interpreters. As such, the following sections explore two accessible, but not entirely commensurable, resources for narrative production. These media and magisterial sources are themselves situated within much larger webs of resources and interactions which would require a significantly longer project to

⁵³ David James, “The Integration of Masculine Spirituality,” in *Perspectives on Marriage: A Reader*, ed. Kieran Scott and Michael Warren (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 290.

⁵⁴ John J. Cicero, “Toward Christian Sexual Maturity,” in *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 38.

begin to untangle.

Media Portrayals of Fatherhood

Social narratives about fatherhood are reaffirmed through various social artifacts and practices, including popular media. Recent generations of television audiences have witnessed diverse portrayals of fatherhood, from the wisdom of fathers like Mike Brady, Andy Taylor, and Ward Cleaver to the hapless antics of Al Bundy, Homer Simpson, and Tim “The Toolman” Taylor. Present variations range from same-sex dads like Mitchel Pritchett and Cameron Tucker, to firmly committed fathers dealing with complex relationships such as Adam Braverman and Randall Pearson, to television fathers returning as grandfathers in rebooted series, as have Dan Conner and Danny Tanner.⁵⁵ Despite these diversities, these men tend to be represented as integral to their children’s lives. This is obvious for the firm role models like Danny Tanner, but even a bumbling man-child like Homer Simpson or Tim Taylor always seems to come through in the end. Furthermore, their masculinity is rarely lost even when the characters undertake traditionally feminine roles or otherwise challenge masculine norms. For example, the flamboyantly extroverted, gay adoptive-father Cameron Tucker is revealed to be a former college football lineman and subsequently excels as a football coach.

Beyond television, parenting magazines put many of the contradictions around gender and parenthood on full display. Their titles typically use the gender-neutral “parent” or “parenting” with a relatively small subset appealing to “mother” or “father” directly. Nonetheless, the fact of greater female involvement in caregiving continues to drive content and reinforces the widely held association of mothering with full-time, authentic parenthood.⁵⁶ Men are frequently presented through both direct and indirect messaging as secondary parents rather than competent co-parents.⁵⁷ When fatherhood is presented directly, masculine identity requires negotiation in relation to parenthood not required of female identity. In this process, men’s masculine traits typically overshadow their role

⁵⁵ The rise of streaming services has disrupted clear lines of generational development in portrayals of fatherhood. For example, in 2020 Netflix offered both *Full House* and *Fuller House*, making it possible to watch Danny Tanner as a father and as a grandfather simultaneously.

⁵⁶ Jane Sunderland, “‘Parenting’ or ‘Mothering’: The Case of Modern Childcare Magazines,” *Discourse & Society* 17, no. 4 (July 2006): 509. A simple perusal of magazine covers gives a quick impression of the same finding. The article also finds that same-sex parents are virtually invisible in these magazines.

⁵⁷ Emily Stevens, “Understanding Discursive Barriers to Involved Fatherhood: The Case of Australian Stay-at-Home Fathers,” *Journal of Family Studies* 21, no. 1 (2015): 24.

as parents.⁵⁸

In entertainment magazines and websites, successful male celebrities are among the few men who are commonly presented as displaying the full array of desirable masculine and fatherly qualities. Chris Hemsworth, the ultra-masculine star of the *Thor* movies and father of three, is perhaps the clearest example of this sexy “honed and toned” ideal dad. Social media pages across the internet are dedicated to cataloging images of sexy dads that contrast their tender care for children with their muscular physiques.⁵⁹ Such image collections can center so much attention on the male body that their children are visually downplayed or obscured from view.⁶⁰ Parents around the world lift and carry their children on a daily basis but for these sexualized fathers the disproportionate excess of their bulging biceps to the work of caregiving becomes the center of attention. Because these select few fathers display both superior levels of physical fitness and significant commodities of both disposable income and time to spend with their families, they represent an idealization that lies well beyond most men’s reach.

The inability of fathers to be recognized fully for their caregiving potential contrasts markedly with the linkage of motherhood to authentic parenthood itself. Gendered boundaries tend to be policed around concepts of parenthood that relegate men to part-time status while reinforcing mothering as the “gold standard of parenting.”⁶¹ Mothering embodies a unity of gender and purpose.⁶² Because parenting is not truly a gender-neutral concept, it does not readily admit to greater masculine content. A full incorporation of male caregiving into the concept of parenting requires shifting its meaning beyond this gendered valence. Consequently, terms such as “co-parenting” or “shared-parenting” are more apt for expressing equitable parental roles.

The association of mothering with primary parenting is expressed in a number of ways including, somewhat paradoxically, the “annihilation of the mother” motif in popular fiction. A telling summary of this motif in children’s films is presented in the 2018 animated film, “Wreck it Ralph 2: Ralph Breaks the Internet.” In an attempt to hide, the protagonist, Princess Vanellope Von Schweetz, finds herself pressed to explain her credentials among thirteen other Disney princesses. As these storied characters interrogate her with plotlines from their own movies, Princess Jasmine asks, “Do you have Daddy issues?” The exasperated misfit responds, “I don’t even have a

⁵⁸ Schmitz, “Constructing Men as Fathers,” 11.

⁵⁹ Smith, “Bulging Biceps and Tender Kisses,” 323.

⁶⁰ Smith, “Bulging Biceps and Tender Kisses,” 322.

⁶¹ Schmitz, “Constructing Men as Fathers,” 14.

⁶² Sunderland, “‘Parenting’ or ‘Mothering,’” 524.

mom!” to which eight princesses chime in unison, “Neither do we!”⁶³ The annihilated mother trope is effective precisely because it removes the central parental figure and thereby opens uncontested dramatic space for narrating children’s personal development or exploring male parental experiences.⁶⁴

Although media portrayals of fatherhood are diverse and have developed throughout recent decades, the male parental performances constructed through popular media do not generally encourage individual fathers in developing their full caregiving potentials and therefore remain morally problematic. Fathers, though different, remain largely peripheral to the authentic parenting realized in motherhood. Even in reporting the daily tasks of parenthood, media portrayals tend to emphasize physical actions in fatherhood rather than emotional support and nurturing care.⁶⁵ This reinforces the inconsistent social narratives that both encourage involved fathering while also emasculating overly involved fathering and questioning men’s capabilities and fitness for caregiving and domestic work more generally. Fathers who are single, same-sex partnered, or primary caregivers obviously must respond to the full range of their children’s needs; nonetheless, awareness of the masculine potential to provide this care eludes many social narratives of male parenting.

Fatherhood in Modern Catholic Teaching

Given the conflicting social messages outlined above, it would seem that religious discourse is well positioned to offer a valuable resource in helping contemporary fathers address challenges of identity formation in relation to their evolving roles. The Catholic tradition is committed to the “human person fully alive,”⁶⁶ while Catholic moral thought takes authentic human development as its aim.⁶⁷ Such aspirations would seem to support a vision of human adaptability and relational fullness that might transcend narrow cultural concerns for properly gendered behavior. Unlike the “Soft Patriarchs” model of fatherhood drawn from conservative Protestantism, Catholicism is theoretically less bound to “biblical models of manhood” in the sense of relying explicitly on scripture as the singular normative source of moral and anthropological

⁶³ *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, directed by Rich Moore and Phil Johnston (Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2018).

⁶⁴ Berit Åström, “The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: *Single Father* and the Death of the Mother,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 594.

⁶⁵ Stevens, “Understanding Discursive Barriers to Involved Fatherhood,” 28.

⁶⁶ This is a common paraphrase of the words of St. Irenaeus. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book VI, Chapter XX, Section 7, available online at www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book4.html. Some translations place the quote at Book 4, Chapter 34, section 7.

⁶⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 3.1.1, www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1.htm.

understanding. It is, of course, doubtful that any tradition can rely singularly on scripture as a sole normative guide without implicitly importing numerous additional resources as interpretive guides. Catholicism's explicit valuation of tradition as a normative guide to the interpretation of scripture as well as its adoption of critical exegetical methods alleviates that need for such single-minded convictions. While Catholics may still find value in "biblical manhood," Catholic interpretative norms open such readings to explicit recognition of the particularities of our own context as interpreters as well as the broader history of diverse Christian practices of parenthood that have characterized the tradition. Moreover, the natural law tradition provides a theologically defensible position from which observations of the created order can be integrated into an understanding of the creative work of God. In this case, observations of a larger range of masculine parental capabilities than those socially prized in the industrialized West can be embraced as new realizations of the breadth of human potential rather than deviations from a tightly scripted revealed order. Despite these possibilities, existing Catholic narratives of fatherhood within magisterial teaching are strongly implicated in the same Western cultural milieu which has given rise to conflicting and narrow social messages about fatherhood.

From Leo XIII in the late nineteenth century to Pius XII in the mid-twentieth, papal documents describe the family as headed by spouses defined by sexually differentiated parental roles. Parenting is described, at least partially, as an act of caretaking,⁶⁸ supervision,⁶⁹ and educating,⁷⁰ though the details of these functions are generally undeveloped. Pius XII offered high praise for the task of parenting, calling parenthood a "ministry of Christ" and speaking of parents as "priests" of their households.⁷¹ He showed particular concern for instructing fathers and asserted that the entire health and wellbeing of the family, not only physically, but intellectually and spiritually, rested upon the virtue and hard work of the father.⁷² He likened fatherhood to God's original act of creation, adding that fatherhood

⁶⁸ Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri*, no. 32, www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121929_divini-illius-magistri_en.html.

⁶⁹ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, no. 15, www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121930_casti-connubii_en.html.

⁷⁰ Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri*, no. 34.

⁷¹ "You are, always under the guidance of the priest, the first and closest educators and teachers of the children of God entrusted and given to you You are as it were the spiritual precursors, priests yourselves of the cradle, infancy and childhood, for you must point out to the children the way to heaven" (Pius XII, "Allocution to Newlyweds," in *Matrimony*, trans. Michael J. Byrnes [Boston: Saint Paul, 1963], 318).

⁷² Pius XII, "Allocution to Fathers of Families," in *Matrimony*, 398.

communicates “the superior life of intelligence and love.”⁷³ Pius XII suggested that fathers not only fulfill the “priestly” role of parenting, but that they also have an “episcopal” role within the home and, as such, he defended male headship in the familial hierarchy.⁷⁴

Despite this gendered demarcation of the domestic order being clearly articulated in magisterial teaching, by the mid-twentieth century its rigidity began to soften. In 1961, John XXIII’s encyclical *Mater et Magistra* assumed an all-male workforce and did not challenge the hierarchical ordering of the family posited by earlier pontiffs.⁷⁵ Just two years later, after the opening of Vatican II, John XXIII optimistically reconsidered changes in women’s social roles and judged these developments to have stemmed from women’s recognition of their own human dignity.⁷⁶ This was a remarkable shift as earlier pontiffs had clearly defended women’s place in the home as a matter of protecting female dignity.⁷⁷ While the justification remained based in the dignity of women, the interpretation of the implications of women’s dignity took a notable turn. *Pacem in Terris* began a transition from hierarchical conceptions of female subservience to ideals of both public and private equity.⁷⁸ With Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* affirmed women’s right to take a more active role in cultural life and emphasized equality between spouses.⁷⁹

At the same time, however, there was little reflection on how these changing perceptions of women might also influence the role of men within the domestic sphere. *Gaudium et Spes* encourages fathers to be active in their children’s lives, but motherhood remains essential for the care of young children.⁸⁰ The newfound recognition of the implications of female dignity did not lead to a similarly concerted

⁷³ Pius XII, “Allocution to Newlyweds,” 325.

⁷⁴ Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*, no. 89, www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20101939_summi-pontificatus_en.html.

⁷⁵ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, nos. 20, 22, 71 et al., www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html.

⁷⁶ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, no. 41, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html.

⁷⁷ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, no. 42, www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html. See Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, no. 75.

⁷⁸ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, no. 12. Even here the transition was not seamless. For example, while women’s participation in public life is encouraged, *Gravissimum Educationis* allowed the universal right to education to be conditioned by gender (*Gravissimum Educationis*, no. 1, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html).

⁷⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 48–52 www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. See Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, no. 23. *Gaudium et Spes* describes marriage as “covenant founded in mutual love.”

⁸⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 52.

effort of rethinking male norms. Instead, magisterial teaching since the mid-century has devoted significant energy towards explaining women's social equality while protecting the private-domestic world of nurture and childrearing as essentially female. Following the council, Paul VI warned against a "false equality" that would deny women's proper roles as "the heart of the family."⁸¹ John Paul II likewise identified the centrality of motherhood in domestic life, clearly differentiated parental gender roles,⁸² and once again identified men as the "head" of the household.⁸³ John Paul II described parents generally as "heralds of the Gospel"⁸⁴ who exercise a "true and proper 'ministry.'"⁸⁵ Yet, in the daily activities of parenthood, he centralized women's role in nurturing children, and gave little indication that fathers might also fulfill such tasks.⁸⁶ John Paul II did emphasize the importance of the father's presence within the home and assistance with caregiving, but fatherhood remained hemmed around the centrality of motherhood.

John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignitatem* presented a conception of womanhood that was tightly bound to motherhood and patterned on the person of Mary.⁸⁷ The following year, his apostolic exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* reflected on the life of Joseph, but came nowhere close to the depth of reflection on identity and parenthood presented in the earlier letter. The lack of parity between *Mulieris Dignitatem* and *Redemptoris Custos* is notable. In the former, Mary serves much more directly and explicitly as a model for women, while in the latter, Joseph is generally presented as a paradigm of human virtue while no thick anthropological account of masculinity is attempted. Instead, the description of Joseph's parenthood replicates existing social ideals about fatherhood common throughout the industrialized West, such as support, protection, oversight, and education.⁸⁸ Even the silence of Joseph in the Gospels is taken as evidence of his strong and silent,

⁸¹ Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, no. 13, www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens_en.html.

⁸² See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Notes on Moral Theology: 1989; Feminist Ethics," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 58.

⁸³ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, no. 19, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html.

⁸⁴ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 39, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html.

⁸⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 21.

⁸⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 66.

⁸⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 3ff, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

⁸⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos*, no. 8, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_15081989_redemptoris-custos.html.

contemplative, and faith-filled way of life. These masculine cultural norms are simply layered into the silence of scripture in order to produce a compelling image of a saint whose actual life and personality remain opaque. Joseph becomes a paradigm for manhood as articulated by the paternal virtues of the modern West, while the lack of scriptural evidence itself is utilized to justify the image being constructed.

Most recently, Pope Francis's 2015 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* encourages reciprocity between spouses and urges men to assume greater responsibilities within the home.⁸⁹ Despite acknowledging some malleability in the categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine,' the document tends toward the same gender dichotomies that typify John Paul II's writing. For example, while both mothers and fathers are called upon to be involved in the life of the family, only women's role in motherhood is presented as essential to society.⁹⁰ Men are to love their wives and are encouraged to take on "some aspects" of childrearing if required for the good of the family.⁹¹ Thus, even as the document pushes towards greater equity and attempts to disrupt rigid gendered categories, it reaffirms the broadly influential assumption that women are essential to parenthood while men play a supporting role.

Throughout recent magisterial teachings, women and motherhood dominate considerations of social change in relation to gender and the family while fathers receive disproportionately little attention characterized by vague references to greater involvement and support of mothers. There are few indications that men may be responsible for, or even capable of, performing a significant set of domestic tasks, particularly those related to the nurture of young children and direct caregiving.

As acknowledged above, the reality of certain patterns of presenting fatherhood within magisterial thought does not necessarily bear directly on the narrative formation of all lay faithful. At a popular level, Catholic organizations commonly support more involved fathering for Catholic men willing to seek out these resources. Numerous websites are dedicated to Catholic parenting and fatherhood in particular, and many Catholic fathers find support through local and national groups and retreats.⁹² These instantiations of Catholic belief are shaped by magisterial thought in significant

⁸⁹ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 55, 286, w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

⁹⁰ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 173.

⁹¹ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 286.

⁹² *That Man is You* is one such program offered through parishes. Information is available at the *Paradisus Dei* website, www.paradisusdei.org/that-man-is-you/#program-content.

ways, even if indirectly.

John Paul II's thought, including his "theology of the body," has been acutely influential in shaping many such resources. The late pope's vaunted appreciation for gendered difference has provided the foundation for many popular Catholic efforts seeking to recover authentic expressions of masculinity.⁹³ In some ways this movement mirrors aspects of conservative Protestant thought and aspects of the men's movement; however, its sources and representatives are diffuse as it has not yet given rise to a significant online community. Instead, the movement relies on speakers, authors, and the parishes and dioceses that promote similar causes.⁹⁴ The movement itself is largely held together by a perceived need for spiritual revival in the social and religious understanding of masculinity. Additionally, John Paul II's tendencies toward culture war thinking help to link the Catholic movement to broader Christian and social movements similarly invested in high contrast socio-religious identities appealing to gender role distinctions, traditional models of manhood, and hostility towards the progress of the larger culture.⁹⁵

The combination of gender essentialism and a confrontational stance toward secular culture informs a religious construction of fatherhood rooted in socially conservative ideals that replicates the "Soft Patriarchs" model identified among conservative Protestants.⁹⁶ This construction of masculinity appeals to a particular segment of American Catholics and is amply supported by magisterial portrayals of fatherhood, which likewise rely on socially conservative norms. Unfortunately, such religious messaging generally works against a concerted commitment to exploring the full diversity of male parental capabilities and experiences by fitting fatherhood into a particular social framework positioned in contrast to motherhood.

⁹³ For a critical assessment of John Paul II's gendered anthropology and its motivations, see Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 84–91.

⁹⁴ Some representative websites include The Catholic Gentleman's Guide, www.catholicgentlemansguide.com/, The Catholic Gentleman, catholicgentleman.net/, and The New Emangelization, www.newemangelization.com/.

⁹⁵ John Paul II's own high contrast orientation towards Western culture is evident in his multiple critiques of consumerism and materialism, but was perhaps more influentially expressed in his identification and rejection of the "culture of death." Notably, this phrase occurs twelve times throughout his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html).

⁹⁶ While there is not room in this essay to explore the connections between violence and traditional constructions of masculinity, it is notable that several online resources for Catholic men openly embrace an overtly militant framing of masculinity. For example, see www.thekingsmen.org and www.romancatholicman.com.

SUPPORTING AND EXPANDING NARRATIVES OF PATERNAL CARE

To support more expansive developments in Catholic narratives of fatherhood based in human dignity, male participation in adaptive parental functions must be understood as advancing the breadth of human potential rather than corrupting some normative model of masculinity. The latter misplaces priority in the construction of gendered norms rather than in the realization of fully human capacities and relational potentials. Not all expressions of diverse human capacities are, in fact, expressions of human dignity. Dignity is tied to moral goodness and therefore only realized in those expressions of human capacities that contribute to—or at the very least do not contradict—the fuller realization of authentic personhood. Because involved fatherhood concerns relational capacities, it is already favorably weighted towards dignity's corollary good—solidarity—which aims precisely at the realization of human relational potentials. Nonetheless, additional resources exist for founding a thicker theological defense of expanded narratives of fatherhood. To conclude, this essay explores two such possibilities in dynamic interpretations of the natural law tradition and child-centered accounts of parenthood.

Natural Law

Natural law has a long history within Catholic moral theology and admits significant diversity in methodological interpretations. While some applications of natural law are certainly culpable for constraining the moral imagination and enforcing unnecessary behavioral boundaries, many contemporary advocates of the tradition promote methodological commitments that open natural law reasoning to more expansive possibilities. Stephen Pope has provided one helpful analysis of variations among distinct strands of natural law reasoning within contemporary Catholic moral thought.⁹⁷ In his typology, each form of natural law recognizes a similar set of sources but differs in the importance ascribed to each source. The methodology endemic to magisterial teaching, which he terms “revealed natural law,” advances a descriptive account of human nature primarily informed by revelation and its interpretation within the tradition.⁹⁸ The strength of this approach is also its weakness; while it can clearly assert strong moral norms deduced from an *a priori* understanding of the human person, it is also prone to underestimating the significance of changing experiences, knowledge, and

⁹⁷ See Stephen Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analysis of Homosexuality: A Methodological Study,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 89–126.

⁹⁸ Pope, “Scientific and Natural Law Analysis of Homosexuality,” 104.

conditions.⁹⁹ Inattention to these factors also tends to exacerbate unrecognized cultural influences within its application. This tendency plays out quite clearly in the conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood articulated in magisterial documents where socially conservative norms have influenced normative descriptions. Even as the accounts of motherhood and female dignity offered by popes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have not worn well with age,¹⁰⁰ having had their cultural presumptions exposed through changing cultural norms and social realities, this general methodological pattern persists into the present through ongoing limited recognition of diversity in male parental experiences.¹⁰¹

Despite such trends in authoritative Catholic teaching, natural law can equally be employed with methodological commitments to cultural awareness and the adaptability of human persons creating conditions for a more dynamic vision of the human person and human capabilities. For example, Cristina Traina has made a compelling case for a revised natural law methodology recognizing that the common physical reality of human existence binds moral reflection in significant ways and remaining open to the diversity of human experience in a way that can advance feminist ethical concerns.¹⁰² Despite the tradition's association with absolutizing claims, Traina offers an interpretation of natural law that values cultural plurality and is adaptive to changing social conditions. Consequently, absolutism is not endemic to the natural law tradition even as it does pervade certain foundationalist interpretations of natural law methodology, which

⁹⁹ Pope, "Scientific and Natural Law Analysis of Homosexuality," 109. This weakness is identified more sharply by Ann Patrick Ware, who points to docetic tendencies in magisterial moral teaching in which "the Church" is presented "as a disembodied concept, speaking an eternal truth arrived at in some mysterious and infallible way" (Ann Patrick Ware, "The Vatican Letter, Presuppositions and Objections," in *The Vatican and Homosexuality: Reactions to the 'Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,'* ed. Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey [New York: Crossroad, 1988], 29).

¹⁰⁰ For a fuller account of the shifting patterns of conceptualizing parenthood in magisterial thought, see Jacob Kohlhaas, "Constructing Parenthood: Catholic Teaching 1880 to the Present," *Theological Studies* 79 no. 3 (2018): 610–633.

¹⁰¹ See also Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 91–92.

¹⁰² See Cristina L. H. Traina, *Feminist Ethics and the Natural Law: The End of the Anathema* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999). James Alison likewise defends natural law for upholding the essential continuity between creation and creator such that "there is not an absolute rupture between that which we see here and now and that which is the divine plan for the fullness of creation." Like Traina, Alison views natural law as a way of grounding human goods in the realities of human existence. See James Alison, *On Being Liked* (New York: Crossroad, 2003).

many magisterial documents might be deemed to promote.¹⁰³

In overcoming this limitation, the moral goods of dignity and solidarity can remain rooted in a methodological commitment to common human realities, while anticipating further disclosures of more robust possibilities for expression through moral evaluation of diverse experiences. Such applications of Catholic moral principles could help map the way to more expansive accounts of paternal capabilities than present resources provide. The Catholic commitment to human dignity implies just such an obligation to develop more robust narratives for supporting greater paternal investment in children and the home inasmuch as these are expressions of authentic human potentials. Advancements in male parental experiences, including equitable co-parenting and nurturing direct care, accord with the Catholic vision of authentic personhood inasmuch as they lead men into deeper relationships of solidarity and, in so doing, allow for the expression and realization of human dignity. When the concerns of natural law reasoning are shifted from preserving a particular normative vision of the person toward attentive evaluation of diverse human capacities, such paternal experiences become revelatory moments that attest to fuller possibilities for expressing dignity and solidarity than dominant gendered scripts have allowed.

Child-Centered Conceptions of Parenthood

John Wall's advocacy of "Childism" provides a further resource for a more reflexive model of parenthood freed from concerns of policing gendered boundaries.¹⁰⁴ Wall decouples parenthood from adult gender roles by centering parenthood squarely on the needs of children. In doing so, Wall gestures to a key aspect of Catholic moral theology by suggesting that his view participates in an "innovative traditionalism"¹⁰⁵ recognizing the need to both restructure narratives in the light of present realities and remain meaningfully connected to

¹⁰³ Cristina L. H. Traina, "Oh, Susanna: The New Absolutism and Natural Law," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 373. Traina later explains how John Paul II's sympathy towards a "faithful remnant" ecclesiological vision conflicts with the basic assertion of the universality of reason within the natural law tradition. The pervasive corrupting force of sin outside the church becomes the contextual position from which natural law norms can be envisioned as the products of common human reason while also being exclusively promulgated by a particular group, that is, the uncorrupted teachers of the Church within a world otherwise damaged deeply by sin. This "vision of radical separatist witness" was a tenuous interpretation of natural law when utilized by John Paul II and appears even more questionable on this side of the clerical abuse scandal (Traina, "Oh, Susanna," 389).

¹⁰⁴ John Wall, "Fatherhood, Childism, and the Creation of Society," 52–76. For a fuller explanation of Wall's "childist" ethic, see John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁵ Wall, "Fatherhood, Childism, and the Creation of Society," 55.

existing tradition. As Wall rightly identifies, given the breadth and complexity of the Christian biblical and historical tradition, the questions hinge not so much on who is being traditional, but on how we choose to be traditional in response to the needs of the present.¹⁰⁶

Conceptually centering parenthood on children may also aid in the formation of parents themselves. Parenthood fundamentally responsive to children teaches “one’s children to grow in taking on loving responsibility themselves. Between servant leadership and moral permissiveness lies the more dynamic and dialogical possibility for cultivating children’s own growing moral capabilities.”¹⁰⁷ Wall continues: “Understood in this child-centered way, parents’ emotion work and equal household labor are both vitally important. Emotion work increases children’s capabilities for attachment with others, both close to and far from the home. Parental equality increases children’s senses and capabilities for human justice, both at large and in intimate relations.”¹⁰⁸

Experiences of parental equality already demonstrate that gender is a poor predictor of parental capabilities, as men who are primary caregivers for their children tend to confess that their experiences of actual parental practices reveal few necessarily gendered differences.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, equitable sharing of domestic labor and childcare between partners coincides with reduced behavioral distinctions between motherhood and fatherhood. Sociologist Michael Lamb argues that, functionally, maternal and paternal influences on children are more similar than distinctive.¹¹⁰ All of this suggests that the actual practices of parenthood, not innately gendered qualities, shape the expression of parental capabilities.¹¹¹ Interestingly, John Paul II himself, who held clear ideals of essential gendered traits, nonetheless asserted that motherly nurture grows out of women’s *experience* of bearing children.¹¹²

CONCLUSION

Present social renegotiations of masculinity and fatherhood provide opportunities for encouraging narratives of male fitness for equitable co-parenting, nurture, caregiving, and domestic life which

¹⁰⁶ Wall, “Fatherhood, Childism, and the Creation of Society,” 57.

¹⁰⁷ Wall, “Fatherhood, Childism, and the Creation of Society,” 68.

¹⁰⁸ Wall, “Fatherhood, Childism, and the Creation of Society,” 69.

¹⁰⁹ Stevens, “Understanding Discursive Barriers to Involved Fatherhood,” 31.

¹¹⁰ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (New York: Paulist, 2003), 135.

¹¹¹ Judy Root Aulette, *Changing American Families* (Boston: Pearson, 2007), 328.

¹¹² John Paul II quite clearly sees the capabilities that grow out of these experiences as related to an innate disposition towards motherhood within women. Nonetheless, they come to expression in response to human experience (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 18).

can take root in the parental experiences of a growing number of fathers. Stephen Williams argues that fathers today are engaged in a “detraditionalization” of fatherhood through actively negotiating their largely unscripted self-identities in increasingly individualized ways.¹¹³ This reflexivity to the demands of actual caregiving is precisely what popular social and religious narratives appear to lack. Concern for fatherhood guided by dignity and solidarity rooted in a dynamic natural law methodology and centered on children themselves could help shift Catholicism from discourse rooted in essentialist constructions of gender towards greater attention to observations of actual parental realities and diverse expressions of human capabilities.

While a more robust account of male parental capacities may well challenge the long-held centrality of motherhood to parental experiences, the displacement of motherhood from its singular association with primary parenthood does not imply a similar challenge to the dignity of women as does inattention to fuller male parental experiences. Building co-parental ideals may also create space for greater exploration of human capacities and capabilities that both expand conceptions of fatherhood and free motherhood from the singular obligation to conceptually uphold authentic parenthood.

Contemporary experience suggests parental traits may be developed from more fundamentally human capabilities. As men increasingly partake in primary and co-parental experiences, emphasis on gendered characterizations of parental aptitudes dismiss the very human adaptability they may be experiencing in their own development of parental capacities. More robust narratives will prize differentiation, complexity, and adaptability over static and restrictive visions of parenthood.

Parenthood is a negotiated and interactive process of discovery. Gender does not make parents, rather parents are made through the responsive care given to children, and this is increasingly being learned as both mothers and fathers engage new parental realities. Given current realities, greater attention to human adaptability in fulfilling parental roles is warranted and can be supported through principled Catholic moral commitments. Such attention should lead to more comprehensive narrative resources for both men and women. Promoting men’s abilities to recognize and claim dimensions of their parental experiences traditionally demarcated as feminine is important for the support of involved fathering and the fuller recognition of human adaptability, diversity, and relational potential; each of which can authentically realize human dignity and lead to greater relational fullness. **M**

¹¹³ Stephen Williams, “What is Fatherhood?: Searching for the Reflexive Father,” *Sociology* 42, no. 3 (June 2008): 488.

Jacob M. Kohlhaas, PhD, is Associate Professor of Moral Theology at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, where he teaches a range of courses in theology, ethics, and general education. His research centers on theological anthropology and relationships. His work has been published in *Theological Studies*, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, *Religious Studies Review*, *America*, and *US Catholic*. He is author of *Beyond Biology: Rethinking Parenthood in the Catholic Tradition*, Georgetown University Press, 2021.