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## "Don't be an absent father"

In his January 28 general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on the family, speaking about the importance of the father's role in every family.

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Let us resume the series of catecheses on the family. Today we shall take the word "father" as our

guide. It is a term dearer than any other to us Christians because it is the name by which Jesus taught us to call God: father. The meaning of this name took on new depth from the very way Jesus used it to turn to God and to manifest his special relationship with Him. The blessed mystery of God's intimacy, Father, Son and Spirit revealed by Jesus, is the heart of our Christian faith.

"Father" is a term familiar to everyone, a universal word. It indicates a fundamental relationship, the reality of which is as old as human history. Today, however, one has reached the point of claiming that our society is a "society without fathers." In other words, particularly in Western culture, the father figure would be symbolically absent, faded, removed. At first, this was perceived as a liberation: liberation from the father-master, from the father as the representative of the law that is

imposed from without, from the father as the censor of his children's happiness and the obstacle to the emancipation and autonomy of young people. At times in some homes authoritarianism reigned in the past, in some cases even oppression: parents who treated their children like servants, not respecting their individual needs for growth; fathers who did not help them to start out on their journey with freedom (and it is not easy to bring up a child in freedom); fathers who did not help them assume their own responsibilities to build their future and that of society.

This, certainly, is not a good approach; but, as often happens, one goes from one extreme to the other. In our day, the problem no longer seems to be the invasive presence of the father so much as his absence, his inaction. Fathers are sometimes so concentrated on themselves and

on their work and at times on their career that they even forget about the family. And they leave the little ones and the young ones to themselves. As Bishop of Buenos Aires I sensed the feeling of orphanhood that children are experiencing today, and I often asked fathers if they played with their children, if they had the courage and love to spend time with their kids. And the answer was negative in most cases: "But I can't, because I have so much work..." And the father was absent from the little child growing up, he did not play with him, no, he did not waste time with him.

Now, on this common journey of reflection on the family, I would like to say to all Christian communities that we must be more attentive: the absent father figure in the life of little ones and young people causes gaps and wounds that may even be very serious. And, in effect,

delinquency among children and adolescents can be largely attributed to this lack, to the shortage of examples and authoritative guidance in their everyday life, a shortage of closeness, a shortage of love from the father. And the feeling of orphanhood that so many young people live with is more profound than we think.

They are orphaned in the family, because the father is often absent, also physically, from the home, but above all because, when they are present, they do not behave like fathers. They do not converse with their children. They do not fulfill their role as educators. They do not set their children a good example with their words, principles, values, those rules of life which they need like bread. The educative quality of the time the father spends raising the child is all the more necessary when he is forced to stay away from home

because of work. Sometimes it seems that fathers don't know what their role in the family is or how to raise their children. So, in doubt, they abstain, they retreat and neglect their responsibilities, perhaps taking refuge in the unlikely relationship as "equals" with their children. It's true that you have to be a "companion" to your child, but without forgetting that you are the father! If you behave only as a peer to your child, it will do him/her no good.

And we also see this problem in the civil community. The civil community with its institutions, has a certain—let's call it paternal—responsibility towards young people, a responsibility that at times is neglected or poorly exercised. It too often leaves them orphaned and does not offer them a true perspective. Young people are thus deprived of safe paths to follow, of teachers to trust in, of ideals to warm their

hearts, of values and of hopes to sustain them daily. They become filled perhaps with idols but their hearts are robbed; they are obliged to dream of amusement and pleasure but they are not given work; they become deluded by the god of money, and they are denied true wealth.

And so it would do everyone good, fathers and children, to listen again to the promise that Jesus made to his disciples: "I will not leave you orphans" (cf. Jn 14:18). He is, indeed, the Way to follow, the Teacher to listen to, the Hope that the world can change, that love conquers hatred, that there can be a future of brotherhood and peace for all. One of you might say to me: "But Father, today you were too negative. You only spoke about the absent father, what happens when fathers are not close to their children...." It's true, I wanted to stress this, because next Wednesday I am going to continue

this catechesis by highlighting the beauty of fatherhood. That is why I chose to start from the darkness, in order to reach the light. May the Lord help us understand these things better.

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