

ZE04111229 - 2004-11-12

Permalink: <http://zenit.org/article-11526?l=english>

"The Masculine Question" Brought to Life

Interview with Bioethicist and Educator Antonello Vanni

ROME, NOV. 12, 2004 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- In his latest book, Antonello Vanni, educator and bioethicist of the Catholic University of Milan, analyzes the causes that have estranged fathers from life and the serious effects this estrangement has had on the family and society.

His book, "The Father and Nascent Life. A Proposal to the Christian Conscience in Favor of Life and the Family," was published this year by Francesco Nastro.

In this interview with ZENIT, the bioethicist highlights the responsibility of the media -- often vehicle of messages against "the sacredness of life," which tend to transform men and women "into objects of consumption deprived of courage and authenticity --, as well as the state, which propounds economic and labor policies that create insecurity and instability in family life.

Q: We are faced with a society in which the father's estrangement from his natural function is often due to the corruption and confusion of the roles carried out by men and women, encouraged by the media and habits of life, if not by governments; it is a culture that does not appreciate the "sacredness of life." Do you agree with this analysis?

Vanni: Undoubtedly, the question of fatherhood is also the "masculine question." My proposal stems from the thorough research carried out for years by Claudio Rise, Italian journalist and psychotherapist, who has published several books on the subject ("Il Padre, l'Assente Inaccettabile" and "Il Mestiere di Padre" published by St. Paul Publishers).

This expert clarifies immediately that the masculine and paternal questions are two realities based on one common experience: donation. It is not possible to separate them. However, the media, television and advertising are among the main causes of a real anthropological disaster which has transformed men and women, "male and female," into money-making instruments and objects of consumption, deprived of value and authenticity.

This destructive and highly persuasive mechanism is the prison in which we leave our children, when the family, the father or the mother are absent. In this prison, the children receive the messages of the "culture of death" which has destroyed the sacredness of life and has as its main suggestions: indifference, tolerance in face of abuses against life, rejection, contempt, the absolutizing of individual freedom.

It can be readily seen that, given this horizon, it is not easy to develop a mature identity, including from the point of view of gender identity: the gift of the father and the capacity of the mother to protect and welcome, are the last values if they are not useful to sell a larger car or some food product.

Q: There are courses that prepare for marriage but none that prepare, specifically, for fatherhood and motherhood. Do you think that at present there is an increasing need for a more effective family pastoral

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program and even education in this respect?

Vanni: Indeed, it is difficult to find programs in preparation for marriage that addressed the question of fatherhood in a profound way (there are more on motherhood).

It would be very important in such a course to dedicate more time to fatherhood and to the father's relation to life, in order to combat irresponsibility, materialism, and hedonism that trivialize sexuality and morally deform it.

However, possibilities exist that could include an educational perspective of this type. For example, in my diocese, Milan, there is preparatory guide for these courses in which it would be very easy to address topics of an anthropological nature.

Q: Are there political and scientific institutions committed to this line?

Vanni: Sadly, I have the impression that the Italian state does not do much to facilitate the development of a mature feeling of paternity and conjugal relationship; it seems to go precisely in the opposite direction.

Suffice it to think of the proposals for quick divorce, the concession of the care of children with little consideration given to the importance of the paternal educational role, and the neglect of economic and labor policies in this area. There are parents who are worthy of admiration and esteem given the love they have for their children but who, subjected to the vexations of the new forms of temporary contracts, must seek desperately for sufficient work to be able to feed their children, and they have no time left to educate them.

And I am not speaking in this instance of paternal permission or family assistance. The future for such families is a nightmare, as they look into their children's eyes when they return home, and have no idea if next year they will have the same contract.

As regards scientific institutions, we have made an initial proposal to the National Bioethics Commission, to the Pontifical Academy for Life, and to the Ministry of Health, suggesting that they start serious research into the causes that have estranged the father from conceived life, as well as the serious effects on the family and society caused by this estrangement.

We are also hoping to talk with the Forum of Family Associations and with other organizations, which at present work for the reform of the law that has established the Family Consultation Centers, to see if they will consider the possibility of looking with greater attention and confidence at the paternal figure, in the Consultation Centers themselves and in Centers of Assistance to Life. The objective is to offer, through dialogue and reflection, a further possibility of salvation for the child.

Q: What is a greater burden today in the father-child relationship: an unacceptable absence or an untenable discussion?

Vanni: Unacceptable absence is evidence in itself that is already sufficiently hard. In so far as discussion is concerned, it must not be untenable but tenable, when it is based on a different view of life and founded on values that are very different from those suggested by the father.

If, as Claudio Re has said, the "society without fathers" has as its characteristic passivity and the inability to discuss the imposed norm, we can look with hope at some stirrings within the world of youth, for example, the movements in favor of life that criticize certain laws that ignore the father.

These young people are saying "no" to their parents who have left them the inheritance of a deadly and

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unwanted law. They are seeking another type of father, capable of loving and respecting life.

Q: Finally, what is the "proposal to the Christian conscience" expressed in your book?

Vanni: To witness, without fear, love of life and the family, with the same strength, confidence, and attention with which, every day, the Father keeps our lives in the palm of his hand.

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