

Healing the Masculine and Feminine Separation

A Historical and Theological Proposal for the Household of God

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In a Q&A session following a public lecture, Peter Kreeft was once asked, “Why are there more women than men in church?”

“Because women are wiser than men.

Also because women have more free time than men do. All they have to do is to be their children’s nurses, doctors, lawyers, pastors, psychologists, scientists, artists, authors, and a mere million other things, twenty-four hours a day, while men are busy doing one really, really important thing, such as doing the math for an insurance company or designing a new meaningless word for a new car, for seven hours a day.

Because, although women are oversensitive, hysterical, and crazy, men are stupid, selfish, stubborn, arrogant jerks.”¹

Kreeft goes on to give his “real answer” to the question, but I think his opening just points to a *real structural problem* that has left generations of households and churches fatherless.

That is the point of my paper. There is a real deep wound between masculinity and femininity today – a real relational-structural problem caused by market-driven industrial assumptions that continues to divide. 20th century feminisms attempted to heal the problems caused by industrialization, which led to necessary and good reforms, but mostly by adopting the shared assumptions of our industrial-technological economy – this is the *oikonomia* that we still share. Neither the caricature of masculinity that Kreeft jokes about nor the feminist-egalitarian proposals of our day get to the root problem – generations of relational and structural separations caused by the pursuit of wealth at any cost.

I ended my paper with a brief image – of a massive, abandoned, brick-built school, with broken windows and crawling vines. Scattered throughout the hills and hollers of Appalachia are many post-industrial structures like this. The *oikonomia* of the last 300 years doesn’t work, the state of West Virginia and its counties are in shambles, schools are an absolute mess, and churches are the same. Most of the churches that are still

¹ Kreeft, Peter. *Ask Peter Kreeft: The 100 Most Interesting Questions He's Ever Been Asked*, Location 697 of 2447, Kindle.

hanging on are built with market-driven, industrial assumptions everywhere – massive structures built *not* for gathered, embodied, multi-generational, sacramental worship – churches rarely gather as one – when individual households come to the household of God, they further divide into neat, industrial spaces, gymnasiums, buildings filled with classrooms, with age-segregated, targeted spaces for consumption – single people go in there [if they even have a room], 4th graders go there, married people go there, all the while, the rector finishes his sermon prep in his “office” – industrial, structural division.

If there are any mediating family-supporting institutions in West Virginia, they’re still built upon industrial models. Schools no longer have inter-generational houses, churches divide and exclude with supposedly family-focused ministry models, and that’s it, no other mediating institutions exist [except for the internet]. Churches are largely nursing homes, and even with a few churches that seem to be alive, spiritual fathers are rarely present with their children, biologically celibate spiritual mothers don’t have meaningful interactions with their true children – I could go on.

[appendix, visual history, images] (1) Pre-industrial admonition, and (2) a story.

(1) The second book of homilies begins with an admonition to priests:

“For that the Lord doth require of his ‘servant whom he hath set over his household’ to show both faithfulness and prudence in his office, it shall be necessary that ye, above all other, do behave yourself most faithfully and diligently in your so *high* a function; that is aptly, plainly and distinctly to read the sacred Scriptures, diligently to instruct the youth in their catechism, gravely and reverently to minister his most holy sacraments...”²

When you read pre-modern writing, especially as it relates to men and women, most of us either squirm awkwardly, not knowing what to do with what we read – or we recoil in disgust, at what we perceive to be harmful sexual stereotypes. With our novel, post-industrial lenses obscuring our vision, we over-realize *an* eschatology – an eschatology that simplistically declares that the small foretaste of what 9 out of 10 people experience in this present age – the biological generation of children through sexual intercourse – that biologically fruitful coming together will somehow disappear into a sexless eschaton that is neutered of nearly all historical meaning.

The “Homily of the State of Matrimony” in our book of homilies is but one example of an awkward (for us), pre-modern writing. As our liturgy for holy matrimony still makes explicit, and this homily makes plain, marriage exists not only for “perpetual friendly

² Gerald Bray, *The Books of Homilies: A Critical Edition*, p. 204.

fellowship,” but also “to bring forth fruit.”³ This homily on marriage – which begins with a 1567 homily by German priest, Veit Dietrich, and concludes with St John Chrysostom’s fourth century homily from 1 Corinthians – in many ways this homily summarizes a unity of pre-industrial Christian teaching about how husbands and wives should live together within a household.

Dietrich and Chrysostom both call men to a cruciform headship, to “be the leader and author of love,” to lead with a measured, calm authority, “not tyranny.” Some foolish men might consider this method of gentle headship to be but “a token of a womanish cowardness,” as if the true mark of authority is a Gentile-like false masculinity, “to fume in anger, to fight.” And wives, likewise, are to be submissive to their husbands within the household. This is the admonition given to the wife, even when her husband fails to fulfill his call, for “Adam did lay the blame upon the woman and she turned it unto the serpent, but yet neither of them was thus excused.” They are both called into peculiar, distinct roles within the household, into “the griefs and perils” of marriage, together committing “all such adventures to God.”

This is what C. S. Lewis called the “high, hard, lovely, and adventurous art of really creating the Christian family.” With Jesus, with St Paul and St Peter, with Dietrich and Chrysostom, Lewis calls us all to pursue this loving, hard work with all our energy, within our individual households, and centrally, within the household of God.

To live with our brides in an understanding way, to learn patience with small children, to know how to navigate the intricacies of countless personality traits and sins, conflicts multiplying within the growing household of God, all of this will require us to pursue wisdom, not to naively parrot the spirit of the age. We divide into neat industrial spaces because it’s easier, but it doesn’t lead to flourishing. We need modern tools like developmental child psychology and the Enneagram. We need ancient tools like St Gregory the Great’s sixth century Enneagram for priests, which almost assuredly St Augustine of Canterbury carried with him as he reluctantly accepted the call from Gregory to go to England. It was Gregory’s household wisdom, not Augustine’s fancy rhetoric, which formed the rule of life in the British Isles, that led to thousands upon thousands of conversions all the way down to us Anglicans here today.

(2) A story...

One month ago, I gathered with about 20 women from my parish, from the age of 13 to 70, single medical residents from Nigeria, my pharmacist wife, stay at home moms, high school and college age women, homeschoolers, public schoolers, working moms, women who came from churches where they weren’t allowed to speak at all in gathered worship

³ *Ibid.*, p. 472-482.

– as their spiritual father with his daughters, my sisters who share the inheritance of Jesus
– we gathered so that I could present a very unfinished draft of this paper. Many of them had already read an early draft of my introduction, and it was a very fruitful and deeply affectionate time together. Much of that open and refining two hour conversation is represented in the paper you have before you.

Two days later, very much because of the gift of that earlier conversation with the women in my parish, I woke up early, dreaming about a sentence for my conclusion. A couple hours later, my first completed draft was done. My wife came into my office in the corner of my basement and said, “Can I hug you?” She had a bad dream about me dying, and I was happy to oblige.

After a moment, I said, “I think I’m done writing.” And then I asked her if she would like to hear some of the parts of my paper that I’d finished in the last two days. If you know Jodee, you’ll know that the very last thing she wants to do is to sit and listen to me ramble about theology, much less history. But miracle of all miracles, maybe because she was happy that I was not dead, she enthusiastically said, “Yes!”

– Before I continue to tell the rest of the story that morning, I need to tell you about what happened a few months earlier. During Christmastide, I concluded a sermon reflecting upon Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina*. After her betrothed died, Macrina devoted her life to the care of cast off children, women, and widows, with Marian strength and brilliance. After over a decade of seriously considering foster care and inspired by the stories of Mary and Macrina, my wife and I began to more formerly consider fostering. Long story short, after several weeks in the process, I felt a strong sense that this was not the right time for us to foster. I was devastated. Jodee was *far more* devastated. She was excited and she really wanted to care for the fatherless and motherless among us and then I said, “Wait.” And even in her grief, she didn’t scorn me. She didn’t resent me. Months later, a father died of overdose, extended family of someone in our church, and God answered Jodee’s prayer. We’ve been able to care for a beautiful 25 year old single mother and her 1 year old son several days a week, and it has been an absolute joy. –

Back to my basement office one month ago with my wife. After we had refilled our coffee and helped our kiddos with some of their assignments, I started reading my paper with Jodee. A couple of hours later, I finished reading my paper, and miracle of all miracles, not only was Jodee still in the room with me, she was smiling. That’s the simple version of our morning...

That morning, rhythmically, as if it was planned, every 30 seconds to 5 minutes, each one of my children came into my office. In the middle of a paragraph reading Judith Butler out loud, my daughter would come in asking about Latin. A minute later, my son would ask if anyone had fed the dog. A few minutes later, my daughter would ask if someone

fed the dog. My eldest would come in too, “Dad, can I borrow your [noise-cancelling] headphones?”

We weren’t interrupted only by my biological children. We had to stop for about a half an hour because the newest member of our household was being dropped off for the day [the little 1 year old boy I mentioned earlier]. After saying bye to his mother as she headed off to support her household as a single mom, Jodee and I eventually made it back down to my office to continue reading.

Many times – having never read this paper out loud – I had to pause, sometimes for minutes, because I couldn’t stop weeping. I wept for the love of many people who are my sons and daughters in Christ. I wept for my inadequacies exposed as I read out loud. I wept for the text messages I received that morning from a couple in our church concerning deep father wounds.

After weeping and praying together, I continued reading my paper to Jodee. We only had another 20 or so more interruptions before I finished reading... – “He has a poopy diaper, can you change him?” ... “What are we having for lunch?” ... “Do I have to do both math assignments?” ... “What’s a decimal?” – I paused and told Jodee that morning, “I am so thankful for every interruption... [sobbing] I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

We finally finished. By that time, I didn’t have enough time to go to my industrially-separated safe space to workout before Jodee had to leave for work. So I made a quick trip to the grocery store to pickup some beer because some men from church were coming over to pray together and discuss English Monasticism. Jodee went to work, we finished up school for the day, I changed another poopy diaper, my 7 year old put her new little brother down for a nap by herself, we played guitar and piano together for an upcoming recital, and after our beloved little man was picked up by his mom, I got a quick trip to the YMCA to workout before the men from church came over.

I have spent my last decade desperately trying to live out the “high, hard, lovely, and adventurous art of really creating the Christian family.” That’s my ministry philosophy.

The way that you organize your household will look different than ours, that’s okay. Erika Bachiochi writes,

“...as the traditional “roles” or... “functions” of caregiver and provider have been decoupled from their respective association with women and men in a significant number of families, the embodied reality of human dependency and human development persists. Children need not only “caregivers” and “providers,” however these relatively interchangeable functions are shared in their families. They also need, for their full human development, deep and abiding relationships with each of their parents, to as far an extent as is possible. Though unfortunate

circumstances do not always allow these most formative relationships to form or grow, parents do well by their children to recognize, in justice, their responsibilities to them.”⁴

The household, and centrally, the household of God must be an intimate, refining fire of embodied fatherly and motherly presence. Priests must reclaim, model, and embody fatherly presence with all of their children. Press into that space – press into shared intimate, inter-generational time together – restructure your “job descriptions” and church calendars – stop dividing everything all the time – build cathedrals – common space for common family prayer – living rooms, not classrooms – reclaim your fatherly voice, your strong and gentle touch – this is our post-industrial opportunity.

⁴ Bachiochi, *Ibid.*, p. 396-397.