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Vulnerability v. Dominance: Questions about the “Father”

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Vulnerability v. Dominance: Questions about the “Father”

Antonio Autiero and James F. Keenan

Gruesome life stories about many women arise because they cross paths with men who compromise their own roles as fathers, husbands, and companions. These stories arise from different eras and take place in different places and cultures, with sometimes similar, sometimes diversified variables.

This past August 13, as we were visiting the island of Torcello, north of Venice, we found the coincidence of two such stories, nineteen centuries apart, with chilling congruencies.

At the eleventh century church of Saint Fosca, built in the form of the Greek cross and a magnificent example of the Venetian-Byzantine style, right next to the glorious seventh century Cathedral of Santa Maria dell'Assunta, in all this beauty, we saw the relics and learned the tragic story of Saints Fosca (Fusca) and Maura. In the year 250, Fosca, the young daughter of a pagan family, learned of Christianity, pursued its teaching, and was baptized. Maura, Fosca's nurse, followed her example. Fosca's father tried to persuade his daughter to return to their pagan faith, but when they both refused, he denounced them to the legendary Quinziano, Roman prefect under the Emperor Decius. Quinziano, famous for his barbaric torture and martyrdom of St. Agatha in February 251, martyred Fosca and Maura by the sword in the same year.

Standing there considering their story and the veneration of their relics, Autiero remarked that only a day earlier in Salerno, a father stabbed his 23-year-old lesbian daughter, Immacolata, and her 39-year-old partner. He could not bear that the two decided to move in together. For him this was inconceivable, unacceptable. Since they did not heed his warning to stay away from one another, he tried to stab them both, crying out as he did, “Better that I spend thirty years in prison, so you will die together.”¹ Immacolata and her partner Francesca escaped with only superficial wounds.

1 https://www.corriere.it/cronache/22_agosto_12/salerno-padre-accoltella-figlia-lesbica-insieme-fidanzata-cosi-morite-together-c31b4618-1a78-11ed-a4ca-24dcb38fef4d.shtml

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Both Fosca and Immacolata were on the threshold of life choices for others, a sign of their maturity in their own significant relationships. Rather than heeding their fathers' demands, they were going forward with their lives. Yet their fathers sought (and one succeeded) to destroy the very lives of their children because their will was not heeded. They did these actions precisely as "fathers," a role gave them the right to denounce or destroy their daughters. Their conceptions of fatherhood are unfortunately familiar.

FEMINICIDE: THE KILLING OF WOMEN

There in Torcello, we saw the long arc of femicide, and, in particular, how that arc is shaped by a fathers' understanding of his own the self. Autiero remarked, "It is not a giving of life, as a parent, but a domination of life as a master and despot. Putting one's own representation of the role model and function above the choice of the people who are the real responsible subjects is like getting your hands on someone's soul and life."

The fathers of Fosca and Immacolata believed that as men they were someone or counted for something only when they could impose their will on women. The expression of this unhealthy and dangerous self-understanding goes from the daily, latent tendency to dominate the lives of others (children, wives, lovers, life partners) to the conditioning of their choices, even up to the cruel exercise of violence that extinguishes even life itself.

Two days after our visit to Torcello, the Italian Ministry of the Interior published, as it does on every feast of the Assumption, its dossier on national security which includes the problem of femicide for the year. This year's data reported an increase from 108 murders of women because of their gender to 125 this year. Of the 125 last year, 108 were killed in the context of a "familial or affective context" that is, by fathers, uncles, brothers and, more commonly, partners or former partners.²

Anthropological and social sciences, as well as gender studies, in recent decades have offered us tools for analysis and in-depth itineraries to recognize the genesis and depth of these phenomena. And the most recent "studies on masculinity" are teaching us to draw the masculine away from the toxic cravings of domination. At stake is the awareness of all the cultural weight and the multitudinous encrustations that have generated a distorted vision of the relationship between genders and of the awareness of roles based on dominance.

Religions have played a decisive and not always liberating role in this. In fact, they have helped legitimize the superiority

2 <https://www.elle.com/it/magazine/women-in-society/a40904581/femmicidi-italia-2022/>

of the male, by resorting unequivocally to dominant masculine expressions of the images of God. Moral, sacramental, and systematic theology must recognize their share of responsibility in this. And our bishops, in particular, because of their leadership, need to be much more responsive to this dangerous reality.

INVESTIGATING THE FATHER

Over the past few years, we have each been examining the Father in Catholic theological ethics. Autiero, for instance, edited with Marinella Perroni, *Maschilità in questione. Sguardi sulla figura di San Giuseppe (Masculinity in Question: Studies on the Figure of Saint Joseph)*³ in response to a recent initiative by Pope Francis. On March 19, the pope announced the year of St. Joseph, proposing him as a model of masculinity, as well as an exemplary husband and father who, by accepting to stay in the background succeeded in establishing healthy relationships.⁴ In his apostolic letter called “Patris corde,” (“with a Father’s heart”), Francis wrote that “Fathers are not born, but made,” adding that “a man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child.” In particular he promotes Joseph who “accepted Mary unconditionally,” an important gesture, “in our world where psychological, verbal and physical violence towards women is so evident.”

Standing there in Torcello, looking at the relics of Fosca and Maura, thinking of Immacolata and her partner, and reflecting on the Ministry of the Interior’s report, Autiero recounted to me how Perroni opens the collection with her call to rethink masculinity in more concrete ways. Noting that eight of the twelve contributing scholars are women, Autiero emphasized how tenderness, mutual recognition, and responsible care were the vulnerable qualities that emerged from their investigations.

Keenan has just finished the D’Arcy lectures at Campion Hall, Oxford, being published next year by Georgetown University Press.⁵ There he developed an ethics of vulnerability, under the influence of Judith Butler. Keenan argues that vulnerability is not a state of need but rather the human, ontological capacity to be responsive to another. He sees the vulnerable one in the Good Samaritan parable, not as the injured victim on the road, but as the Samaritan who singularly responds to the injured one’s precarity. And in the Prodigal Son parable, he highlights the vulnerable father who welcomes back the precarious prodigal.

3 (<https://www.queriniana.it/libro/maschilita-in-questione-4380>)

4 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html)

5 <https://www.campion.ox.ac.uk/news/darcy-lectures-2022>

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Keenan likes to quote Butler's remark from 2012, "You call upon me, and I answer. But if I answer, it was only because I was already answerable; that is, this susceptibility and vulnerability constitutes me at the most fundamental level and is there, we might say, prior to any deliberate decision to answer the call. In other words, one has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness." Keenan argues that vulnerability is our answerability, what allows and prompts us to recognize, to respond, to communicate, in short, to love.

Like the noted Italian writer Giusi Quarenghi who closes Autiero's collection wondering about how we are affected by the images of God the Father, Keenan studies the image of God the Father in the famous motif of the "Throne of Grace." He notes that when the throne is first depicted in the twelfth century, the Father, in holding up the crucified body of his Son, is visibly grievous, with burdened shoulders and a pained transfixed face drawing closely to the now lifeless beloved Son and burdened shoulders. Later, church leaders fearful that the Father's unchanging nature should not be so affected, compel artists to highlight the Father as unmoved. More interested in protecting the "power" of God, the church abandons the vulnerability of God, giving us a vision of the Father as unmoved by the death of his Son. The Father's later stance is much like the fathers of Immacolata and Fosca.

In John's Gospel, however, Jesus proclaims time and again that the Father and Son are one. We ask, if the Son is vulnerable, is not the Father? Would not the one who submitted vulnerably to the cross be vulnerably received by the Father?

Indeed, perhaps when we proclaim together that we believe in God the Father Almighty, we might pause and ask whether our Father does not derive "his power" from his capacious vulnerability and not from some latent image of toxic dominance?