

# RE-IMAGINING THE MASCULINE

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**F**AMILIES ARE CRAFTED IN MANY embraces. Held in our parents' arms, we hold them in affection. As adolescents we are held accountable—a new, sometimes shocking embrace. Unavoidably we hold each other in conflict, struggling to resolve differences without injury. These multiple, testing embraces choreograph the dance that is our family's life.

Forging bonds of affection, we also fall into habitual embraces that are unhealthy and even destructive. Bonds become bondage. One child is held so securely that he need never mature. Another child is held down or held back, caught in embraces that wound and shame her for a lifetime. In bonds holy and unholy a family is knit together.

And so it is in our life of faith. Held by a nurturing God, we grow strong. Or held by a God that we are told is vengeful, we grow cautious and timid. Becoming companions of Jesus, we try out a more adult embrace of faith. And, like Jacob in the book of Genesis, we may wrestle with a mysterious, wounding God. In these embraces we craft, with God as our partner, a faith resilient enough to face the challenges of our life.

In the vigorous dances of family life and religious faith, we come to see two crucial dynamics at play in these embraces. Holding one another blends affection and authority. Our needs and desires impel us into engagements that we hope will be fruitful. And we assign authority to certain embraces: 'This is how one must hold an infant', we decide, or 'this is the best way to reprimand a teenager', or 'this is how a pastor should respond to an angry parishioner'. Authority and care come together in the embraces of the Christian virtues: faith, hope and love are ways we hold one another.

The second dynamic in our embraces is crucial: virtues survive by changing. For love to mature, our embraces must not only endure, they must change. Trial and error are the homely teachers of this lesson. We find, to our dismay, that the special blend of authority and affection that succeeded wonderfully with our small children does not work with teenagers. The relationship between my wife and myself,

so comfortable for fifteen years, suddenly feels dull and unsatisfying. Or, the parish that once thrived under a paternal pastor is now offended by the paternalism of Church leaders.

For these vital engagements to survive, we must find new, more fruitful ways to hold one another. We must re-imagine our life together. Many Christian men today feel an urgent imperative to envision their lives and duties in new ways. In the following pages we will trace the disruptions in the dance—of Western culture and of Christian spirituality—as men struggle to remember and re-imagine what it means to be a man.

*Learning to be a man*

A man. A woman. What could be simpler, more natural? Two clearly distinct yet complementary versions of humanity. But if 'being a man' is natural, why is it so difficult? Why are we beset by doubts, constantly re-evaluating what it takes to be a man? Peter Brown's description of second-century Rome, in his excellent *Body and society*, reminds us that this concern is not uniquely contemporary:

It was never enough to be male: a man had to strive to remain 'virile'. He had to learn to exclude from his character and from the poise and temper of his body all telltale traces of 'softness' that might betray, in him, the half-formed state of a woman. (p 11)

These Romans scrutinized a person's walk, the resonance of his voice, his expression of emotion. All these bore witness to the ancient Romans' manliness. For many centuries, then, in civilized and uncivilized argument, our ancestors have woven a ready-to-wear masculinity.

The struggle continues. Our possessions and occupations announce to others and to ourselves what kind of man we are. We want to belong, to be members in good standing. But gradually it dawns on us: our masculinity is not a 'given' of nature but a social achievement. In our embraces of certain habits and humours we craft our masculinity, guided by values we barely acknowledge. If our maleness is built on chromosomes and body parts, our masculinity is played out on another stage.

Masculinity is less a reality than a conversation. The enduring conversation about manhood provides many scripts but is, finally, only our best interpretation. On television and in churches, at sporting events and religious retreats, we enter into this continuous conversation and we learn more about becoming a man.

Being a man is hard work. But for women it is dangerous. Men craft their fragile gender with one eye on the chief peril: woman. To fail at manliness is not to descend into a nameless abyss; we fall instead into effeminacy. Feminine is not merely another, complementary image of being-human; for many men it is the enemy. To become a man we learn to hold women back, to distance ourselves from their engulfing presence. And we learn to hold them down, to control them lest they jeopardize our quest. These are dangerous embraces that ensnare us in injustice and violence. Today many men wonder how to trade these manly embraces for more fruitful engagements.

Holding women away: this is the early lesson of separation. The male infant learns the bad news that the mother who first arrives as food is not an extension of himself. She is a distinct person who comes and goes; she has interests (unbelievable!) beyond him. Then he learns a second lesson: I am not only distinct from my mother, but unlike her. To become a man means a departure more radical than my sisters will know. I must separate myself from this woman and her powerful, life-giving embrace. This healthy imperative may balloon into a relentless quest to distance myself from the emotional attachments and vulnerability that I associate with her care. Then detachment and an exaggerated self-sufficiency become the benchmarks of my manhood. To be a man, I learn, means an independence from entangling emotions and the bonds and bondage that they engender.

This masculine ideal of detachment found exquisite expression in St Ambrose's understanding of the Christian virtue of integrity. For the fourth-century Bishop of Milan, integrity for both Church and individual meant a well-defended separation from the soiling incursions of others. Peter Brown, in *Body and society*, sums up Ambrose's vision of integrity: 'the precious ability to keep what was one's own untarnished by alien intrusion' (p 354). Virginity seemed the perfect expression of integrity: a body and soul unsullied by contact with others. Ambrose pictured integrity as rooted in a person's original singularity and splendid separateness.

Ambrose makes integrity *masculine* by his repeated concern for the 'effeminizing' of the Church. To fall away from the ideal of integrity 'was to "pollute" one's own body and that of the church. To surrender any boundary line was to court the ancient shame of the Roman male—it was to "become soft", to be effeminated' (Brown, p 347). Ambrose's contribution to the Christian conversation about manhood was his description of the virtue of integrity according to

masculine specifications. Christians today are attempting a turn in the conversation in which we re-imagine this crucial virtue as linking our lives rather than isolating them.

If to be a man means separation, it also means control. Long ago we learned that a real man is in control of his feelings, in charge of his wife and family, in control of his destiny. Did not God give us the commission: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen 1,28)? Extricating ourselves from entangling attachments, we long to master our world.

As Ambrose was crafting a masculine scenario for integrity, Augustine and other theologians worried forth a novel portrait of a God of control, safely removed from the disturbances of human passion. A persuasive Stoic philosophy shamed Christian theologians into denying that God could be moved by anger or compassion. In place of the scriptural God of desire, these theologians imagined a God distant from the vicissitudes of the passions. Aristotle's cosmology of an unmoved mover underwent a metamorphosis and reappeared in a theology of God's impassibility. This new 'Christian' God moved all creation with compassion and correction, but remained himself unmoved.

The theology of God's impassibility was so incredible that it had little influence outside theological circles. Most Christians preferred the scriptural God of longing and regret, a God burdened with all the compromises that passionate love entails. This theology did, however, hatch a novel goal for Christian leaders: the image of the minister removed from the passions of everyday life. If the leader is to imitate God, he too should distance himself from the passions. He should try, through self-control and detachment, to become a faithful reflection of God: one who holds us with care and compassion, but is himself not dependent on the embraces of others. Many centuries of conversation would ensue before Christians recognized that this portrait is not so much a theology as it is a masculine fantasy: to reach out in care and control while remaining untouched by others.

Influenced by this vision, Christian boys learn that separation is the route to integrity and that control is the way to follow God. And then they learn the price of such a life.

*Playing the role; paying the price*

Among the multiple, ambiguous embraces that comprise the human dance, certain stances settle into habits and finally become privileged ways to hold one another. Paternalism is one of these

authoritative embraces. Western culture and Christian practice have enlisted men in the role of *paterfamilias*—the head of the household. In Roman society a husband and father legally owned his family. Paternalism is the protective embrace of an owner. Peter Brown reminds us of the potency of this role:

The mere fact of physical birth, for instance, did not make a Roman child a person. Its father must lift it from the floor. If not, the little bundle of ensouled matter, as much a fetus as if it were still in its mother's womb, must wait for others to collect it from a place outside the father's house. (p 28)

As young men we strive to fulfil the expectations of our cultural and religious upbringing: to be capable providers, to do what is best for our family and community. The embrace of paternalism turns toxic as care becomes constraint. As a paternal leader, I want only the best for this group, but I fail to include them in the discernment of this best. To ensure that we reach the goal I envision, I tighten my grip. Almost instinctively, guiding hands lock into restraining talons. My spouse, my work partners resist this control masquerading as care. As husband or boss or pastor, I am bereft: this is the only style of manly care that I have learned. The choice, it seems to me, is strong paternal care or abdication. Where am I to turn?

Men also pay the price of masculinity by learning to imagine the world as an arena of competition. We instinctively prepare to embrace others as adversaries and obstacles to our success. Healthy competition—prodding and encouraging one another toward more creative and generous action—corrupts into an obsessive concern with *my* success. This narrowed vision shrinks our abundant world into a field of scarce resources. Others not only threaten scarcity, they create it. Their possessions undermine my well-being. Life constricts into camps jealously guarding goods in short supply.

As competitors, men become concerned more with production than fruitfulness. Our company's goal of a 15% yearly increase in sales dwarfs other considerations of purpose or worth. Driven by this image of the world we have ourselves concocted, men experience a burgeoning scarcity: not enough time to spend with our families; insufficient job security; no opportunity even to question the drivenness of our daily life.

On the outside, the embraces of paternalism and competition. On the inside, silence. The most compelling memory of their fathers, for many men, is their silence. A common complaint of wives today is

their husbands' inability to express their feelings. A legacy of lost voices.

The cultural script for masculinity dictates considerable silence. How and why are we assigned this stifling role? John Stoltenberg, in his *Refusing to be a man*, suggests that this silence may stem from our earnest separation from the first female in our life. Becoming a man entails distancing ourselves from the range of sentiments that we still associate with our mothers. The range of emotion from vulnerability to grief, we carefully if unconsciously learned, is womanly.

In the realm of sexuality young men learn to genitalize their sensuality. To be physically stirred by music or art, to be sensually satisfied by snuggling together with a loved partner—these are traits of womanliness and thus not for us. Responding to life in these ways does not reinforce our manhood. Our interior sentiments (except for anger and genital arousal) disquiet and threaten to un-man us.

So we fall silent, following fathers and other actors who portray strong, silent types. But our emotions, though mute, will not be quelled. Instead they find expression through unlikely spokespersons.

Some of us experience our emotions through the women in our lives. At home my wife finally utters the sadness I will not acknowledge. I become adept at denying such feelings, she at deciphering my emotional undercurrents. Our entangled 'compatibility' enlists her as custodian and interpreter of my mute emotions. This dynamic is often repeated in the work or ministry team. As a group, we succeed in silencing a simmering conflict until a woman team member voices our shared distress. If the emotions involved are too threatening, we insist that 'it is her problem' and thus relieve ourselves of responsibility. So we get to hold our tongues and still give voice to our pain.

Other men break their silence by speaking through organizations. Institutions are our mouthpieces. The president or general announces with great calm the savage bombing of our enemy. Anger and outrage are almost absent in these individuals: the institution does the dirty work.

For some men the silence of shame finds expression in their anger. Traumatic shame is an unspeakable feeling. A man who undergoes a profound wound of shame in childhood learns to keep it a secret. Injured by sexual or physical abuse, he falls silent and 'forgets' this pain. But the distress, submerged, will not dissipate. Biding its time, suppressed shame finds expression for many men in their anger. They find they are suddenly angry for no apparent reason or they are

always overflowing with an angry resentment. These rages or sullenness tarnish every relationship. With fortune and grace, these men may come to see that they are not angry, but shame-filled. Speaking the unspeakable tears off its mask and severely diminishes its power. Now the sentiment of anger, released from its servitude to shame, is free to serve as an appropriate reaction to injustice and a healthy spur to difficult change.

Finally, masculine silence speaks loudly in pornography. As domination and paternalism diminish as viable embraces in social life, pornography provides me with a silent partner, a compliant companion. Docile to my demands, my pornographic object of desire allows me to separate myself from women even as I (seem to) control them.

Roberto Unger's analysis, in his *Passion: an essay on personality*, of the vice of luxury serves as a good definition of pornography: 'sensuality without sociability' (p 137). The temptation of both luxury and pornography is 'the offer of a route to happiness that bypasses participation, alliances and conflict' (p 139).

The surrogate embraces of pornography momentarily reduce the tension in our life, but do not satisfy. And they lead us farther from genuine partners who demand a voice, an active part in our encounter. If he is offended by the obstinacy of actual women, a man may resort to violence. Another way we speak.

Scripts for our masculine role; prices that these roles exact. We long to shrug off these embraces and discover more fruitful, if risky encounters with our world. We are in search of conversion.

### *Refusing to be a man*

The lament arises: 'I did everything I was told to become a good husband and father; it hasn't worked'. Or: 'I did all I was taught to be a good priest but I feel empty'. We have studied our lessons on manhood; we have done our homework. Why, then, do we feel so deeply that somehow we have failed? Coming to a dead end, we retrace our steps and come upon a new option: perhaps we must refuse to be a man. This is the beginning of conversion.

This turn in the conversation about masculinity begins in the realization that we have a choice. Acknowledging that manliness comes neither as nature nor divine edict, we recognize our complicity in forging the embraces of masculinity. If separation and silence have injured us, then conversion dares us to come together and to speak. The men's movement in the United States, guided by Robert Bly and others, provides one model for such a gathering of men. The

cultural and religious élite often criticize this movement as one more superficial American fad, but the instinct here is sound. Abandoning their well-defended masculine individualism, men grope toward connections that might enliven and heal them. Will our established Churches find a way to support men in this effort of change?

Coming together, men long to speak out—to break the routine banter about weather, sports and cars and tell the truth. But in naming our feelings of loneliness and vulnerability, we enter ground traditionally reserved for womenfolk. As Robert Bly has observed, for many men the door into their feeling world is grief. In our forties and fifties we turn with sorrow to ageing and dying fathers. We lament their silence ('Did he love me?'). We are haunted by the spectre of reproducing this silence in our own lives. Bly, in his poem 'My father at eighty-five' questions this continuity.

Some powerful river of desire  
goes on flowing through him.  
He never phrased what he desired  
and I am his son.

In offering conferences on the 'negative' emotions over the past five years, we have found men longing to break through the anonymity of their feelings and eager to give them accurate, healing names. No exercise in narcissism or interior piety, this disciplined search for the meaning and sources of our passions prepares us to become reliable partners in our social commitments.

Coming together and giving voice to our feelings—these actions risk our well-learned manhood, rinsing us of our fierce self-control and detachment. Unger describes the fruit of these risks: we learn 'you can change without ceasing to be', and that 'the failure of control is not the imminence of annihilation'.

This conversion—our refusal to be a man—requires a re-imagining of the manly virtues of fruitfulness and integrity. Fruitfulness, we know, is about more than fertility. Yet the more primitive demands of virility find their test in sex: can you get someone pregnant? (Having and raising a child is, of course, quite a different challenge!) Christian practice over several centuries parodied this cultural concern by focusing the discussion of marriage on genital consummation and by seeing biological reproduction as the sole legitimate aim of sexual love. By narrowing the focus of fecundity, we lost sight of the myriad ways our love is fruitful. We overlooked the other ordinary embraces that enrich the bonds of married love—a



quiet meal together, a reconciliation shared, snuggling together on a rainy afternoon. Anxious about a sensuality disconnected from fertility, we turned away from other gifts the body gives the spirit—the comfort of a friend's warm embrace, the healing touch of a massage, even the humble luxury of a lingering hot bath.

Men today struggle to reject the cultural imperative that shrinks sexuality into genital performance. We try to honour the multiple embraces in which life flowers. The gay man and the celibate man share this desire with their brothers to rediscover all the ways that the joining of lives bears fruit.

When we free fruitfulness from the clutches of fertility (as the gift of celibacy aspires to do), we begin to recognize the authentic shape of integrity. This virtue does not find its finest portrait in the singularity of the virgin, but in the unions that always precede and most often follow it. During our first months of life we float in the womb securely tethered to another person, exchanging life at the most intimate level. As adults we bind ourselves to others—in friendship, in marriage, in our work—in unions that bear the fruit we most prize. These are links that enliven us, bonds that do not entrap but enrich us. A man discovers, in Unger's words, that 'in binding himself . . . to others he need not deny or dissolve himself'. In these fierce attachments we reverse the cultural imperative about masculine separation and independence. We find a better truth.

### *The promise of koinonia*

In the first centuries of Christianity, the world of the Mediterranean was locked in a tumultuous conversation about human sexuality. A powerful insight fuelled the debate: sex is not destiny! Sexual passion is not a blind drive that seasonally victimizes us. Humans have a choice. For many influential Christians of the third and fourth centuries this choice was expressed in the 'no' of virginity and celibacy. As the conversation continued, the celibate leader becomes spiritual *paterfamilias*, continuing the tradition of masculine domination and distance. The spirituality that sprouted from this ground was rooted in dispassion and detachment.

In today's Church, men search for images to help us replace our manly reserve with a passionate attachment in faith and love. The scriptural image of *koinonia* arises in our shared imaginations: believers together in mutual respect and fervent commitment to the following of Jesus Christ. 'These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the *koinonia*, to the breaking of the bread and to the

prayers' (Acts 2,42); 'I pray that this faith will give rise to a sense of *koinonia*' (Phm verse 6).

This metaphor of common life steps away from the embrace of domination and the imperative of detachment. *Koinonia* envisages a fertile partnership of women and men unbound by the paternalism and competition of our culture. If this hope remains almost unbelievable (our religious heritage testifies to this), it is also unforgettable. Its deepest aspiration does not imply a hierarchical call to be a docile son or even a fertile mother. *Koinonia* invites us to forge bonds of a radical partnership, bonds in which we will find both our desired fruitfulness and our deepest integrity.