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## How fatherhood is crucial to children's faith

Fr Robbie Low

*Recent Swiss research on church attendance has highlighted the vital role played by fathers in their children's practice rates. Fr Robbie Low, who analyses this research, was vicar of St Peter's, Bushey Heath, a Church of England parish in the UK, for the last 15 years and is a member of the editorial board of the magazine 'New Directions' published by Forward in Faith, in which the complete version of this article first appeared. This shortened version is published with permission.*

**In 1994 the Swiss carried out a survey to determine whether a person's religion carried through to the next generation, and if so, why, or if not, why not. The result is dynamite. There is one critical factor. It is overwhelming, and it is this: it is the religious practice of the father of the family that, above all, determines the future attendance at or absence from church of the children.**

If both father and mother attend regularly, 33 percent of their children will end up as regular churchgoers, and 41 percent will end up attending irregularly. Only a quarter of their children will end up not practising at all. If the father is irregular and mother regular, only three percent of the children will subsequently become regulars themselves, while a further 59 percent will become irregulars. Thirty-eight percent will be lost.

If the father is non-practising and mother regular, only two percent of children will become regular worshippers, and 37 percent will attend irregularly. Over 60 percent of their children will be lost completely to the Church.

Let us look at the figures the other way round. What happens if the father is regular but the mother irregular or non-practising? Extraordinarily, the percentage of children becoming regular goes up from 33 percent to 38 percent with the irregular mother and to 44 percent with the non-practising, as if loyalty to father's commitment grows in proportion to mother's laxity, indifference, or hostility.

However, there is some consolation for faithful mothers. Where the mother is less regular than the father but attends occasionally, her presence ensures that only a quarter of her children will never attend at all.

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Even when the father is an irregular attender there are some extraordinary effects. An irregular father and a non-practising mother will yield 25 percent of their children as regular attenders in their future life and a further 23 percent as irregulars. This is twelve times the yield where the roles are reversed.

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Where neither parent practises, to nobody's very great surprise, only four percent of children will become regular attenders and 15 percent irregulars. Eighty percent will be lost to the faith.

While mother's regularity, on its own, has scarcely any long-term effect on children's regularity (except the marginally negative one it has in some circumstances) it does help prevent children from drifting away entirely. Faithful mothers produce irregular attenders. Non-practising mothers change the irregulars into non-attenders. But mothers have even their beneficial influence only in complementarity with the practice of the father.

### Evangelisation

In short, if a father does not go to church, no matter how faithful his wife's devotions, only one child in 50 will become a regular worshipper. If a father does go regularly, regardless of the practice of the mother, between two-thirds and three-quarters of their children will become churchgoers (regular and irregular). If a father goes but irregularly to church, regardless of his wife's devotion, between a half and two-thirds of their offspring will find themselves coming to church regularly or occasionally.

The findings may be for Switzerland, but from conversations with English clergy and American friends, I doubt we would get very different findings from similar surveys here or in the United States. Indeed, I believe some English studies have found much the same thing. The figures are of huge import to our evangelisation and its underlying theology.

First, we (English and Americans both) are ministering in a society that is increasingly unfaithful in spiritual and physical relationships. There is a huge number of single-parent families and a complexity of step relationships or, worse, itinerant male figures in the household, whose primary interest can almost never be someone else's child.

The absentee father, whoever's "fault" the divorce was and however faithful he might be to his church, is unlikely to spend the brief permitted weekend "quality time" with his child in church.

Sociologically and demographically the current trends are severely against the church's mission if fatherhood is in decline. Those children who do maintain attendance, in spite of their father's absence, albeit predominantly sporadically, may instinctively understand the community of nurture that is the motherhood of the Church. But they will inevitably look to fill that yawning gap in their spiritual lives, the experience of fatherhood that is derived from the true fatherhood of God. Here they will find little comfort in the liberalising churches that dominate the English scene and the mainline scene in the United States.

Second, we are ministering in churches that have accepted fatherlessness as a norm, and even an ideal. Emasculated Liturgy, gender-free Bibles, and a fatherless flock are increasingly on offer. In response, these churches' decline has, unsurprisingly, accelerated. To minister to a fatherless society, these churches, in their unwisdom, have produced their own single-parent family parish model in the woman priest.

A church that is conspiring against the blessings of patriarchy not only disfigures the icon of the First Person of the Trinity, effects disobedience to the example and teaching of the Second Person of the Trinity, and rejects the Pentecostal action of the Third Person of the Trinity but, more significantly for our society, flies in the face of the sociological evidence!

No father - no family - no faith. Winning and keeping men is essential to the community of faith and vital to the work of all mothers and the future salvation of our children.

Reprinted from *AD2000* Vol 16 No 9 (October 2003), p. 10

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