

# Soccer and the Sacred Heart, The Rhythm of Spiritual Fatherhood

By Dave McClow, June 21, 2016

## June is the month of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Father's Day also falls within the month, and spiritual fatherhood ties these two together.

The human heart always operates in two directions—the muscle contracts and then relaxes. If this rhythm is disrupted, you have earned a trip to either the ER or the undertaker. There is also a rhythm of Catholic fatherhood—the rhythm of loving, then challenging; of being tender, then tough. Disruption of this rhythm can create major problems for kids.

### Soccer

Chad played soccer. His parents were highly successful professionals, trying to motivate Chad to pay attention and engage in the game with some intensity. They were turning the situation into a life lesson: "How do you expect to succeed if you can't do this?" There was a lot of criticism and pressure to perform. Another team was using psych ops, trashing Chad and his team. The way they talked, I would have sworn this was a U.S. Olympic competition, but Chad was in fourth grade! The parents assured me their behavior was mild compared to other parents. Nevertheless, the results were predictable: Chad was anxious, highly critical of himself, and impulsive, almost explosive at times. He was performing to be loved, which left him only as good as his last performance. The rhythm of Catholic fatherhood was broken, and they were all frustrated.

### Sacred Heart and Spiritual Fatherhood

Jesus' Sacred Heart teaches men a lot about this rhythm of fatherhood. During his time on earth Jesus fathered no physical children (unless you believe the fiction writer Dan Brown). But he was a spiritual father—a leader, mentor, and coach (and much more), to the twelve apostles and his other disciples! He loved and challenged them. It was the Heart of Jesus that revealed how his Father's heart was turned towards his children—us—in love and mercy. The Father's heart is what we need to receive and what we are to give to others. Scripture confirms the giving part, "The hearts of fathers will be turned back to the children" (Mal 3:24, 4:6; Lk 1:17; Sir 48:10). Jesus actually became indignant, incensed, or irate at the disciples for hindering the little children from coming to him to be embraced, touched, and blessed by him (Mk. 10:13-16). He was tough on his disciples and tender towards the children in his spiritual fatherhood!

St. John Paul II reflected on the Sacred Heart quite a bit. In talking about the gift of the Holy Spirit called piety (reverence, devoutness), he says, "the Spirit heals our hearts of every form of hardness, and opens them to tenderness toward God and our brothers and sisters" (May 28, 1989). From our sonship, tenderness flows toward

God and is expressed in prayer that arises from our own poverty and void of chasing after earthly things, and then turns toward him for "grace, help, and pardon." It is piety which directs us to trust God as "a good and generous Father" and to call him Abba (Gal. 4:4-7)!

This tenderness is manifested in meekness, a familial openness, toward our neighbor. Meekness is not weakness! Meekness is having the power to act or destroy, but not using it. The Spirit infuses into us a new capacity to love others, making our "heart[s] participate in some manner in the very meekness of the Heart of Christ." Our spiritual fatherhood is made complete we when see others as part of the family of God, treating them with tenderness and friendliness.

### Back to Soccer

I worked with Chad's father to create new liturgies (rituals and routines) in their domestic church that communicated love to Chad. He affirmed Chad as a son rather than just his performance. And we shifted the focus from results, which Chad could not control, to his efforts—so while he might not always score a goal, he could always choose to play hard. These changes made a huge difference. Chad paid more attention, became more self-motivated, and everyone noticed the change. In fact, in one game, he was playing hard, but they were losing badly. He had put his shorts on backwards, and though it was not obvious, a friend started to harass him about it. Normally Chad would have blown up, but instead he retorted, "Do you really think that's the biggest problem we have here?" I was amazed and laughed, saying, "I can't even get adults to do this!" Chad was feeling much more secure and loved. The rhythm was back in right order: love and challenge; tenderness and toughness. We had returned from Olympic tryouts to fourth grade soccer!

### The Challenge

June is the month of the Sacred Heart. It includes Father's Day, which celebrates physical fatherhood. But we must challenge **all men** to follow the Sacred Heart and be spiritual fathers, turning their hearts towards all fatherless children in tenderness, challenging them to be the best versions of themselves. All men are called to reveal and relive the very fatherhood of God on Earth—this is spiritual fatherhood.

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