

Naming the 'Father Hunger'  
An Interview With Richard Rohr  
By Anthony J. Schulte, O.F.M.  
October 1990

permission given by [St. Anthony Messenger Press](#)  
[Printer friendly](#) (PDF 9 pages)

“All men know how to do is pass on roles, money and opinions, but not who they are,” says Father Richard Rohr, O.F.M. The fundamental drive affecting male spirituality, he believes, is “father hunger.”

“I gave a directed retreat recently to a very fine man, a priest who has driven himself to be perfect, successful. We were trying to determine where that drive was coming from. A great silence ensued that was almost embarrassing and I could see that something was happening,” recalls Father Richard Rohr, O.F.M., an internationally known retreat director, author and lecturer.

“It’s like a chasm. It’s like a canyon,” the priest said.”

“What is?’ I asked.”

“The depth of the emptiness and pain of my relationship with my father,’ he replied. All he could keep saying was, ‘It’s like a canyon.’”

“Here was a man who looked very productive and creative. And he was, but in his 40’s his world started collapsing because he was always driven by a need to please his father. Nothing he ever did for his father was right. He transferred that need to please the Church, the bishop and the people. But that drive was keeping him from the real experience that he already was loved by God.”

“That little example is the story of much of the Church as far as I am concerned. This father hunger is running so many things for good and for ill. When we don’t recognize we are seeking love and approval from the absent father, then we become compulsive, frenetic, busy, wild in a bad sense. That is why we need power, sex and money. We don’t recognize that what is really at work is father hunger.”

“I find this father wound to be even bigger and deeper than I first had expected years ago. There is a father hunger in society that is unrecognized, unnamed, not seen as that. It is seen in the people who rage toward society, and in the need for authority – for someone else to tell them what to do. Underneath all of that there is a father wound out of which comes a tremendous father hunger in our society that is showing its face in so, so many ways.”

Rohr has seen that hunger and its effects on individuals in traveling around the world as a retreat director, as pastor of a charismatic lay community in Ohio and, most recently, as animator of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Drawing on these experiences, he shares his reflections on the nature of spirituality with St. Anthony Messenger.

What role does mentoring play in discovering the true sense of the masculine or does its lack play in the father hunger we see in society today?

A central one. The power of relationship is passed on through relationship and experience. It isn’t passed on through books. To discover masculine energy, we need to be in relationship with someone who has progressed farther along on the journey. We need to be mentored.

When I was a young newly ordained priest, a Franciscan mentor did me the greatest favor. He said, “Richard, a lot of people are intuitive, but you trust your intuition and go with it. I want you to promise me you will always trust your intuition.” Now that is a wonderful example of a man giving another man masculine energy – of a man mentoring, fathering another man.

Somehow – and this is the heart of the problem – men have lost the ability to pass on the wisdom and experience of their life and who they are. All they know how to do is pass on roles, money and opinions, but not who they are. I would see that as the single greatest lack of power, dysfunction and disability in civilization today.

No civilization has survived if the elders did not see their task as passing on the fruit of their experience to the young through some kind of initiation rite. We, however, look forward to old age so we can retire and move to Florida.

In so many of the countries that I have visited men are no longer authoritative or empowered – leaders in any true sense. They have walked no spiritual journeys so they have nothing to offer. All they can do is go in the direction of clichés, control, comfort, legality and all the rest. That’s all that is available to them. As a result, there is a tremendous father hunger within many societies today. Just what do you mean by “father hunger”?

By “father hunger” I mean the profound, but usually unconscious longing for affirmation and limits from male authority figures. The most common words people use to describe their relationships with their fathers are “absence,” “sadness” and “I don’t know him.” Men have not been given the permission or the skills to pass on who they are to their children. We often know what makes fathers angry, but not the deep desires and dreams of their hearts, much less their loneliness and hurt. That vacuum creates a similar emptiness in the hearts of sons and daughters. Dad is an unnameable mystery, which only calls forth fear, doubt and sometimes endless rebellion.

I do not want to see everything through one prism, but I do believe that father hunger is at least intrinsically involved in such diverse phenomena as military and athletic bonding, prostitution and addiction to success and power, some expressions of homosexuality, gangs and male aggression, many women’s acquiescence to sexism, and the practice today in otherwise intelligent groups of “killing the leader.”

In Latin countries, I am convinced that machismo is basically men strutting their stuff in front of one another much more than it is an attempt to win the woman. A man who has been initiated into manhood by his father has no need to be macho. An insecure, uninitiated man has to be: He takes on the symbolic, exaggerated masculine [role] because he has never been given the real thing. If fathers could pass on their feelings, their excitement, their grief, their touch and the process of their struggles to become authentic men instead of just their dogmatic conclusions to their sons and daughters, I believe that we would have a very different world. There would be less mistrust and anger toward power and maleness, much less need for war and competition, much less fear and making demons of the unknown enemy.

We are now living in a time when many people believe that all men are stupid, insensitive and self-seeking. There is no way to build up good models of maleness when males themselves are ashamed and mistrustful of maleness.

I want to talk about this to give some men the courage to be true fathers and mentors, to start walking the inner and outer journeys so they have something to pass on to the next generation of the sons and daughters of God. The young need the wisdom and the blessing of their fathers who are truly fathers for them.

In this age of feminism and increasing equality between the sexes, is there a need to speak of masculine spirituality?

I think there is, for a lot of reasons. Our Church spirituality has been neither masculine nor feminine, but neuter – an approach to God that lacks the power of true relationship. It is mechanical, planned, theoretical and calculated toward personal gain.

A truly masculine or feminine spirituality, however, will be charged, alive, reciprocal, passing through stages of union, grief and every emotion in between. It cannot be managed ahead of time by rules that always work, but will require daily listening, engagement and letting go. Neuter spirituality exists when the encounter with God is no longer personal and erotic. In that sense, a neuter spirituality has been de-sexed.

There’s great power in the sexual images of hardness and softness – of the sacred no traditionally associated with the masculine, and the sacred yes traditionally associated with the feminine, which involve clear responsibilities and surrenders.

By the sacred yes or sacred no I mean that affirmation or negation that comes from a deep place of wisdom and courage, even if it creates conflict or disagreement. The sacred yes is not willful or

egocentric, but rather is willing and surrendered. The sacred no is not rebellion or refusal, but always the necessary protecting of boundaries.

Because Jesus had said a deep yes to the Reign of the Father, for example, he could unflinchingly offer a sacred no to religious leaders who sought their own kingdoms. Similarly, because St. Francis had offered his “marriage vows” to Lady Poverty, he could get up on the roof and tear off the shingles from a house that the friars had built against their life of poverty.

The sacred no takes a special kind of grace and clarity that I think is essential to the mature male and female. In almost all cultures and myths it takes the form of the warrior. The warrior is the protector of boundaries. Without the sacred no of the warrior, nothing is forbidden, and therefore, nothing is required. A child who grows up without discipline and love, for example, will have little social sense of accepted limits, of right and wrong. So without boundaries, reality means nothing except what the private ego wants it to mean.

In contrast, the warrior must be in submission to a “king” – one who has a vision of truth and justice larger than himself. Today we have few sacred no’s because we have few warriors, individuals who are protecting boundaries other than their own.

The ultimate warrior is the saint who protects the boundaries of the Reign of God – even against the demands of state or institutional religion. In its fullest form the warrior and the sacred no are seen in the rare but necessary figure of the prophet.

Can a woman be a warrior?

There is both a male and female way of being a warrior. Although both fulfill their respective roles differently, they share essentially the same task – giving name and order to the realm. In other words, a masculine spirituality will emphasize certain human qualities as essential, a feminine spirituality will emphasize others, but they ideally will be integrated in a unique way in each of us. In that sense, women need to learn about a so-called masculine spirituality, and men need to be educated in a feminine spirituality. How or in what way those come together in each of us is God’s work, not ours. A person who has walked that spiritual journey and integrated the two can utter the sacred yes and the sacred no. Much of that ability has been transferred to an institution which has told us when to say “yes” and “no.” Consequently, there has been no need for people to take inner journeys to get in touch with the masculine and feminine sides of the soul.

In our society mentoring and the establishment of boundaries is only allowed in the military and the world of sports. The coach and the drill sergeant are allowed to set limits and to say, “Shape up. You’ve never paid the price for anything. You’ve never risked anything.”

Traditionally [in the Church] we have had the power of the sacred no, of putting limits on the person, of challenging the person for the sake of something spiritual, sacred and great in order to expand the soul.

The Church does not use that power to call the sons and daughters of God to the kinds of issues Jesus called us to in the Sermon on the Mount: to the journey of justice, to nonviolence, to a simple and even poor life-style, to freedom and truth beyond institutional truth. Instead the Church has often used the sacred no for issues of control – usually in the areas of sexuality and marriage – which only produces more anger, mistrust and fear of “the fathers.”

True masculine energy, however, results in a sense of healthy – I don’t mean reactionary – healthy inner authority. Men and women with masculine energy are willing to do what they know they have to do regardless of the price, and without having to be assured from the outside they are right.

Masculine spirituality is a spirituality of individuals who know that they have life for others and are confident of it.

How does that differ from feminine spirituality?

Feminine spirituality includes the freedom inside to be tender, nurturing, forgiving, gentle, to let go and to surrender. The feminine is characterized by the freedom to weep and to touch.

I see the Church spirituality in which many of us were reared as lacking the ability to weep over humanity’s pain and the ability to touch. Our sisters, thank God, are making us aware of the other

side – that ability to weep, to touch, to understand reality and the Scriptures from the perspective of relationship and from the perspective of the body.

This neuter spirituality we have operated from before within the Church has largely understood everything from the perspective of what Church leaders called reason, logic and truth which is, for the most part, a self-maintaining, self-protective system of truth. In her book, *Women's Reality*, Anne Wilson Schaef calls it “the white male myth of reality.”

It is members of the white-male system who have most of the power in the whole world, make most of the decisions in the world, make most of the money in the world, have written most of the books in the world and presume they understand reality. Because we live daily now on the brink of ecological catastrophe and much of the world is starving to death, it is obvious to me that members of this system have not comprehended the truth, the reason and the meaning of reality.

So feminine spirituality is simply refusing to continue to legitimate that perspective. Our sisters are saying, “Your reading of the gospel is not the only reading.” I think they are right.

Women are calling men to the inner journey and the contemplative perspective within which they can stand in union with God and the Gospels. I am not trying to preach a gospel of individualism. I am simply saying that trusting our experience has to be the starting point, not the whole journey.

How does the typical man on Wall Street, in the boardroom or in the factory get in touch with a healthy masculine spirituality?

We have to accept from the beginning that the typical man on Wall Street, whatever that connotes, is a very addicted, trapped person. Unless we accept that he is trapped in a mythology which is largely a lie, we are not going to be able to move away from it. Men in all previous history used their energy to produce, to create something in the outer world.

Now for the first time in history we have the phenomenon of men not making things like the great cathedrals or just doing a job in the cobbler or carpenter shop of which they can be proud. Now they make money. Making money is a fiction which literally doesn't exist except on paper and in banks.

We have taken masculine energy which in its best instances is outer-directed for the life of the world and the community, for the betterment of the human age and the human spirit, and we largely have turned it falsely inward for a person's own ego and security needs. A man who needs to combat, succeed and win that much is a very insecure person. He has no soul, no inner grounding. So, I think we have to accept that the white-male system is dangerous for the soul and for society. The man who is playing the game has some major surgery to do – major. I don't think that surgery is merely a matter of some light spiritual reading and going to up-to-date liturgies while still playing the game. The illusions of the game, what it means and where it is going have to be radically questioned by a Christian.

Are there any differences in the approach to male spirituality for those who are married versus those who are single?

There is no difference. I don't think spirituality is concerned with state of life. It might be called forth from us differently, but what has to be called forth, named and owned is the same for a married man or a single man. We both have to meet the feminine. You can meet the feminine not just in other women, but also in other men who are in touch with their feminine, and in the circumstances of life – the sufferings of the world which call forth from us tenderness and understanding.

What do you think men today need to hear and why?

Men need to realize – and this is going to sound very old-fashioned – that striving for sex, prestige and possessions is, in most cases, a refusal to walk the spiritual journey. Instead of competing within themselves for wholeness and authenticity, men have allowed their souls to be projected outward in terms of their preoccupation with getting a woman and getting money, which is a source of power.

Men think, “If only I can obtain them, then I'm going to be happy.” Men need to be told that is utterly false. They have to be convinced that this obsession with money, sex and power is going to get them nowhere in terms of the spiritual life.

What is the one thing you want to tell women about men?

I know many women think we are the ones who have the power and the money. And oftentimes we do, but I am saying that is not power. Many women think of us as the oppressors. They have to realize in the real state of affairs – the realm of spirituality – men are the oppressed. We are less free, less empowered and less in touch [with our inner selves] than they are. Women need to stop imitating and envying us.

Men are into pseudo-success, pseudo-power, pseudo-sexuality that we don't even know we need liberation. We think we are liberated, but we are liberated from the wrong things. Males have been excluded and we have excluded ourselves from the most important things of all: family, spirituality, emotions and feelings, personal growth and the soul. We have been cut off from the very things for which humanity was created. Women should affirm us for the right reasons, and challenge us for right reasons.

We need to work together to break out of patriarchy. Please don't exclude us from the solution just because we have been such a big part of the problem. The gospel tells us that those "at the top" are the least free and therefore, "the last."

In our culture, women, for the most part, echo the white-male system and its mythology. Many applaud us for being macho and playing football, and then wonder why they don't have sensitive husbands.

How can a single parent be both mother and father to his or her children?

The grand examples I see of this are some of the black women of the inner city who seem to have integrated [the two roles]. They are hard as nails, honest as they can be, and yet people just love being pulled into their bosoms and hugged because they know they are going to be taken care of. These great, grand black women of the inner city weren't created yesterday. They have integrated the masculine and the feminine characteristics of the human person for several generations.

If individuals have to be single parents today, I think they need mentoring. They need themselves to be grandfathered, to be grandmothered by someone who has walked a bit more of the journey than they have. Single parents cannot do it alone. Obviously, we need community today more than ever. How is the mystery of the Trinity a model for masculine and feminine spirituality?

I have always marveled how everything goes back to the mystery of the Trinity. This mystery says the foundation of reality is relationship – the giving and receiving between the Father and the Son, which is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the life given back and received between the Father and the Son.

That's very traditional Trinitarian doctrine.

Now I know that our words there are masculine, which skews the whole thing in one partial direction, because the masculine is only one-half of the picture. We can't deny that Jesus is masculine, but we certainly don't want to say that the mystery of God is masculine. We do want to say that the mystery of God is relationship.

We have to back to Genesis where we were created in the image of God – male and female. So this Godhead, this beginning point is called Father. Father is not, in all truth, the most perfect word in all cases, but it will always be sacred because Jesus used it. We have to keep reminding ourselves, nevertheless, that this Father's love is so perfect it is like the love of a mother. This Father is father, but this Father is also mother. That is not new liberal theology. You could not be any more traditional than that. It is just that we have denied that reality for centuries in our false masculine interpretation of the Church (which is entirely led by males, of course!).

My own opinion why Jesus used the masculine word (apart from culture) is that most of the human race seems to bear a greater wound from the male and father love. It is therefore the harder and, for many, the more necessary word that they must "dare to say." Don't throw out the words mother or father until you can pronounce them with great freedom and trust.

How does that speak to us as a model of masculine spirituality?

We have said the Father generates all life. In the generative and creative power of fatherhood we have the image of the masculine. But what this God creates, this God preserves, maintains and nurtures in existence. The medieval Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus taught that we would not

exist if second by second God did not choose and sustain me – not just as part of a class – but choose and sustain me precisely apart from you.

When people let themselves be affirmed by the Father, you see, then they don't race after coaches, drill sergeants, roles and titles to keep affirming them as individuals. That again is why contemplation is central to Christianity. It is only there where they are named by God, foundationally, rightly and eternally. Then there is no need to grab outside of oneself for success, identity and affirmation. So there we see the Trinity as masculine – creating life – but also as feminine – maintaining life by choosing and nurturing the individual. Both aspects are founded on the most traditional teachings of the Church.

The Gospel of John says that we are “born” of the Spirit. Much of the tradition has always seen the Spirit as feminine and creative. I don't want you to think that only the masculine is creative or only the feminine nurturing. Jesus, quite honestly, puts them together quite well in his human person. How can women and men support one another in their spiritual journeys?

The best couples I know are those who are secure enough within their relationship and within themselves to give one another space away from one another in order to walk their own journeys. She cannot keep him home every night “with kids and me.” He cannot demand she just stay home, be his cook and bottle-washer, and nurse his children. She has to move to the larger world. Her gift of relatedness has to move beyond the sphere of her own children to the suffering children in Ethiopia and El Salvador. He must learn the patience and concreteness of human love.

A recent statistic says that 57 percent of the active American Catholics do nothing beyond their parish. That is a very sad and convicting statistic.

So many people today in religious life, in lay ministry and even in groups like Marriage Encounter or the charismatic movement, think they are really up-to-date because they belong to a Church society. But they have only made half the journey. How are they going to mediate that life to the issues of the world and of society? How do you bring the masculine and feminine energy you learn from Marriage Encounter, let's say, to the town meeting in Massachusetts?

How can we support one another in our uniqueness and those things we share in common on our spiritual journeys? I guess my assumption is that will take care of itself. We are most unlike at the beginning of the journey, but we must continue to walk it together as allies and companions.

The place where we are the most alike is at the end of the journey. Spiritually mature men and women are highly capable of love and communion. They don't need one another in that rigid sense. They can give love and enjoy one another. They can give life to one another, but they can also be away from each other. He can be gone for a week helping refugees and neither one is going to fall apart. Each knows who they are apart from the other. Finally, spiritually mature men and women are able to pass their life, wisdom and experience on to their children, thus breaking the cycle of father hunger.