THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SONHENRI NOUWE

CONCLUSION: BECOMING THE FATHER

"Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate."

A Lonely Step

When I first saw the detail of Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son,* a spiritual journey was set in motion that led me to write this book. As I now come to its conclusion, I discover how long a journey I have made.

From the beginning I was prepared to accept that not only the younger son, but also the elder son would reveal to me an important aspect of my spiritual journey. For a long rime the father remained "the other," the one who would receive me, forgive me, offer me a home, and give me peace and joy. The father was the place to return to, the goal of my journey, the final resting place. It was only gradually and often quite painfully that I came to realize that my spiritual journey would never be complete as long as the father remained an outsider.

It dawned on me that even my best theological and spiritual formation had not been able to completely free me from a Father God who remained somewhat threatening and somewhat fearsome. All I had learned about the Father's love had not fully enabled me to let go of an authority above me who had power over me and would use it according to his will. Somehow, God's love for me was limited by my fear of God's power, and it seemed wise to keep a careful distance even though the desire for closeness was immense. I know that I share this experience with countless others. I have seen how the fear of becoming subject to God's revenge and punishment has paralyzed the mental and emotional lives of many people, independently of their age, religion, or life-style. This paralyzing fear of God is one of the great human tragedies.

Rembrandt's painting and his own tragic life have offered me a context in which to discover that the final stage of the spiritual life is to so fully let go of all fear of the Father that it becomes possible to become like him. As long as the Father evokes fear, he remains an outsider and cannot dwell within me. But Rembrandt, who showed me the Father in utmost vulnerability, made me come to the awareness that my final vocation is indeed to become like the Father and to live out his divine compassion in my daily life. Though I am both the younger son and the elder son, I am not to remain them, but to become the Father. No father or mother ever became father or mother without having been son or daughter, but every son and daughter has to consciously choose to step beyond their childhood and become father and mother for others. It is a hard and lonely step to take:-especially in a period of history in which parenthood is so hard to live well-but it is a step that is essential for the fulfilment of the spiritual journey.

Although Rembrandt does not place the father in the physical center of his painting, it is clear that the father is the center of the event the painting portrays. From him comes all the light, to him

goes all the attention. Rembrandt, faithful to the parable, intended that our primary attention go to the father before anyone else.

I am amazed at how long it has taken me to make the father the center of my attention. It was so easy to identify with the two sons. Their outer and inner waywardness is so understandable and so profoundly human that identification happens almost spontaneously as soon as the connections are pointed out. For a long time I had identified myself so fully with the younger son that it did not even occur to me that I might be more like the elder. But as soon as a friend said, "Aren't you the elder son in the story?" it was hard to see anything else. Seemingly, we all participate to a greater or lesser degree in all the forms of human brokenness. Neither greed nor anger, neither lust nor resentment, neither frivolity nor jealousy are completely absent from any one of us. Our human brokenness can be acted out in many ways, but there is no offence, crime, or war that does not have its seeds in our own hearts.

But what of the father? Why pay so much attention to the sons when it is the father who is in the center and when it is the father with whom I am to identify? Why talk so much about being like the sons when the real question is: Are you interested in being like the father? It feels somehow good to be able to say: "These sons are like me." It gives a sense of being understood. But how does it feel to say: "The father is like me"? Do I want to be like the father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes home; not just the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it as well?

Isn't there a subtle pressure in both the Church and society to remain a dependent child? Hasn't the Church in the past stressed obedience in a fashion that made it hard to claim spiritual fatherhood, and hasn't our consumer society encouraged us to indulge in childish self-gratification? Who has truly challenged us to liberate ourselves from immature dependencies and to accept the burden of responsible adults? And aren't we ourselves constantly trying to escape the fearful task of fatherhood? Rembrandt certainly did. Only after much pain and suffering, when he approached death, was he able to understand and paint true spiritual paternity.

Perhaps the most radical statement Jesus ever made is: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." God's compassion is described by Jesus not simply to show me how willing God is to feel for me, or to forgive me my sins and offer me new life and happiness, but to invite me to become like God and to show the same compassion to others as he is showing to me. If the only meaning of the story were that people sin but God forgives, I could easily begin to think of my sins as a fine occasion for God to show me his forgiveness. There would be no real challenge in such an interpretation. I would resign myself to my weaknesses and keep hoping that eventually God would dose his eyes to them and let me come home, whatever I did. Such sentimental romanticism is not the message of the Gospels.

What I am called to make true is that whether I am the younger or the elder son, I am the son of my compassionate Father. I am an heir. No one says it more dearly than Paul when he writes: "The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God. And if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, provided that we share his sufferings, so as to share his glory." Indeed, as son and heir I am to become successor. I am destined to step into my Father's place and offer to others the same compassion that he has offered me. The return to the Father is ultimately the challenge to become the Father.

This call to become the Father precludes any "soft" interpretation of the story. I know how much I long to return and be held safe, but do I really want to be son and heir with all that that implies? Being in the Father's house requires that I make the Father's life my own and become transformed in his image.

Recently, on looking into a mirror, I was struck by how much I look like my dado Looking at my own features, I suddenly saw the man whom I had seen when I was twenty-seven years old: the man I had admired as well as criticized, loved as well as feared. Much of my energy had been invested in finding my own self in the face of this person, and many of my questions about who I

was and who I was to become had been shaped by being the son of this man. As I suddenly saw this man appearing in the mirror, I was overcome with the awareness that all the differences I had been aware of during my lifetime seemed so small compared with the similarities. As with a shock, I realized that I was indeed heir, successor, the one who is admired, feared, praised, and misunderstood by others, as my dad was by me.

The Fatherhood of Compassion

Rembrandt's portrayal of the father of the prodigal son makes me understand that I no longer need to use my sonship to keep my distance. Having lived my sonship to its ful1est, the time has come to step over all barriers and claim the truth that becoming the old man in front of me is all I really desire for myself I cannot remain a child forever, I cannot keep pointing to my father as an excuse for my life. I have to dare to stretch out my own hands in blessing and to receive with ultimate compassion my children, regardless of how they feel or think about me. Since becoming the compassionate Father is the ultimate goal of the spiritual life, as it is expressed in the parable as wel1 as in Rembrandt's painting, I now need to explore its full significance.

First of all, I have to keep in mind the context in which Jesus tells the story of the "man who had two sons." Luke writes: "The tax collectors and sinners... were all crowding around to listen to him, and the Pharisees and scribes complained saying: 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' "They put his legitimacy as a teacher in question by criticizing his closeness to sinful people. In response Jesus tells his critics the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son.

Jesus wants to make it clear that the God of whom he speaks is a God of compassion who joyously welcomes repentant sinners into his house. To associate and eat with people of ill repute, therefore, does not contradict his teaching about God, but does, in fact, live out this teaching in everyday life. If God forgives the sinners, then certainly those who have faith in God should do the same. If God welcomes sinners home, then certainly those who trust in God should do 1ikewise. If God is compassionate, then certainly those who love God should be compassionate as well. The God whom Jesus announces and in whose name he acts is the God of compassion, the God who offers himself as example and model for all human behaviour.

But there is more. Becoming like the heavenly Father is not just one important aspect of Jesus' teaching, it is the very heart of his message. The radical quality of Jesus' words and the seeming impossibility of his demands are quite obvious when heard as part of a general call to become and to be true sons and daughters of God.

As long as we belong to this world, we will remain subject to its competitive ways and expect to be rewarded for all the good we do. But when we belong to God, who loves us without conditions, we can live as he does. The great conversion called for by Jesus is to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God.

When, shortly before his death, Jesus prays to his Father for his disciples, he says: "[Father,] they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world… May they all be one… just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me."

Once we are in God's house as sons and daughters of his household, we can be like him, love like him, be good like him, care like him. Jesus leaves no doubt about this when he explains that: "If you love those who love you, what credit can you expect? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit can you expect? For even sinners do that much. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to get money back, what credit can you expect?... Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. Instead, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend without any hope of return. You will have a great reward, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and to the wicked.

Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate." That is the core message of the Gospel. The way human beings are called to love one another is God's way. We are called to love

one another with the same selfless outgoing love that we see in Rembrandt's depiction of the father. The compassion with which we are to love cannot be based upon a competitive life-style. It has to be this absolute compassion in which no trace of competition can be found. It has to be this radical love of enemy. If we are not only to be received by God, but also to receive as God, we must become like the heavenly Father and see the world through his eyes.

But even more important than the context of the parable and the explicit teaching of Jesus is the person of Jesus himself Jesus is the true Son of the Father. He is the model for our becoming the Father. In him the fullness of God dwells. All the knowledge of God resides in him; all the glory of God remains in him; all the power of God belongs to him. His unity with the Father is so intimate and so complete that to see Jesus is to see the Father. "Show us the Father," Philip says to him. Jesus responds, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

Jesus shows us what true sonship is. He is the younger son without being rebellious. He is the elder son without being resentful. In everything he is obedient to the Father, but never his slave. He hears everything the Father says, but this does not make him his servant. He does everything the Father sends him to do, but remains completely free. He gives everything, and he receives everything. He declares openly: "In all truth I tell you, by himself the Son can do nothing. He can only do what he sees the Father doing; and whatever the Father does the Son does too. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he himself does, and he will show him even greater things than these works that will astonish you. Thus as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to anyone he chooses; for the Father judges no one; he has entrusted all judgment to the Son, so that all may honour the Son as they honour the Father."

This is divine sonship. And it is to this sonship that I am called. The mystery of redemption is that God's Son became flesh so that all the lost children of God could become sons and daughters as Jesus is son. In this perspective, the story of the prodigal son takes on a whole new dimension. Jesus, the Beloved of the Father, leaves his Father's home to take on the sins of God's wayward children and bring them home. But, while leaving, he stays dose to the Father and through total obedience offers healing to his resentful brothers and sisters. Thus, for my sake, Jesus becomes the younger son as well as the elder son in order to show me how to become the Father. Through him I can become a true son again and, as a true son, I finally can grow to become compassionate as our heavenly Father is.

As the years of my life pass, I discover how arduous and challenging, but also how fulfilling it is to grow into this spiritual fatherhood. Rembrandt's painting rules out any thought that this has anything to do with power, influence, or control. I might once have held the illusion that one day the many bosses would be gone and I could finally be the boss myself But this is the way of the world in which power is the main concern. And it is not difficult to see that those who have tried most of their lives to get rid of their bosses are not going to be very different from their predecessors when they finally step into their places. Spiritual fatherhood has nothing to do with power or control. It is a fatherhood of compassion. And I have to keep looking at the father embracing the prodigal son to catch a glimpse of this.

Against my own best intentions, I find myself continually striving to acquire power. When I give advice, I want to know whether it is being followed; when I offer help, I want to be thanked; when I give money, I want it to be used my way; when I do something good, I want to be remembered. I might not get a statue, or even a memorial plaque, but I am constantly concerned that I not be forgotten, that somehow I will live on in the thoughts and deeds of others.

But the father of the prodigal son is not concerned about himself His long-suffering life has emptied him of his desires to keep in control of things. His children are his only concern, to them he wants to give himself completely, and for them he wants to pour out all of himself.

Can I give without wanting anything in return, love without putting any conditions on my love? Considering my immense need for human recognition and affection, I realize that it will be a

lifelong struggle. But I am also convinced that each time I step over this need and act free of my concern for return, I can trust that my life can truly bear the fruits of God's Spirit.

Is there a way to this spiritual fatherhood? Or am I doomed to remain so caught up in my own need to find a place in my world that I end up ever and again using the authority of power instead of the authority of compassion? Has competition so pervaded my entire being that I will continue to see my own children as rivals? If Jesus truly calls me to be compassionate as his heavenly Father is compassionate and if Jesus offers himself as the way to that compassionate life, then I cannot keep acting as though competition is, in fact, the last word. I must trust that I am capable of becoming the Father I am called to be.

Grief, Forgiveness, and Generosity

Looking at Rembrandt's painting of the father, I can see three ways to a truly compassionate fatherhood: grief, forgiveness, and generosity.

It might sound strange to consider grief a way to compassion. But it is. Grief asks me to allow the sins of the world-my own included-to pierce my heart and make me shed tears, many tears, for them. There is no compassion without many tears. If they can't be tears that stream from my eyes, they have to be at least tears that well up from my heart. When I consider the immense waywardness of God's children, our lust, our greed, our violence, our anger, our resentment, and when I look at them through the eyes of God's heart, I cannot but weep and cry out in grief:

Look, my soul, at the way one human being tries to inflict as much pain on another as possible; look at these people plotting to bring harm to their fellows; look at these parents molesting their children; look at this landowner exploiting his. workers; look at the violated women, the misused men, the abandoned children. Look, my soul, at the world; see the concentration camps, the prisons, the nursing homes, the hospitals, and hear the cries of the poor.

This grieving is praying. There are so few mourners left in this world. But grief is the discipline of the heart that sees the sin of the world, and knows itself to be the sorrowful price of freedom without which love cannot bloom. I am beginning to see that much of praying is grieving. This grief is so deep not just because the human sin is so great, but also--and more so--because the divine love is so boundless. To become like the Father whose only authority is compassion, I have to shed countless tears and so prepare my heart to receive anyone, whatever their journey has been, and forgive them from that heart.

The second way that leads to spiritual fatherhood is forgiveness. It is through constant forgiveness that we become like the Father. Forgiveness from the heart is very, very difficult. It is next to impossible. Jesus said to his disciples: "When your brother wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I am sorry,' you must forgive him."

I have often said, "I forgive you," but even as I said these words my heart remained angry or resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me that I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return-if only the praise for being so forgiving!

But God's forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged and that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one whom I am asked to forgive.

This "stepping over" is the authentic discipline of forgiveness. Maybe it is more "climbing over" than "stepping over." Often I have to climb over the wall of arguments and angry feelings that I have erected between myself and all those whom I love but who so often do not return that love. It is a wall of fear of being used or hurt again. It is a wall of pride, and the desire to stay in

control. But every time that I can step or climb over that wall, I enter into the house where the Father dwells, and there touch my neighbour with genuine compassionate love.

Grief allows me to see beyond my wall and realize the immense suffering that results from human lostness. It opens my heart to a genuine solidarity with my fellow humans. Forgiveness is the way to step over the wall and welcome others into my heart without expecting anything in return. Only when I remember that I am the Beloved Child can I welcome those who want to return with the same compassion as that with which the Father welcomes me.

The third way to become like the Father is generosity. In the parable, the father not only gives his departing son everything he asks, but also showers him with gifts on his return. And to his elder son he says: "All I have is yours." There is nothing the father keeps for himself He pours himself out for his sons.

He does not simply offer more than can be reasonably expected from someone who has been offended; no, he completely gives himself away without reserve. Both sons are for him "everything." In them he wants to pour out his very life. The way the younger son is given robe, ring, and sandals, and welcomed home with a sumptuous celebration, as well as the way the elder son is urged to accept his unique place in his father's heart and to join his younger brother around the table, make it very clear that all boundaries of patriarchal behaviour are broken through. This is not the picture of a remarkable father. This is the portrayal of God, whose goodness, love, forgiveness, care, joy, and compassion have no limits at all. Jesus presents God's generosity by using all the imagery that his culture provides, while constantly transforming it.

In order to become like the Father, I must be as generous as the Father is generous. Just as the Father gives his very self to his children, so must I give my very self to my brothers and sisters. Jesus makes it very clear that it is precisely this giving of self that is the mark of the true disciple. "No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends."

This giving of self is a discipline because it is something that does not come spontaneously. As children of the darkness that rules through fear, self-interest, greed, and power, our great motivators are survival and self-preservation. But as children of the light who know that perfect love casts out all fear, it becomes possible to give away all that we have for others.

As children of the light, we prepare ourselves to become true martyrs: people who witness with their whole lives to the unlimited love of God. Giving all thus becomes gaining all. Jesus expresses this clearly as he says: "Anyone who loses his life for my sake . . . will save it."

Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know that I am moving from fear to love. But these steps, certainly at first, are hard to take because there are so many emotions and feelings that hold me back from freely giving. Why should I give energy, time, money, and yes, even attention to someone who has offended me? Why should I share my life with someone who has shown no respect for it? I might be willing to forgive, but to give on top of that!

Still... the truth is that, in a spiritual sense, the one who has offended me belongs to my "kin," my "gen." The word "generosity" includes the term "gen" which we also find in the words "gender," "generation," and "generativity." This term, from the Latin *genus* and the Greek *genos*, refers to our being of one kind. Generosity is a giving that comes from the knowledge of that intimate bond. True generosity is acting on the truth-not on the feeling-that those I am asked to forgive are "kinfolk," and belong to my family. And whenever I act this way, that truth will become more visible to me. Generosity creates the family it believes in.

Grief, forgiveness, and generosity are, then, the three ways by which the image of the Father can grow in me. They are three aspects of the Father's call to *be* home. As the Father, I am no longer *called* to come home as the younger or elder son, but to *be* there as the one to whom the wayward children can return and be welcomed with joy. It is very hard to just *be* home and wait. It is a waiting in grief for those who have left and a waiting with hope to offer forgiveness and new life to those who will return.

As the Father, I have to believe that all that the human heart desires can be found at home. As the Father, I have to be free from the need to wander around curiously and to catch up with what I might otherwise perceive as missed childhood opportunities. As the Father, I have to know that, indeed, my youth is over and that playing youthful games is nothing but a ridiculous attempt to cover up the truth that I am old and dose to death. As the Father, I have to dare to carry the responsibility of a spiritually adult person and dare to trust that the real joy and real fulfilment can only come from welcoming home those who have been hurt and wounded on their life's journey, and loving them with a love that neither asks nor expects anything in return.

There is a dreadful emptiness in this spiritual fatherhood. No power, no success, no popularity, no easy satisfaction. But that same dreadful emptiness is also the place of true freedom. It is the place where there is "nothing left to lose," where love has no strings attached, and where real spiritual strength is found.

Every time I touch that dreadful yet fruitful emptiness in myself, I know that I can welcome anyone there without condemnation and offer hope. There I am free to receive the burdens of others without any need to evaluate, categorize, or analyze. There, in that completely non-judgmental state of being, I can engender liberating trust.

Once, while visiting a dying friend, I directly experienced this holy emptiness. In my friend's presence I felt no desire to ask questions about the past. or to speculate about the future. We were just together without fear, without guilt or shame, without worries. In that emptiness, God's unconditional love could be sensed and we could say what the old Simeon said when he took the Christ child in his arms: "Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace as you promised." There, in the midst of the dreadful emptiness, was complete trust, complete peace, and complete joy. Death no longer was the enemy. Love was victorious.

Each time we touch that sacred emptiness of non-demanding love, heaven and earth tremble and there is great "rejoicing among the angels of God." It is the joy for the returning sons and daughters. It is the joy of spiritual fatherhood.

Living out this spiritual fatherhood requires the radical discipline of being home. As a self-rejecting person always in search of affirmation and affection, I find it impossible to love consistently without asking for something in return. But the discipline is precisely to give up wanting to accomplish this myself as a heroic feat. To claim for myself spiritual fatherhood and the authority of compassion that belongs to it, I have to let the rebellious younger son and the resentful elder son step up on the platform to receive the unconditional, forgiving love that the Father offers me, and to discover there the call to be home as my Father is home.

Then both sons in me can gradually be transformed into the compassionate father. This transformation leads me to the fulfilment of the deepest desire of my restless heart. Because what greater joy can there be for me than to stretch out my tired arms and let my hands rest in a blessing on the shoulders of my home-coming children?

EPILOGUE: LIVING THE PAINTING

When I saw the Rembrandt poster for the first time in the fall of 1983, all my attention was drawn to the hands of the old father pressing his returning boy to his chest. I saw forgiveness, reconciliation, healing; I also saw safety, rest, being at home. I was so deeply touched by this image of the life-giving embrace of father and son because everything in me yearned to be received in the way the prodigal son was received. That encounter turned out to be the beginning of my own return.

The L'Arche community gradually became my home. Never in my life did I dream that men and women with a mental handicap would be the ones who would put their hands on me in a gesture of blessing and offer me a home. For a long time, I had sought safety and security among the wise and clever, hardly aware that the things of the Kingdom were revealed to "little children"; that God has chosen "those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise."

But when I experienced the warm, unpretentious reception of those who have nothing to boast about, and experienced a loving embrace from people who didn't ask any questions, I began to discover that a true spiritual homecoming means a return to the poor in spirit to whom the Kingdom of Heaven belongs. The embrace of the Father became very real to me in the embraces of the mentally poor.

Having first viewed the painting while visiting a community of mentally handicapped people allowed me to make a connection that is deeply rooted in the mystery of our salvation. It is the connection between the blessing given by God and the blessing given by the poor. In L'Arche I came to see that these blessings are truly one. The Dutch master not only brought me into touch with the deepest longings of my heart, but also led me to discover that those longings could be fulfilled in the community where I first met him.

It now has been more than six years since I first saw the Rembrandt poster at Trosly and five years since I decided to make L'Arche my home. As I reflect on these years, I realize that the people with a mental handicap and their assistants made me "live" Rembrandt's painting more completely than I could have anticipated. The warm welcomes I have received in many L'Arche houses and the many celebrations I have shared have allowed me to experience deeply the younger son's return. Welcome and celebration are, indeed, two of the main characteristics of the life "in the Ark." There are so many welcome signs, hugs and kisses, songs, skits, and festive meals that for an outsider L'Arche may appear a lifelong homecoming celebration.

I also have lived the elder son's story. I hadn't really seen how much the elder son belongs to Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* until I went to Saint Petersburg and saw the whole picture. There I discovered the tension Rembrandt evokes. There is not only the light-filled reconciliation between' the father and the younger son, but also the dark, resentful distance of the elder son. There is repentance, but also anger. There is communion, but also alienation. There is the warm glow of healing, but also the coolness of the critical eye; there is the offer of mercy, but also the enormous resistance against receiving it. It didn't take long before I encountered the elder son in me.

Life in community does not keep the darkness away. To the contrary. It seems that the light that attracted me to L'Arche also made me conscious of the darkness in myself Jealousy, anger, the feeling of being rejected or neglected, the sense of not truly belonging-all of these emerged in the context of a community striving for a life of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. Community life has opened me up to the real spiritual combat: the struggle to keep moving toward the light precisely when the darkness is so real.

As long as I lived by myself, it seemed rather easy to keep the elder son hidden from view. But the sharing of life with people who are not hiding their feelings soon confronted me with the elder son within. There is little romanticism to community life. There is the constant need to keep stepping out of the engulfing darkness onto the platform of the father's embrace.

Handicapped people have little to lose. Without guile they show me who they are. They openly express their love as well as their fear, their gentleness as well as their anguish, their generosity as well as their selfishness. By just simply being who they are, they break through my sophisticated defences and demand that I be as open with them as they are with me. Their handicap unveils my own. Their anguish mirrors my own. Their vulnerabilities show me my own. By forcing me to confront the elder son in me, L'Arche opened the way to bring him home. The same handicapped people who welcomed me home and invited me to celebrate also confronted me with my not yet converted self and made me aware that the journey was far from ended.

While these discoveries have profoundly impacted on my life, the greatest gift from L'Arche is the challenge of becoming the Father. Being older in years than most members of the community and also being its pastor, it seems natural to think of myself as a father. Because of my ordination, I already have the tide. Now I have to live up to it.

Becoming the Father in a community of mentally handicapped people and their assistants is far more demanding than grappling with the struggles of the younger and the elder son.

Rembrandt's father is a father who is emptied out by suffering. Through the many "deaths" he suffered, he became completely free to receive and to give. His outstretched hands are not begging, grasping, demanding, warning, judging, or condemning. They are hands that only bless, giving all and expecting nothing.

I am now faced with the hard and seemingly impossible task of letting go of the child in me. Paul says it clearly: "When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult, I have finished with all childish ways." It is comfortable to be the wayward younger son or the angry elder son.

Our community is full of wayward and angry children, and being surrounded by peers gives a sense of solidarity. Yet the longer I am part of the community, the more that solidarity proves to be only a way station on the road to a much more lonely destination: the loneliness of the Father, the loneliness of God, the ultimate loneliness of compassion. The community does not need yet another younger or elder son, whether converted or not, but a father who lives with outstretched hands, always desiring to let them rest on the shoulders of his returning children. Yet everything in me resists that vocation. I keep clinging to the child in me. I do not want to be half blind; I want to see clearly what is going on around me. I do not want to wait until my children come home; I want to be with them where they are in a foreign country or on the farm with the servants. I do not want to remain silent about what happened; I am curious to hear the whole story and have countless questions to ask. I do not want to keep stretching my hands out when there are so few who are willing to be embraced, especially when fathers and father figures are considered by many the source of their problems.

And still, after a long life as son, I know for sure that the true call is to become a father who only blesses in endless compassion, asking no questions, always giving and forgiving, never expecting anything in return. In a community, all this is often disturbingly concrete. I want to know what is happening. I want to be involved in the daily ups and downs of people's lives. I want to be remembered, invited, and informed. But the fact is that few recognize my desire and those who do are not sure how to respond to it. My people, whether handicapped or not, are not looking for another peer, another playmate, nor even for another brother. They seek a father who can bless and forgive without needing them in the way they need him. I see clearly the truth of my vocation to be a father; at the same time it seems to me almost impossible to follow it. I don't want to stay home while everyone goes out, whether driven by their many desires or their many angers. I feel these same impulses and want to run around like others do! But who is going to be home when they return-tired, exhausted, excited, disappointed, guilty, or ashamed? Who is going to convince them that, after all is said and done, there is a safe place to return to and receive an embrace? If it is not I, who is it going to be? The joy of fatherhood is vastly different from the pleasure of the wayward children. It is a joy beyond rejection and loneliness; yes, even beyond affirmation and community. It is the joy of a fatherhood that takes its name from the heavenly Father and partakes in his divine solitude.

It does not surprise me at all that few people claim fatherhood for themselves. The pains are too obvious, the joys too hidden. And still, by not claiming it I shirk my responsibility as a spiritually adult person. Yes, I even betray my vocation. Nothing less than that! But how can I choose what seems so contrary to all my needs? A voice says to me, "Don' t be afraid. The Child will take you by the hand and lead you to fatherhood." I know that voice can be trusted. As always, the poor, the weak, the marginal, the rejected, the forgotten, the least . . . they not only need me to be their father, but also show me how to be a father for them. True fatherhood is sharing the poverty of God's non-demanding love. I am afraid to enter into that poverty, but those who have already entered it through their physical or mental disabilities will be my teachers.

Looking at the people I live with, the handicapped men and women as well as their assistants, I see the immense desire for a father in whom fatherhood and motherhood are one. They all have suffered from the experience of rejection or abandonment; they all have been wounded as they grew up; they all wonder whether they are worthy of the unconditional love of God, and they all search for the place where they can safely return and be touched by hands that bless them.

Rembrandt portrays the father as the man who has transcended the ways of his children. His own loneliness and anger may have been there, but they have been transformed by suffering and tears. His loneliness has become endless solitude, his anger boundless gratitude. This is who I have to become. I see it as clearly as I see the immense beauty of the father's emptiness and compassion. Can I let the younger and the elder son grow in me to the maturity of the compassionate father?

When, four years ago, I went to Saint Petersburg to see Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* I had little idea how much I would have to live what I then saw. I stand with awe at the place where Rembrandt brought me. He led me from the kneeling, dishevelled young son to the standing, bent-over old father, from the place of being blessed to the place of blessing. As I look at my own aging hands, I know that they have been given to me to stretch out toward all who suffer, to rest upon the shoulders of all who come, and to offer the blessing that emerges from the immensity of God's love.

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