



A Father's Presence in the Home



By John A. Cuddeback

The nation braces itself, waiting to hear whether the highest court in the land will redefine that which is beyond redefinition.¹ In the face of woeful marriage statistics, appalling portrayals of marriage in the arts and entertainment, and mounting negative political and legal pressures, defenders of marriage find themselves falling back, fighting simply to salvage the freedom to articulate, yea even to live, basic aspects of traditional marriage. It might seem that this is a time to restrict our focus to the most fundamental issues: one man, one woman; permanent commitment; openness to life.

But there is another possible approach. Now is the time to redouble our efforts to discover and implement the fullness of marriage and family life. One man and one woman permanently committed to each other and open to new life—this is a great thing. But it is not enough. Or in any case, there is yet a whole art, a virtue of how to do this well. Living family life well means unlocking the potential that marriage has to be a powerhouse of joy and blessing, even far beyond its own borders.

About the Author



John A. Cuddeback, who holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Catholic University of America, is chairman of the Philosophy Department at Christendom College. He frequently writes and lectures, on a variety of philosophical and cultural topics, for both scholarly and popular audiences. His academic writings have appeared in *The Review of Metaphysics*, *The Thomist*, and *Nova et Vetera*, as well as in several volumes published by the American Maritain Association. His book, *True Friendship: Where Virtue Becomes Happiness*, was republished in 2010, and his website, baconfromacorns.com, is dedicated to the philosophy of family and household. A lay Dominican, Professor Cuddeback is also an avid gardener and hunter; he lives with his wife and six children in the Shenandoah Valley.

Aristotle once noticed that a society tends to produce the kind of men it honors. Defenders of the traditional family are well aware that our society neither honors nor understands the traditional family man.



The bigger question is: do its defenders really honor and understand him in all of his richness? The conservative vision of the family—leaving aside the biggest issues—is often in reality surprisingly like the dominant progressive vision. Many defenders of the traditional family look back to the 1950s. When we picture Ward Cleaver at least the image includes a home—with one man and one woman and children. But a closer look at this image reveals a man too blithely disconnected from the warp and woof of home life; indeed, it reveals the '60s and '70s and 2010s in incubation.

I would like to make what is perhaps a radical suggestion: we need to do more to reimagine and then reinstate a different model of family life. At the center of this model will be a husband and father whose very success in life is fundamentally, though not solely, seen and judged in terms of what he does in *the home*. Indeed, a central measure of his manhood will be the quality of his presence in the home.

We turn first to a great, if almost-forgotten, or simply rejected, tradition of thinking about household life. In light of this tradition, we will then consider the general transformation in household life in roughly the last two hundred years. Here we will focus on a seldom-considered reality: how fathers first left

the household to find work elsewhere, and then came to value their careers above their home life, to the detriment of the family. We will finally draw some practical implications for renewal of household life today through a focus on ways a father can be more present in his home.

I. A New Look at an Old Understanding of Household

Let us go back to Aristotle. Setting aside some notable shortcomings in his understanding of the household, the man that St. Thomas Aquinas calls “the Philosopher” nonetheless expresses its fundamental principles with remarkable clarity. At the heart of all practical wisdom is the primacy of the “end.” The term “end” refers to the final cause, or “that for the sake of which.” Aristotle holds that all human actions as well as all human communities—such as the state or the household—aim at a final completion or perfection which gives them their meaning and purpose. In life itself, as well as in the more particular areas of human action, the good man must put first what is truly first, that is, the end. In other words, his intention of the true end should be the driving and guiding energy behind what he does.

Oikonomia is the Greek word for the art of ruling or ordering the household (the *oikos*), and, at least traditionally, a father’s duty as head of the household was to excel in this art. The central question that Aristotle and Aquinas would have us ask about one who exercises the art of *oikonomia* is, what should he *intend*? What is the end the willing of which gives meaning and concrete direction to what the husband and father does in the household? In commenting on Aristotle’s *Politics*, Aquinas writes: “Aristotle infers that the chief intention of the householder concerns these two relations of persons in the household,” namely, the relation of husband and wife, and the relation of parents to children.²

It sounds so simple; but the power of this truth can shatter all false conceptions of family and household. What is the principal concern of the husband and father of a family? His relationship with his spouse and their relationship with their children. Through his providence, his work, his presence, he is the first principle of real human flourishing in its most foundational instance, namely, the flourishing relationships that are the core of a household. Aristotle's profound assertion is rooted in the simple truth that a wife or child or husband who stands in such healthy relationships is verily an icon of human happiness.

We can be so bold as to ask, if a married man is not succeeding in these relationships, how can he be said to be succeeding as a *man*?

Our second point from Aristotle is his conception of the household community as, in the words of Aquinas, “a community constituted by nature for everyday life, that is, activities that have to be performed daily.”³ What at first seems a rather pedestrian point begins, on further examination, to shine like a diamond. Humans are made to live in relationships, and in community. There is one community which, by its very nature, reaches into almost every corner of life. It knits together our days by being the place, the context for *living together every day*. The very notion is thrilling, even though the word “quotidian”—literally, “daily”—has the connotation of the pedestrian and mundane. We get to live with certain people, *every day*! When a young man and a young woman fall in love, what better can they imagine than being able (being allowed!) to be together every day—literally, to make a life together.

There are indeed human activities that require a broader community, such as the village or the state, but by and large those activities are not daily ones.

Eating and working, and the resting and playing that punctuate the working—these are done every day. And they are done together with those with whom we share a home. This is where life really happens.

In these two points from an ancient tradition of thinking about the good life, we have a solid foundation for better

understanding and evaluating our current situation. We can proceed now to consider a fundamental transformation of the structures of the household—tragically, a transformation that can make the above points seem like ancient history.

II. A Historic Transformation of the Household

If we are to grasp and address the situation of the family today, it is crucial that we note certain significant changes in family and home life that have been anything but random. There are certain readily discernible patterns in this transformation. And our consideration of the points from Aristotle and Aquinas can give us an excellent vantage from which to consider them.

Christopher Lasch was a noted historian and social critic who gave much attention to the plight of the traditional family. To many, his findings might be somewhat surprising. He writes: “The history of modern society, from one point of view, is the assertion of social control over activities once left to individuals or their families.”⁴ Lasch sees what he calls the “socialization of production” as a fundamental, even if oft-missed, cause of the demise of the traditional structure and practices

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of the household. In essence, this “socialization” refers to how, on the whole, the day-to-day work that produces the material things needed for human existence left its native soil—the household. One can recall here how Aristotle and Aquinas conceived of the household as a place where precisely such work was done. A hallmark of this “socialization” was the migration from farm and workshop, themselves often attached to households, to employment in the factories of the industrial revolution. While in recent generations factory work has been largely replaced by other industries, the fundamental reality remains, as men—and also now most women—are engaged in work that is neither in the context of the household nor has any real connection, other than through the money it produces, to life therein.

It is the stock-in-trade of defenders of the traditional household to decry the general movement of women out of the household and into the “workforce.” Most, however, are mute on the issue of the parallel and prior male exodus. And yet the very notion of the “workforce” as something fundamentally outside of the household (significantly, women are said to “leave” the home to “join” it) exemplifies a fundamental shift from both the theory and practice of household life once standard in our civilization since its founding.

This change—the demise of the household as a center of production—is one that many defenders of the traditional family either dismiss with a shrug, or even approve with a nod in the direction of “economic progress.” Yet I think it is clear that, regardless of an admixture of genuine advantages, this shift was a blow to the very essence of the household community as, in Aristotle’s words, “constituted by nature for everyday life.” Why? Work, especially in the sense of the production of things necessary for human life, is the very stuff of daily human life. Though not the most noble or important activity

done in the household, it is naturally the skeleton around which other activities spring—be they meals, prayer, study, leisure, or play.

Here history can be helpful. From time immemorial the basic structure of the household included a man and woman working together on a daily, even hourly, basis. The kinds of work done by the man and woman often differed; Xenophon, an Athenian contemporary of Plato, wrote in his *On Household Management* of the natural division of labor in the household:

Since both of these domains—indoor and outdoor—require work and attention, God, as I see it, directly made a woman’s nature suitable for the indoor jobs and tasks, and man’s nature suitable for the outdoor ones.⁵

Yet the fact that the kinds of labor differed did not imply that the husband and wife were separated in their work. Rather, distinction in work was seen as for the sake of the greater commonweal and unity of the whole:

In so far as the two sexes have different natural talents, their need for each other is greater and their pairing is mutually more beneficial, because the one has the abilities the other lacks. . . . Just as God has made men and women partners in procreation, so the law makes them partners in their household.⁶

What is especially worth noticing in this vision of Xenophon, which is typical of the theory and practice of premodern Western civilization, is that working together daily was the flesh and bones of what a married man and woman shared, first with each other and then with their children. The context in which they procreated was precisely the context of the life they shared through common work, through making a household together.

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A significant amount of this work would have been done in close proximity to, and often with participation by, children. Such work in the household likewise afforded *both* parents the time and context for personal mentoring of children—formation in perhaps its most foundational sense: by presence and example. Are we to conclude that the chief intention of the man of the household—the flourishing of relationships, especially spousal and parental—is essentially tied to work in the home? This is a central issue about which we should be concerned. The work of Lasch and others points, in any case, to a key lesson from the last two hundred years. History seems to establish a connection between the daily absence of the father and the general weakening of familial relationships.

It behooves us to consider how we might take a practical approach to this conundrum, turning again to ancient wisdom for assistance.

III. Toward a Solution

Economic necessity today will usually require that at least one spouse work outside of the household. Allow me to be clear. This is not a call for men to abandon their jobs outside the home.

For the vast majority of us, that will not be possible, and for some, in any case, it would not even be desirable. We must find a way to live according to ancient wisdom in our current environment.

The virtue of practical wisdom, also called prudence, is the power of discerning the best course of action in *present circumstances*—which of course are the only circumstances that actually exist. At the same time, we must bear in mind the complexity of this queen of the moral virtues. While prudence is about living in concrete, given conditions, it nonetheless determines how to act by judging in terms of ideals. In other words, the prudent man is the one who fearlessly asks how things *should* be and uses the answer as a real principle in determining how to act now.

I suggest that we take as a starting point that the father whose main “work” is outside the household should realize that he has a handicap that he must overcome, namely, the absence of substantial, daily work in the home. He does not have this obvious and natural context for contact and presence with his spouse and children. And it should be noted that “working from home” does not necessarily address this situation. Many who work from home are engaged

in a labor that remains utterly distinct from and foreign to the household in every way other than bodily presence in a home office.

How then might fathers who work remotely seek to address this situation?

In the prologue of a minor philosophical work, Thomas Aquinas gives us a beautiful image that points to what is the heart of a father's presence in the home. Aquinas quotes the thirty-second chapter of the Book of Sirach: "Run ahead into your house and gather yourself there." The focus of his prologue is how to prepare for the contemplation of wisdom by taking full possession of one's own mind. He uses the text from Sirach to give an analogy to a father in his home. Aquinas interprets the phrase "gather yourself there" as meaning "draw together your whole intention."⁷ So, just as a father takes complete possession of his home, investing there his whole intention, so the contemplative must take possession of his mind. Aquinas writes: "But it is necessary that we ourselves should be fully present there, concentrating in such a way that our aim is not diverted to other matters."⁸ This profound analogy rests upon a powerful image: a father, fully present in his own home, present at root by the focus of his intention, an intention not diverted to other matters.

The first and most significant action—one within the power of any father—is to *take possession of his household* by investing it with his intention and attention. The old saying should perhaps be taken as prescriptive, not descriptive: "Home is where your heart *should be*."

Words of Wendell Berry come to mind: "I do not believe that there is anything better to do than to make one's marriage and household, whether one is a man or a woman."⁹ To be precise, this statement needs qualification, for

there are some things a person can do that are better than making one's household. Nonetheless these striking words point to a wisdom that we need to recover in an age in which so many men, following the lead of society itself, measure themselves by their success in business or other such areas of life.

A critical feature of a man's presence in the home is that it begins with his presence to his wife. When Aristotle notes that the spousal relationship is the source of the parental relationship, he is not simply referring to the fact of bodily generation. Rather, the character of the spousal relationship is especially determinative of the character of the parental relationship. A central way a man loves and is present to his children, is by *loving and being present to his wife*. That is the natural order of the fabric of family life.

While investing one's intention in the household is the key first step, we know that our intentions—we could also say our loves—must be enacted, lived out, incarnated. That which is first of all a presence by intention must not be only a presence by intention. A loving intention brings one's mental and spiritual energies to bear on the good of those loved, and it does so in concrete and tangible ways. If, as Aristotle sagely suggested, the chief intention of the husband and father is the flourishing of the personal relationships in the household, we need to ask how that intention should be embodied. Any way that it is embodied will require time.

Yet especially since most of their work today is removed from the household, fathers will need to be creative in finding the time and the avenues of presence. A first avenue to consider is some kind of manual labor, preferably one requiring an art that can be learned and shared by family members. This includes specifically "home arts" such as

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gardening, cooking, animal husbandry, etc., as well as more general arts such as carpentry, carving, engine mechanics, plumbing, landscaping, etc. As children grow older, higher arts can be added and studied together, such as reading, writing, and the liberal arts. It is worth noting that while some of these latter arts are at times beyond the capabilities of households, some manual arts are within the competence of all.

Also worthy of particular attention is the place of real leisure in the home. Since, as Josef Pieper has pointed out, good leisure and good work are closely tied through nourishing one another, they should be addressed together. Yet here is an area where any father can take the lead, even when his work removes him from the home, by taking initiative in leading the family in rich activities. It will be arduous. Regular meals together, which should be a mainstay of presence and communion, too often fall by the wayside. Common custom has replaced real leisure with mass-produced amusement;

communication technology tends to intrude into all spaces, making simple together-time difficult to achieve. We are losing a sense of how to be together in deeper activities, and more and more we turn to some device any time we have a free moment. But real freedom is in having habits of being together in richer ways—reading, singing, hiking, praying. A father’s leadership here may well make all the difference.

I have suggested that we need to do more to rethink and re-form our family life. The extremely negative environment of a culture of death should prod us to rediscover family and household life in its fullness. Households can still be a vibrant organ, even if the body politic is wasting with disease. To understand the ideal of true fatherhood—and the contemporary challenges to living that ideal—is already to be halfway to success. Issues concerning the role and presence of husband and wife in the household need to be considered with nuance, recognizing that particular conditions can warrant modifications and adaptations. Nevertheless, exceptions do not invalidate general rules; indeed often they corroborate them. At the heart of the renewal will be husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, united in the intensity of their intention to focus on relationships in the household and to embody that intention in daily life. 

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- 1 Indeed, the Supreme Court will likely have issued its ruling by the time you receive this essay.
- 2 *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics*, I.10.4.
- 3 *Ibid.*, I.1.12.
- 4 *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (Basic Books, 1979), xx.
- 5 *On Household Management*, 7.22.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 7.28, 30.
- 7 *Commentary on Boethius’ De Hebdomadibus*, prologue.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” in *What are People For?* (Counterpoint, 2010), 182.

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