

GOD AS FATHER AND DON BOSCO AS FATHER

by Anthony Nguyen

Introduction

Don Bosco is a saint who is honored as the “father and teacher” of the youth. However, we may be curious to ask ourselves: In what sense do we understand the term “father” as it is attributed or applied to Don Bosco? Surely, it is not in “biological” sense of the word. But it is not simply in spiritual sense because Don Bosco did not only provide spiritual nourishment (heaven) to the young, but also “work and bread” (something for bodily/biological needs). From this perspective, we may dare to say that the term “father” attributed to Don Bosco should be an integration of “biological” (understood as bodily) and “spiritual” sense of the term. In other words, the term “father” attributed to Don Bosco is understood as “the one who provides bodily and spiritual needs” to the young.

As he lived out his fatherhood among his poor boys, Don Bosco “experiences the fatherhood of God and continually reminds himself of the divine dimension of his work: ‘Apart from me you can

do nothing’ (Jn 15:5).”¹ For this reason, God as Father is a most intimate image of God whom he would like to engrave in the hearth of each youngster who was entrusted to his care. It is without any doubt that the image of God as Father arose from Don Bosco’s own “lived experience.”² He lost his father at the age of 2; then he lost another “father,” Father Calosso, when he had just begun to aware of his call to a more “transcendent purpose” in life. He experienced how hard it is for a child to grow up without a father. Thus, these experiences formed in him a heart of a father, which was patterned after that of God, the Almighty Father.

This article aims at presenting, in a concise manner, how Don Bosco had imitated and reflected the Fatherhood of God for the people of his time, especially his poor boys. We will do this by, first of all, trying to understand how the term “father” understood in the Old and New Testament as well as in representative theologians. We then apply what we have found to the image of Don Bosco as father.

1. God as Father

There have been, on the one hand, recently many critiques of theism and the personalist concept of God. Some even speak of the “death” of a personal God, Christian God.³ For example, in the postmodern mind: the human person as *techno sapiens* is envisaged to have enough acumen to take a secure hold of his or her life without being supernaturally aided. On the other hand, there is a new stream of fresh air blowing in the Church, where the “personal dimension of

¹ *Salesian Constitutions*, art. 12.

² Karol Wojtyła defines “lived experience” as “the irreducible or the element that defies reduction of man experience to an epistemological categories.” In other words, “lived experience” refers to a person’s experience which is *particular as his own*. This kind of experience cannot be easily accessed by others or reduced to a bundle of data, (Karol Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” in *Person and Community*, trans. Therese Sandok [New York: Peter Lang, 1993], 212).

³ For an in-depth discussion on this topic, see Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 3-46; see also Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, trans. J. R. Stephenson (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 162-174.

God” has been deeply studied and mystically experienced by many.⁴ God is no longer considered as “Someone” residing in heaven and having nothing to do with man’s day-to-day life. Nor is He the “product” of philosophical and theological speculation. Rather, He is a God who journeys with his people. For this reason, many have been personally touched by a God, who is the Father and who calls them “by name.”⁵

However, no mortal has ever had a direct access to the knowledge of God in Himself. This is also true when it comes to the question of God as Father. One has to have recourse knowing God through creation. And what better way than through the individual human person. This has been attested to by the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of God as Father in the sense that He is the “Creator,” the “Origin” of all things and the One who cares for His children. We read,

by calling God “Father,” the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God’s immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God

⁴ See Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993). See also Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985); and Philip Ryken and Michael LeFebvre, *Our Triune God: Living in the Love of the Three-In-One* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2011), 69-114.

⁵ As Joseph Ratzinger has written in his book, *The God of Jesus Christ*, that “God has a name, and God calls us by our name. He is a Person, and he seeks the person. He has a face, and he seeks our face. He has a heart, and he seeks our heart,” (Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*, trans. Brian McNeil [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008], 24).

transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father.⁶

Is this understanding, that God is the Origin of all things and Care-giver of His children, the only way to understand God as Father?

1.1. God as Father in the Old Testament

We find in the Old Testament a cluster of three words designating God, namely, 'ēl (“lae “), 'ēlōah, and 'ēlōhîm (ywy).⁷ When they are used in the Old Testament, they either refer to the true God of Israel or the god(s) of other nations. Besides these words, the Israelites called God by a distinctive name, that is, YHWH.⁸ Even though there are several words designating God as pointed out and these words could connote the idea of plurality in God, there is no doubt that the Jews strictly observed monotheism.⁹ In fact, the prayer, which is the foundation of Judaism is the *Shema*: “Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh” (Deut 6:4).¹⁰

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), no. 239.

⁷ For a more thorough discussion of these names, see *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 1988 fully revised ed., v.s.”God, names of,” 505. Mark S. Smith holds that this cluster of terms designating God has Canaanite background, (see Mark S Smith, *Early History of God: Yahweh and the Others Deities in Ancient Israel* [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990], 1-40).

⁸ “YHWH is the only true personal name of God in Israel’s faith; the others are titular or descriptive expressions. References to ‘the name’ or ‘in the name’ of God indicate this name,” (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 506). For a brief discussion on how it is possible for YHWH to become Trinity, see Bishop Teodoro C. Bacani, Jr., *From Yahweh to the Trinity* (Manila, Philippines: Gift of God Publications), 1-27.

⁹ For a good discussion on the emergence of Jewish Monotheism, see Vel-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 17-18.

¹⁰ According to Joseph Blenkinsopp, the demand presented in Deuteronomy (6:4) is not an affirmation of monotheism, but rather an affirmation of exclusive devotion (love) to YHWH, because for him the Hebrew text of Deut 6:4 (“dx; ywy an “h;l’a] ywy larvy lybq [m;v.”) is better translated as follows: “YHWH is our

This prayer is said at the beginning of the service in the synagogue; it is contained in the phylacteries (Mt 23:5); it is contained in a little cylindrical box called the Mezuzah.¹¹ Thus if the Jews observed strict monotheism, what can we find in the Old Testament concerning the Father in relation to the Son and the Holy Spirit?

The word “father” in the Old Testament is *’āb*. It occurs 1,191 times in the Hebrew and 9 times in the Aramaic form.¹² The primary Greek word corresponding to Hebrew word *’āb* is *patēr*. Another term which has a more intimate tone is *abba*.¹³ *’āb* has many meanings. It can be used for “father” or “grandfather.” *’āb* can be

God, YHWH alone,” (Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Deuteronomy,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy [Eaglewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1994], 99). His view is challenged by some scholars who hold that this text is really an affirmation of the monotheism. “Does the text (Deut 6:4) teach monotheism? Or monolatry for Israel? Or does it teach only a uniqueness in the Lord as over against various Baals and gods of other people? Some of the Israelites believed in the reality of other deities, but this declaration of the nature of the Lord does not admit of the real existence of other gods. The Lord is the only deity (monotheism),” (Kenneth L. Barker & John K. Kohlenberger III, con. ed., *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, “Old Testament” [Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1994], 247).

¹¹ See William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: the Gospel of Mark*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), 295.

¹² See *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Worlds*, 266. E.g., “The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth-Ham being the *father* of Canaan” (Gen 9:18); “When they returned to their *father* Reuel, he said to them, ‘Why are you back so early today?’ (Ex 2:18) “; “And you will keep my Sabbaths; I am Yahweh your God” (Lv 19:3). Emphasis mine.

¹³ E.g., Yahweh said to Abraham “For my part, this is my covenant with you: you will become the *father* of many nations” (Gen 17:4); “Anyone who strikes *father* or mother will be put to death” (Ex 21:15); “Our *father* died in the desert. He was not a member of the party who banded together against Yahweh, Korah’s party; it was for his own sin that he died without sons” (Num 27:3). For a helpful discussion on “*ab*” and “*abba*,” (see Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 142-143). Emphasis mine.

used as a title of respect for a governor, priest and prophet.¹⁴ 'āb is also used to refer to the founder of a tribe or family group.¹⁵

In the Old Testament, God as “Father” appears something more than twenty times.¹⁶ However, we need to be more precise in what sense God is called “Father” in the Old Testament. We find in the Old Testament the expression “God of the fathers” (Ex 3:13) – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.¹⁷ This expression speaks of God as “Father” in the collective or corporate sense rather than individual. Thus, early on God is not (or rarely) “being viewed in a father-son relationship with individuals or as the father of mankind in general.”¹⁸ It is so because the Old Testament belief protects the transcendence of God. God is called “Father” not in the physical or biological sense, but in a metaphorical sense.

Foremost in the Old Testament theology, the term “father” is used in relation to the concept of “election.” He is also called Father

¹⁴ E.g., “Micah said to him, ‘Stay here with me; be my *father* and priest and I shall give you ten silver shekels a year, and clothing and food’” (Judg 17: 10); “Elisha saw it, and shouted, ‘My *father!* My *father!* Chariot of Israel and its chargers!’ Then he lost sight of him, and taking hold of his own clothes he tore them in half” (2 Kgs 2:12); “I shall dress him in your tunic, I shall put your sash round his waist, I shall invest him with your authority; and he will be a *father* to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the House of Judah” (Is 22:21). Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ See *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words*, v.s.”Father,” 266.

¹⁶ See Gerald O’Collins, *The Personal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 14. E.g., “Extol him before all the living; he is our Lord and he is our God; he is our Father, and he is God for ever and ever” (Tob 13:4); “Father of orphans, defender of widows, such is God in his holy dwelling” (Ps 68:5); “Is there not one Father of us all? Did not one God create us?” (Mal 2:10).

¹⁷ According to Durham, “Moses is told first that he is being addressed by ‘the God of his father.’ The word ‘father’ is pointedly singular (see Gen 26:24; 31:5; 43:23; Ex 15:2; 18:4) despite the various (and unjustified) attempts to make it plural. What Moses is told must therefore be understood as a means of connecting the speaking deity with the faith of Moses’ family in Egypt. Then Moses told that this God who addresses him is also the God of the three great patriarchal fathers – Abraham, Isaac, an Jacob/Israel – a linking of the speaking of deity with the faith of Moses’ people, the sons of Israel,” (Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 31).

¹⁸ “The Old Testament is very restrained in its use of the father-son relation for God,” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, v.s.”God, Names of,” 509).

of Israel as a covenant nation:¹⁹ “You will then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what Yahweh says: Israel is my first born son’” (Ex. 4:22); “Is this the return you make to Yahweh? O people brainless and unwise! Is this not your father, who gave you being, who made you, by whom you subsist?” (Deut 32:6). It is in this concept of “election” that the change from “collective” to “individualistic” sense of the understanding of the term “father” was introduced especially during monarchy period of Israel.

Indeed, during the time of the monarchy,²⁰ the fatherhood of God was transferred from a collective sense to an individualistic sense. The fatherhood of God was directed to David as an individual (see 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13; 22:10; Ps 89:26). However, even in the case of David, the father-child relationship, as we would think, does not apply, since David was presented as a representative for a “royal line” with which the Lord had signed a covenant as He did with Abraham. This fact shows that the Old Testament concept of God as Father is “thin and underdeveloped, perhaps deliberately so, in order to avoid association with pagan ideas of divine fatherhood in the sense of procreation.”²¹

The reference to God as the Father of the Messiah before the time of Jesus remains unclear.²² There are references in the prophetic Psalms (see Ps 2:7; 89:26). However, this was not clear until the time of the New Testament. For this reason, we can affirm that in the Old Testament God as “Father” was not understood as “person” as we understand it today. Yet, even though the term “Father” carries the tone of “personal relationship,” it was simply seen in the Old Testament as a “name” or “designation” of God which the Israelites

¹⁹ See Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 138-139.

²⁰ The time of monarchy began when the Israelites refused to obey the voice of Samuel [the last judge], and asked him for a king who would rule over them; that they also may be like all the nations; and that their king may judge them, and go out before them, and fight their battles. And so Samuel consulted the Lord Who eventually told Samuel to give people a king in the person of Saul, (see 1 Sam 8:10-22).

²¹ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, v.s..”Father,” 510.

²² Bernard Piault argues that although the Old Testament tells us that there is a Father in God, it does not make any reference to God “as the Father of the Promised Messiah,” (Bernard Piault, *What is Trinity* [New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959], 16).

used to address God. On this particular issue, O’Collins has this to point out,

Naming God “Father” expressed His deep involvement in the story of Israel, its kingly leaders, and its righteous ones. The name has nothing to do with physical generation. ... While occurring in a variety of historical, prophetic, and sapiential texts, this divine name cannot be called frequent in the Old Testament, but it will become the favored name in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John.”²³

In sum, the Old Testament calls God “Father” primarily as referring to His covenantal relationship with the tribe of Israel: Yahweh would be the Father of a recreated or chosen people according to Mount Sinai *testamentum*. In this sense, God as Father was originally understood as the One who gave birth to Israel by delivering the tribe from slavery and by a covenantal pact in Mt. Sinai. In fact, the belief that God was the Creator of all things only dawned on the consciousness of the Jews post-exilic times.²⁴ There is no doubt that the name Father in the Old Testament connotes the idea of “relation,” but not with another “distinct Person” in the same Godhead, but rather to Israel as people whom He considers as his child (see Hos 11:1).

1.2. God as Father in the New Testament

In lieu of the terms *’ēl*, *’ēlōah*, and *’ēlōhîm* used for calling God in the Old Testament, the New Testament uses the common Greek term θεός (*theos*) as “God.”²⁵ According to some exegetes, the concept of God as defined in the Old Testament is foreign to the

²³ O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 23.

²⁴ According to Wenham, the message of creation account is essentially one of redemption. It explains why man needs salvation and what he needs to be saved from. It also describes the original state of the world, and the goal of redemption,” (Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1 “Genesis 1-15,” lii).

²⁵ For an in-depth discussion on “*Theos*” in the New Testament, see Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. I, “God, Christ, Mary and Grace,” 79-148.

Greek since the Greeks believe in many gods and goddesses who were shaped in the image of the human beings.²⁶ This fact helps us to understand the reason why Christians later on depicted the three divine Persons in human form. It is only in later Greek philosophy that the god and goddesses were thought of more as an abstract principle or force.

God addressed as “father” occurs in the New Testament about 250 times. It is found on Jesus’ lips no less than 170 times in the Gospels, e.g., “At that time Jesus exclaims, ‘I bless you Father, Lord of heaven and of earth...’” (Mt 11:25); “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing’” (Lk 23:34); “In all truth I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you bread from heaven, it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread,” (Jn 6:32). Unlike in the Old Testament, the New Testament offers texts on the fatherhood of God as one of God’s qualities. In fact, the New Testament seems to present the fatherhood as God’s very nature.²⁷

The term *Abba*²⁸ is used in the New Testament but never in the Old Testament. Using it, Christ intimates to us the God-man (individual) relationship as He is to His Father. According to Barclay, the word *Abba* used of God is a “compact summary of Christian faith.”²⁹ It settles all the relationships that man has in this earthly life.³⁰ The God as *Abba* whom Jesus addressed and taught us

²⁶ Karl Rahner writes in his *Theological Investigations* that, “by ‘θεός’ the Greeks did not mean the unity of a definite personality in the monotheistic sense, but rather the unity of the religious world, clearly felt as *one* in spite of its multiplicity of forms. The Greek conception of God is essentially polytheistic, not indeed in the sense of many isolated gods but as an ordered totality of gods,” (Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. I, “God, Christ, Mary and Grace,” 90); see also Emmanuel Durand, O.P., “A Theology of God the Father,” in Emery and Matthew, *Oxford Handbook of Trinity*, Chapter 27, 371-386.

²⁷ See *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Words*, 1998 ed., v.s. “Father,” 268; see also Durand, O.P., “Theology of God Father,” Chapter 27, 371-386.

²⁸ For a concise presentation of “*abba*,” see Kasper, *God of Jesus Christ*, 142-143.

²⁹ Barclay, *Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, 200.

³⁰ It settles our relationship to the unseen world; it settles our relationship to the seen world; it settles our relationship to our fellowmen; it settles our relationship to ourselves; and it settles our relationship to God, (see *Ibid.*, 200-203).

to address has the name and the heart of a father. Thus, He is a loving Father, who is not the same as the gods presented in Greek legend.³¹

God as Father is the most favored theme in John's Gospel, e.g., 8:54; 10:32; 11:41; 13:1; 13:3; 18:11.³² The relationship between Father and Son is also strongly depicted.³³ He is not only the Father of Jesus, but He is also "our" God and Father: "Jesus said to her [Mary Magdalene], 'Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to the brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (Jn 20:17). The distinction between "my Father" and "your Father" (see Jn 20:17) suggests that Jesus affirms a different relationship with the Yahweh of the Old Testament. This is clearly seen in the "knowledge"³⁴ Jesus has of his Father: "Everything has been

³¹ Barclay singles out the most significant Greek legend of the gods is the legend of Prometheus."Prometheus was a god. It was in the days before men possessed fire; and life without fire was a cheerless and a comfortless thing. In pity Prometheus took fire from heaven and gave it as a gift to men. Zeus, the king of the gods, was mightily angry that men should receive this gift. So he took Prometheus and he chained him to a rock in the middle of the Adriatic Sea, where he was tortured with the heat and the thirst of the day, and the cold of the night. Even more, Zeus prepared a vulture to tear out Prometheus' liver, which always grew again, only to be torn out again," (Ibid., 201).

³² God as Father is the most favored in the Gospel of John since Jesus presented in the gospel as the one who comes to make God known: God is "my Father and your Father" (Jn 20:17), (see Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 4, ed., Daniel J. Harrington, [Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998], especially 526). For Ben Witherington III, although the Gospel of John does not fully discuss the Trinitarian doctrine, it has provided Trinitarianologists the needed "most complete set of raw data from which such a doctrine could be constructed because here the interrelationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are given the most fulsome treatment of any NT documents," ("The Trinity in the Johannine Literature," in Gilles and Levering, *Oxford Handbook of Trinity*, 69). It is also worthy of note, according to Witherington, that the word "Father" appears 120 times referring to the word "God" and 108 times the term "God" is used for this person. What comes as an earth-shaking pronouncement coming from John the Evangelist is when he addresses the Logos as *theo* in Chapter 1, (see Ibid., 70). If ever the Father is discussed with the Son, Witherington further notes, it is in reference to the Old Testament idea of "Wisdom" (see Ibid., 71).

³³ E.g., "No one has ever seen God; it is the Only Son, who is close to the Father's heart who has made him known" (Jn 1:18); "The Father and I are one" (10:30); "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" (17:21).

³⁴ In the New Jerusalem Bible, footnote (g) of Chapter 10, we find this description

entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt 11:27). This is decisive statement because it distinguishes the Jesus’ knowledge of God from that of his disciples.

The distinction between Jesus’ knowledge of the Father and disciples’ is made clear by the Gospels of Matthew and John. We hear Matthew declaring: “Everything is entrusted to me by my Father; and no one *knows* the Son except the Father, just as no one *knows* the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt 11:27. Emphasis mine). This is somehow echoed in Jn. 8:55: “Although you do not *know* him. But I *know* him, and if I were to say, ‘I do not *know* him,’ I should be a liar, as you yourselves are. But I do *know* him, and I keep his word,” (emphasis mine).³⁵ The key idea that demands full attention here is the word “know” (Gk., *oida* from the infinitive *eidēnai*, “to know “).³⁶

of “knowledge “: “In biblical language, ‘knowledge’ is not merely the conclusion of an intellectual process, but the fruit of an ‘experience,’ a personal contact; when it matures, it is love.

³⁵ See parallels in Jn 10:15, “Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep “; and 17:25, “Father, Upright One, the world has not known you, but I have known you, and these have known that you have sent me.” Emphasis mine.

³⁶ In his textual analysis of Jn 8:55, Brown notes the use of both Gk words *ginōskein* and *eidēnai* (*oida*) to mean in English “to know,” (see Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to John I-XII* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co.], 359). A lengthy discussion on *eidēnai* vis-à-vis the Gk word *ginōskein* is found, (Ibid., Appendix I:9, 512-515). For his part, Bruce Vawter, CM takes note carefully that “John never says that Jesus *believes* the Father, only that he *knows* him and is known by him. Knowledge comes from faith; faith leads to knowledge as tie lads to life – knowledge is part of life. What John is trying to say is that the believer is introduced into a true knowledge of God to the extent that he can possess it, not that faith is to be equated with knowledge. ... [Here], John is denying the fundamental conviction of Gnosticism, namely, that there is a higher knowledge that can lead to salvation, a knowledge denied the mere believer. Rather, whatever meaningful dimension there is to knowledge, whatever knowledge can do in the matter of salvation, comes only through faith,” (Bruce Vawter, “Johannine Theology,” in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Vol 1, The Old Testament and Vol. 2, The New Testament and Topical Articles (Englewood, Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968), 835).

For sure, the manner Jesus knows the Father is not the way a believer (man) knows the Father. On our part when “I know the Father,” the I, the knower, remain, in essence, very distinct from the thing known – “the Father” whose very essence remains inaccessible to man, strictly speaking. In any human knowledge we can readily distinguish the following interspersing factors: the knower, the thing known and the idea ensuing therefrom. The result is an analogical likeness between the knower and the thing known converging manifestly in the ensuing *idea* of the object known. For example, in the assertion, “I know the apple,” the apple as the object of knowledge is very distinct, indeed, from the “I” as the subject or agent of knowledge. And the ensuing factor, generated within the knower, of the apple remains distinct as well because its nature is ideogenic, i.e., it is an *idea* of the object called “apple.”

But when Jesus asserts “I know the Father” the undercurrent statement is this: that Jesus does not have a mere analogical representation of the object known, say, an “idea” of His Father, but rather a more intensive, all-inclusive interiorization of the object known to the extent that the Father and Son know one another at the *most* intimate, *most* intense, and *most* personal level; hence, Jesus’ having the deepest intimacy and profoundest “personalness” with the Father, and living within a relationship of the greatest familiarity with Him. This brand of intimacy and “personalness” has been entrusted to Jesus, as part of His Father’s will, to reveal to his close associates first and then to entire humanity in a manner of “adoption.”³⁷ This makes the Fatherhood of God becomes so personal and intimate.

³⁷ The manner is “by adoption” according to Scriptures but the process is called “deification” or “divinization” proximately from the Gk. word *theosis* and remotely from the Gk. word *apotheosis*. Traditional mainstream theology, both East and West, views Jesus Christ as a pre-existing deity who undertook mortal existence, not as a mortal being who attained divinity: He became one of us to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). We enter into the divine life of the Trinity through the only one mediation: Jesus Christ. In this sense human beings are “God revealed” – living representations of God on earth as they should live in a godly fashion by doing the will of the Triune God as Jesus did, (see Dennis Dexter Sontillano and José Antonio Aureada, OP, “The Nourishing Character of the Eucharist,” *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. XLIV, No. 132 (Sept-Dec, 2009): 603-668; esp. 607-619.

This identity in essence urges us to accept in faith that Jesus, because his essence consubstantially equals that of the Father, is in essence equally God. Because of this fact, only Jesus has the key to unlock our understanding of the nature and will of God since He does not have the key but He IS The Key itself: “I am the Way; I am Truth and Life,” (Jn 14:6). Ultimately, therefore, only Jesus can divulge to us what the very essence of God is really and precisely because he is equally God, in John’s very words: “No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known,” (Jn 1:18).³⁸

It is in the poignant awareness of this all-inclusive interiorization of the object known that Jesus, full of conviction, declares in public: “The Father and I are one. . . . But if I am doing it, then even if you refuse to believe in me, at least believe in the work I do; then you will know for certain that the Father is in me and I am in the Father,” (Jn 10:30, 38). Elsewhere, “do you not believe that I

³⁸ In the King James Version (KJV): “No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” In the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE): “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,[a] who is close to the Father’s heart,[b] who has made him known.” In The New American Bible (NAB), “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.” Using the KJV, Barclay sees a three-fold implication of the said passage, namely: 1) Jesus is *unique* (captured by the Gk word *monogenes*, “only begotten”) intimating that Jesus is *especially beloved*; thus, implying that “there is no one like Jesus”; 2) Jesus is *God*, that is, to have seen Him is to have seen the Father as well; and 3) Jesus is *in the bosom of the Father*. Barclay goes on to explain further how the word “bosom” is used in the Bible to speak about the kind of deep intimacy exhibited by the love actively present in the husband-wife or mother-child relationship, or even between close friends; hence, when used between Jesus and His Father the connotation is “complete and uninterrupted intimacy. It is because Jesus is so intimate with God, that he is one with God and can reveal him to men,” (see Barclay, *Gospel of John*, 74-75). Moreover, the unique personality of Jesus is denoted by the use of the expression “Abba” (see, for example, Mt 6:9, 11:25-26, 26:42; Mk 14:26; Lk 23:34, 46; Jn 11:41, 12:27, 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 14-25). Also, the *unigenitus* (“the only Son”) passages in the Johannine corpus substantiate the same (see, for example, Jn 1: 14: “And the Word became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth,” [emphasis mine]; see also Jn 1:18b; 3:16, 18; and 1 Jn 4:9). If ever John calls Jesus by this extraordinary address, it is to reiterate His exclusivity as Son of God. For a thorough discussion on the use of Gk word *monogenes* or *unigenitus* in Latin, (see Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 13-14).

am in the Father and the Father is in me? What I say to you I do not speak of my own accord: it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his works. You must believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe it on the evidence of these works” (Jn 14:10//7:16; 8:28). Therefore, “in Jesus Christ the distant, unknowable, invisible, unreachable God has come to men; and God can never be a stranger to us again.”³⁹ That is why “they will call him Immanuel, a name which means ‘God-is-with-us’,” (Mt 1:23).

At any rate, in the New Testament, the Father is revealed by Jesus as “His Father” and “our Father.” We can sense that the term “Father” primarily refers to the relation between Jesus and the God of Israel. It only secondarily refers to the relation between God and Israel. Even when it is referred to the relation between God and Israel, it does so in reference to Jesus. The reason is: it is only through Jesus that we all receive the grace of adoption and so call God “our” Father (see Gal 4:3-6). This threefold distinction lays down, indeed, the groundwork for the discussion of the personal relations existing in the Old Testament Yahweh (see Lk 10:22; Mt 11:27). This summary intimates to us the Father’s willingness to share his “personness” to us to a certain extent, but actually as an overflow of a kind of the most intimate, the most intense and most personal relation He has with His Son. It is in this sense that we will explore how the “relationship” which Don Bosco has for the young that made him into a father to them.

1.3. God as Father in Theology

Since the scope of this article does not allow us to expose the thought of all theologians on God as Father, we opt to choose only three representatives. They are St. Augustine (for the first millennium), St. Thomas Aquinas (for the second millennium) and John Paul II’s (for the third millennium).

³⁹ Barclay, *Gospel of John*, vol. 1, 75. See also Paul Petersen, “Jesus – the ‘One and Only,’ or ‘Only Begotten’: The Meaning of *Monogenes*” in Paul Petersen and Rob McIver, eds., *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity* (Adelaide, Australia: Avondale Academic press, 2014), 29-34.

1.3.1. St. Augustine

According to St. Augustine, the same substance requires that all works of the Trinity *ad extra* are indivisible, as from one principle.⁴⁰ However, each of the Divine Persons possesses the divine nature in a particular manner and, thus, in the operation of the Godhead *ad extra*, it is proper to attribute to each of the Three a role that is appropriate to the particular divine person, by virtue of the Trinitarian origin of that person.⁴¹ Augustine essays:

Take another saying of the same Apostle (Paul): “For us there is one God, the Father from whom are all things, and we in him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him” (1 Cor 8:6). Who can doubt that by *all things* he means all that is created, like John in *All things were made through him* (Jn 1:3)? So I ask whom does he mean in another place with the words, *since from him and through him and in him are all things, to him be glory forever and ever* (Rom 11:36). If he means Father and Son and Holy Spirit, attributing a phrase apiece to each person – *from him*, from the Father; *through him*, through the Son; *in him*, in the Holy Spirit – then it is clear that Father and Son and Holy Spirit is what the one God is, sine he concludes in the singular, *to him be glory forever and ever*.⁴²

Augustine speaks of the Father primarily in relation (reference) to the Son and the Holy Spirit. He is the Father in the sense that from Him the Son was begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeded.⁴³ He is the Principle or Origin in reference to the Son. Augustine explains:

To return to the mutual relationships within the Trinity: if the producer is the origin with reference to what it produces, then *the Father is origin* with reference to the Son, because he produced or begot him. But whether the Father is origin with respect to the Holy

⁴⁰ See *De Trinitate*, I. ii. 8.

⁴¹ See Angelo di Berardino, ed., *Patrology*, vol. 4, 428.

⁴² *De Trinitate*, I. ii. 12.

⁴³ See *Ibid.*, V. i. 6.

Spirit because it is said that *He proceeds from the Father* (Jn 15:26), that is quite a question. If it is so, then he will be origin not only for what he begets or makes, but also for what he gives.⁴⁴

In the economy of salvation, it is the Father who sends the Son and the Holy Spirit. Since He is the Principle, the Father cannot be sent.⁴⁵ Rather He is the One who sent the Son in the “fullness of time” to reveal and bring to completion his loving plan. It is also He and the Son sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to perpetuate his merciful love till the end of time.

1.3.2. St. Thomas Aquinas

The Father is a distinct person because He is the “principle” of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The word “principle” here is understood as “that from which something proceeds.” In this sense the Father is “principle” from whom another person originates. Thomas avoids using the term “cause” even though the Greek Trinitarian theologians use this term interchangeable with “principle” to refer to divinity.⁴⁶

The word “principle” is proper to the “First Divine Person,” since it signifies that by which the Father is distinct from the Son and the Holy Spirit. As Thomas has pointed out, what distinguishes the Father from the Son and the Holy Spirit is “fatherhood.” For this reason, “the name Father, signifying his fatherhood, is the name proper to the person of the Father.”⁴⁷ However, “the fatherhood

⁴⁴ “Coming now to the Father, he is called Father relationship-wise, and he is also called origin relationship-wise, and perhaps other things too. But he is called Father with reference to the Son, origin with reference to all things that are from him,” (Ibid., V. iii. 14).

⁴⁵ See II. iv. 22.

⁴⁶ According to Thomas, “cause” seems to connote a diversity of substances and the dependence of the one on another. If this is applied to the Trinity, the Trinity may lead to “tritheism” or “subordinationism.” However, we can avoid this when we use “principle” since it does not refer to inferiority or priority, but rather only to origin, (see ST, q. 33, a. 1).

⁴⁷ “A name proper to any person signifies that by which the person is distinct from all others. The reason: just as body and soul make up the meaning of man, so also, as noted in the Metaphysics, this particular soul and body make up the meaning of

applies to God first as connoting the relation of the one person to another, before it applies as connoting the relation of God to creatures.”⁴⁸ Concretely, “Father” is primarily the Father in relation to the Son before He is the “Father” in relation to man and other creatures.

Since the Father is the “principle,” He must be “unbegotten.” Thomas contends:

Even among creatures we observe primary and secondary principles, so among the divine persons, while there is no first and second, there is a principle not from a principle, the Father, and a principle from a principle, the Son. Now in the created order a principle comes to be known as primary in two ways: in the one from its being first by reason of its relationship to what follows; in the other, from its being first as not following from another. So too, then, the Father is identified as principle in reference to the persons proceeding from him by fatherhood and common spiration; but as he is principle not from a principle, by his not being from another. That is what constitutes the property of not being born, to which the term “unbegotten” refers.⁴⁹

In sum, we can see clearly that Thomas still follows the traditional understanding of the term “Father” in the sense that He is the One from whom the Son is begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeds; it is He to whom everything owes their being. However, Thomas explains it in a more systematic and appealing manner to human reason.

this individual man; through them he differs from all others. Now that which distinguishes the person of the Father from all others is fatherhood. Thus the name ‘Father,’ signifying his fatherhood, is the name proper to the person of the Father [*Unde proprium nomen personae patris est hoc nomen pater, quod significat paternitatem*],” (Ibid., a. 2).

⁴⁸ Ibid., a. 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid., a. 4.

1.3.3. John Paul II

John Paul II has written an encyclical on God the Father called *Dives in Misericordia* (1980). This encyclical comprises eight major sections. It contains one hundred and three paragraphs. It generally exposes the theme of God as the Father who is rich in mercy. John Paul II begins his encyclical on the Father with the affirmation that “It is ‘God who is rich in mercy’ (Eph 2:4) whom Jesus Christ has revealed to us as Father.”⁵⁰ In this affirmation, John Paul II would like to point out to us that mercy is God’s very essence. In this sense, mercy is another concrete face of love. Concretely, then, when love faces the reality of man’s sin, it acquires a new but profounder name, that is mercy. This merciful God is the One whom Jesus Christ has revealed to man as Father.⁵¹

As he has pointed out in *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II affirms once again that in and through Jesus, we discover an inseparable link between the knowledge of God, the Father, and the knowledge of man. He writes: “Man cannot be manifested in the full dignity of his nature without reference – not only on the level of concepts but also in an integrally existential way – to God. Man and man’s lofty calling are revealed in Christ through the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love.”⁵² Indeed, Jesus is the full embodied revelation of the Father, “He who sees me sees the Father” (Jn 14:9). In this sense, the face of Jesus radiates the face of his Father who is merciful. On the other hand, man is called to open his heart to Christ, if he wants to enter into a deep relationship with God, the Father of mercies.

According to John Paul II, God is the Father in the sense that He is the “Source of Love and Mercy.” This theme is a combination of the two passages taken from First Letter of St. John, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8) and Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians, “God, who is rich in mercy” (Eph 2:4). However, for John Paul II, it is through Jesus that “God is love and rich in mercy” is brought to light. He writes:

⁵⁰ *Dives in Misericordia* (DiM), 1.

⁵¹ For an in-depth exposition of the Fatherhood of God, see Antonio López, “God the Father: A Beginning without Beginning,” *Communio* 36, no. 2 (2009): 219-258.

⁵² *DiM*, 1.

Christ, then, reveals God who is Father, who is ‘love,’ as Saint John will express it in his First Letter (1 Jn 4:16); Christ reveals God as ‘rich in mercy,’ as we read in Saint Paul. This truth is not just a subject of a teaching; it is a reality made present to us by Christ. *Making the Father present as love and mercy is, in Christ’s own consciousness*, the fundamental touchstone of his mission as the Messiah; this is confirmed by the words that uttered first in the synagogue at Nazareth and later in the presence of his disciples and of John the Baptist’s messengers.⁵³

“God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), St. John affirms. The love of God turns into mercy when it addresses and embraces man in his suffering and pain, especially the suffering and pain that are the results of sin. Regarding this, John Paul II essays:

Especially through his (Jesus’) lifestyle and through his action, Jesus revealed that love is present in the world in which we live – an effective love – a love that addresses itself to man and embraces everything that makes up his humanity. This love makes itself particularly noticed in contact with suffering, injustice and poverty – in contact with the whole historical “human condition” – which in various ways manifests man’s limitation and frailty, both physical and moral. *It is precisely the mode and sphere in which love manifests itself that in biblical language is called “mercy.”*⁵⁴

When it comes to “mercy,” John Paul II points out, “some theologians affirm that mercy is the greatest of the attributes and perfections of God, and the Bible, Tradition and the whole faith life of the people of God provide particular proofs of this.”⁵⁵ Mercy sometimes becomes an “adjective” (an attribute of) for love. And this is what John Paul II uses in his encyclical to describe God’s essence. Yet, God’s love is not any kind of love, but rather it is the kind of

⁵³ Ibid., 3. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.

love that expresses itself concretely in mercy. Furthermore, for Him the merciful love of God by its essence, is a creative love.⁵⁶ Merciful love is creative because it does not focus on itself, but rather it looks for the good of others. In this sense, redemption and creation is one. They are inseparable.⁵⁷ They do not come one after the other, but interpenetrate one another.

Moreover, in the economy of salvation, love is seen as the “only reason” for God to create,⁵⁸ and mercy is seen as the “only way” for man to achieve redemption.⁵⁹ Hence, as creation and redemption are inseparable, so are love and mercy. Why is mercy important in the economy of salvation? John Paul II has pointed out in the Encyclical that mercy, ever since the Old Testament times had been regarded as an attribute of God. It has a long and rich history. In fact, the Old Testament uses different terms and concepts to speak of the mercy of God.⁶⁰

God as “Father of mercies” is experienced in a special manner when man is inflicted with suffering and pain, especially the suffering caused by sin. No other parable can poignantly capture the mercy who is the Father than the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact, it is in the context of prodigality that we are called to reflect on God,

⁵⁶ See *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁷ See Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action* (Hindmarsh: ATF, 2010).

⁵⁸ See CCC, no. 295; see also Edwards, *How God Acts*, 57-75.

⁵⁹ See Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, *God the Father of Mercy* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 1998), 43-57.

⁶⁰ See *Ibid.*, footnote 52. For example, “hānan” means the manifestation of grace, which involves a constant predisposition to be generous, benevolent and merciful; the verb “hāmal” literally means “to spare” but also “to show mercy and compassion,” and consequently forgiveness and remission of guilt; “hùs” expresses pity and compassion, but especially in the affective sense.

To understand the term “mercy,” we have to put it in the context of “covenant” – covenant between God and Israel. Throughout the history of Israel, this covenant was often broken. Whenever Israel became aware of its infidelity, it called on God for mercy. This is made clear during the time of the prophets, who linked mercy with people’s sins. For the prophets, God, who loves his people whom he has chosen for his own sake, pardons their sins and infidelities and betrayal. Whenever people repent, He pardons them: “In the preaching of the prophets mercy signifies a special power of love, which prevails over sin and infidelity of the chosen people,” (*DiM*, 4).

the Father of mercies not in an abstract term, but in a concrete situation wherein each man who as one united with Christ, will be shown mercy. According to John Paul II, “the parable indirectly touches upon every breach of the covenant of love, every loss of grace, every sin.”⁶¹

The situation of the prodigal son personifies the current state of modern man. The prodigal son has received from his father the inheritance (“the image and likeness”), which belongs to him. This inheritance comprises a quantity of material goods, and most importantly, the dignity as a son in his father’s house.⁶² After squandering his inheritance, he comes to realize that he does not simply lose what he has (possession), but also what he is (a son). It is here that we see the inseparability between what man has and what man is. What man has is also as important as what he is. Without what he has, he will be deprived of what he needs to be – what he is.

In his commentary on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, John Paul II touches home-base by stating that mercy is the expression of the relationship between justice and love.”Love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice – precise and often narrow.”⁶³ Love concerns not what the person has, but the person himself. In other words, love concerns the dignity of the person one loves. This is what the father in the parable did.⁶⁴ John Paul II explains:

⁶¹ *DiM*, 5.

⁶² See *Ibid.*

⁶³ *DiM*, 5.

⁶⁴ From his commentary, we can surmise that for William Barclay this parable has threefold truth: (1) the parable should never have been called the parable of the Prodigal Son, for the son is not the hero. It should be called the parable of the Loving Father, for it tells us rather about a father’s love than a son’s sin; (2) the parable tells us much about the forgiveness of God. The father must have been waiting and watching for the son to come home, for he saw him a long way off. When he came, he forgave him with no recriminations; and (3) it is easier to confess to God than it is to many a man; that God is more merciful in his judgments than many an orthodox man; that the love of God is far broader than the love of man; and that God can forgive when men refuse to forgive. In face of a love like that we cannot be other than lost in wonder, love and praise,” (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975], 205-206).

The love for the son, the love that springs from the very essence of fatherhood, in a way obliges the father to be concerned about his son's dignity. This concern is the measure of his love, the love of which Saint Paul was to write: "Love is patient and kind... love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful... but rejoices in the right...hopes all things, endures all things" and "love never ends" (1 Cor 13:1-8).⁶⁵

In this love, the person does not feel humiliated but rather loved. With this love, God, the Father of mercies, comes to each man in every age to lift him up from the lowly situation since, "He has mercy on those who fear Him in every generation" (Lk 1:50). This is *agape*, existentially as "merciful" love.

In sum, with John Paul II, the understanding of the terms "God as the Father" who is the Origin of all things to whom all things owe their existence shifts to the understanding of God as the Father from whom mercy flows. He is not only the One to whom all things owe their existence, but also the One who is the source of renewal.

2. Don Bosco as Father

It is undeniable that "the Salesian spirit is found incarnate in the Founder, St. John Bosco."⁶⁶ As Salesians and followers of Don Bosco, we are asked to go back to his example, his way of life. He is our model on how to be a "father" and "teacher" for the young of today. The Special General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation speaks of Don Bosco not as an abstract figure, but as a person who is "alive and at work in the midst of his boys, throughout the period

According to Michael Fallon, it is the unconditional love of the father that moves the son to true repentance. The father's love shows the son that it is the father-son relationship that is paramount, not the lost property. Thus, mending the relationship is something that the son cannot do for his scheming; it depends on the father's grace, (see Michael Fallon, *The Gospel According to Saint Luke* [Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2002], 257).

⁶⁵ *DiM*, 6.

⁶⁶ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, 236.

of his apostolic life.”⁶⁷ Indeed, Don Bosco is always alive and at work among the young people as a “father.”

2.1. The Fatherhood of Don Bosco

The Salesian Constitutions singles out two qualities of Don Bosco: “The Lord has given us Don Bosco *as father* and teacher.”⁶⁸ This echoes what has stated in article 1 of the same Constitutions: “The Spirit formed within him *the heart of a father* and teacher, capable of total self-giving: ‘I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys’.”⁶⁹ Let us briefly look into Don Bosco as a father.

The image of “father,” applied to Don Bosco, derives from the mysterious divine fatherhood as St. Paul exclaims: “This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth, takes its name” (Eph 3:15). The fatherhood of Don Bosco is nothing but an imitation and reflection of God’s Fatherhood. It is Don Bosco who had tasted the goodness and providential care of God’s fatherhood that in his turn he lived this experience among his poor youth. He is true to what St. Paul said: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). He is the perfect “imitator” of God’s Fatherhood as Christ has been.

It is surprising to note that the fatherhood of Don Bosco does not limit to “spiritual” sense, but his fatherhood is something very “simple and *human*.” Here we would like to stress on the term “human” since it will help us to understand how Don Bosco’s fatherhood analogously understood in the “physical or biological” sense. In fact, Don Bosco’s fatherhood is modelled “on the simple and human qualities of a father of a family; both evoke in the Salesian and in the community the idea of kindness, attention, availability and forgiveness.”⁷⁰ The “human aspect” of Don Bosco’s fatherhood is not suppressed by his spiritual fatherhood. We find this

⁶⁷ Special General Chapter, *Don Bosco at the Oratory: Enduring Criterion for the Renewal of Salesian Action*, 192.

⁶⁸ Salesian Constitutions, art. 21. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁹ Salesian Constitutions, art. 1. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁰ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, 238.

in the comments on Salesian Constitutions: The qualities of Don Bosco’s “human fatherhood” were not suppressed, but permeated by the divine. These qualities express themselves in this manner:

He [Don Bosco] was “deeply human, rich in the qualities of his people,” “open to the realities of this earth “; able to inspire esteem, confidence and affection because he was able to love; he was a formative educator, “an idealist and realist who would try anything but at the same time show prudence” (Daniel-Rops); “a giant with massive arms with which he has managed to draw the whole universe to himself” (Card. Nina to Leo XIII); a “dreamer (how many “dreams” he had during his life...) but very much down to earth in what he achieved.”⁷¹

Furthermore, the Salesian Constitutions speaks of all Don Bosco’s rich gifts of nature and grace placed him at the service of a unique mission in “a closely-knit life project.” In him the human and divine aspects were intimately united in the single mission for the salvation of youth.⁷² Yet, Don Bosco is a man with a fixed idea always in mind, which becomes ever broader in detail but remains essentially that of the dream at the age of nine, and will do so until his dying breath: save the young, and especially the poorest of them. This service to youth prompted him to undertake courageous enterprises. He realizes them with “firmness, constancy and the sensitivity of a generous heart, in the midst of difficulties and fatigue.”⁷³

The fatherhood of Don Bosco is manifested through his firmness and constancy:

Firmness to undertake initiatives that called for a lot of courage, sometimes flying in the face of traditional ideals and ways of doing things; firmness to accept the hard work and toil of his ministry, even to the extent of dying of bodily exhaustion. For a man driven on by

⁷¹ Ibid., 240.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ See Ibid., 240-241.

such holy zeal, he nevertheless had a great and delicate tenderness; it sprang from a heart deeply touch by the wretchedness of the young and the injustices suffered by the lowly; the tenderness of the heart of a father which made him attentive to each one of his children, anxious for their good, sad when he had to be away from them; the tenderness finally of the heart of a child which gave him trust and joy before the infinitely good God, and before the Virgin Mary, the Mother of his family.⁷⁴

With firmness and constancy as described, Don Bosco had loved all his boys and each of them wholeheartedly in the Lord. We find here in Don Bosco's love what we find in God's Fatherhood understood by the Old Testament. Let us single out three prominent features of fatherhood of Don Bosco as imitation of Fatherhood of God presented in the Old Testament.

First, in the Old Testament the concept of God as Father has two sense, collective and individualistic: God as the Father of Israel and God as the Father of individuals like David, Solomon, etc. We find these traits in the person of Don Bosco. He loved the young as collective personality and at the same time as individual. He often said: "That *you are young* is enough to make me love you very much."⁷⁵ In this saying, it is certain that Don Bosco loved the young as a collective personality. In this sense, there is no youngster excluded from Don Bosco's heart. On the other hand, Don Bosco's love for the young was not restricted to collective and abstract sense. Rather his love for the young became so personal, so intimate that he knew each of them by name and he loved each of them in a very unique and unrepeatable manner. This fatherly love of Don Bosco is beautifully expressed in his Letter from Rome in 1884:

Whether I am at home or away I am always thinking of you. I have only one wish, to see you happy both in this world and in the next. It was this idea, this wish of mine, that made me write this letter. Being away from you, not being able to see or hear you, upsets me more than you can imagine. For that reason I would have liked to

⁷⁴ See *Ibid.*, 241.

⁷⁵ Salesian Constitutions, art. 14. Emphasis mine.

write these few lines to you a week ago, but constant work prevented me. And so, although I shall be back very soon, I want to send you this letter in advance, since I cannot yet be with you in person. *These words come from someone who loves you very dearly in Christ Jesus, someone who has duty of speaking to you with the freedom of a father.* You'll let me do that won't you? And you will pay attention to what I am going to say you, and put it into practice.⁷⁶

Second, in the Old Testament, the term “father” is used in relation to the concept of “election.” It is God-Yahweh who has chosen Israel as his first-born son. This is the relationship of choice, of predilection. We find this choice or predilection perfectly reflected in Don Bosco when he was asked by Marchioness Barolo to choose between his poor boys and the position of chaplaincy in her institutes. Don Bosco had chosen his poor boys. It is worthwhile to narrate their conversation here:

Having made up her mind, she went to Don Bosco one day and said: “I am very pleased with the work you are doing for my institutes. I am particularly grateful to you for introducing hymns, plain chant, and organ music during church services, as well as for teaching arithmetic and the metric system in the school, along with so many other practical things.”

“There is no need to thank me, Madame,” Don Bosco replied. “A priest has a moral obligation to work. I was only doing my duty and God will reward me, I am sure, if I deserve it.”...

“But I cannot stand by and see you kill yourself. Whether you realize it or not, trying to do so many different things at the same time is only ruining your health, and it may also hurt my own institutes. Then, there are rumors going about...with regard to your mental faculties. I am, therefore, obliged to advise you...”

“To do what Madame? “

“To give up either your oratory or my hospital. Think it over, and give me your decision at your convenience.”

“I have already thought it over, and I can give you my answer now: you have money and means, and you will have no trouble in finding all the priests you want to direct your institutes. But *poor boys have*

⁷⁶ MB XVIII, 107-114; see also Appendix of Salesian Constitutions 1984, 254. Emphasis mine.

nothing, and that is why I cannot and must not forsake them. If I were to give them up now, the work of several years would be lost. So from now on I shall gladly do all I can for the Rifugio, but not as a full chaplain. I am giving up this post to devote myself more fully to the care of these boys."⁷⁷

Third, as O'Collins has stated, "naming God "Father" expresses His deep involvement in the story of Israel, its kingly leaders, and its righteous ones. Expressed differently, the Fatherhood of God indicates his personal involvement in the life of Israel. This is what Don Bosco had picked up. He completely involved in the life of the young in general and each youngster in particular. He took delight in their interests and anxieties. Regarding this, P. Ruffinato comments:

Don Bosco's love for these boys manifested itself in practical and timely way. *He took an interest in the whole of their lives recognizing their more urgent needs and with an insight into those most hidden.* To say that his heart was totally dedicated to the boys meant that the whole of his being, intellect, heart and will, his physical strength, everything he was and had was directed towards their good, in fostering their all-around development, and with the desire for their eternal salvation. For Don Bosco, therefore, being a man of the heart meant being totally consecrated to the good of his boys and devoting to them all his strength to his last breath.⁷⁸

By and large, we can affirm that all his life, Don Bosco displayed a father's heart. He said to his Salesians: "No matter in what remote part of the world, you may never forget that here in Italy you have a father who loves you in the Lord."⁷⁹ And we recall here also the heart-rending appeal in the Letter from Rome of 1884: "Do you know what this poor old man who has spent his whole life for his dear boys wants from you?...that you should go back to the days

⁷⁷ BM II, 357-359. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁸ P. Ruffinato, *Educhiamo con il Cuore di Don Bosco* in "Note di Pastorale Giovanile," (no. 6/2007): 9. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁹ BM XI, 362.

of affection and Christian confidence between boys and superiors; the days when we accepted and put up with difficulties for the love of Jesus Christ; the days when hearts were open with a simple candour; days of love and real joy for everyone.”⁸⁰ Don Bosco is indeed a father in imitation of the fatherhood of God!⁸¹

2.2. Don Bosco’s Mission: To Be Sign of God’s Fatherly Love as Jesus Did

This section is the presentation of how the term “father” revealed by Jesus in the New Testament has its bearing on Don Bosco’s mission, to be a father to his poor boys. To be more specific, we would like to explore how Don Bosco had learned and imitated from Jesus the art of revealing the Fatherhood of God to people, especially the young.

To begin with we need to affirm that we are all God’s children. This is not only a fact, but also a reality of faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that in Baptism we become sons and daughters of God and so brothers and sisters to one another.⁸² However, it is sad to say the image of God as Father is not much appreciated in today world wherein the image of a father in the family (biological sense) or in religious life (spiritual sense) has been distorted by human weakness and scandal. For this reason, we always need someone to remind and to reflect God’s fatherly love for us in imitation of Jesus Christ. It is without any doubt that the fatherhood has been mostly and completely reflected in the saints, who are “perfect imitators” of the Son. And among them is Don Bosco.

To understand of the fatherhood of Don Bosco, we need to return to Jesus, who reflected perfectly the loving face of God the Father. We do this by examining the task/s which Jesus is sent to

⁸⁰ MB XVIII, 107-114; see also Appendix of Salesian Constitutions 1984, 263.

⁸¹ *Project of Life of Salesians of Don Bosco*, 238.

⁸² “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: “Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word,” (CCC, no. 1213).

perform. According to Francis J. Moloney, one of the tasks that Jesus claims to have brought to perfection, to have accomplished and thereby glorified God, is to make God known by telling the saving story of God (see 1:18; 20:30-31). However, what sort of God must Jesus make known?⁸³

St. John the Evangelist tells us that the God who Jesus comes to make known is “*A God who loves the world so much*” (3:16-17). He is a Father, who “causes His sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike” (Mt 5:45). The relationship between God, the Father and the Son is very personal, intimate, and dynamic. Regarding this, Moloney comments:

The relationships between God and the Word and between the Father and the Son, and the eventual relationship between Jesus and his own, are dynamic. In other words, the nature of the relationship between God and the Word in the Prologue (1:1-3), spills out into the dynamic nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the story. The oneness of God and the Logos in the prologue is further spelled out in the relationship between the Father and the Son in the story.⁸⁴

Moloney points out that toward the end of the Gospel Jesus spells out the reason he has made God known. He asks the Father that believers be swept into the relationship with God that He has had from all time: “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ... I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:24, 26). The love that has existed from all time between God and the Word, between the Father and the Son, has burst into the human story. Jesus has made it known so that others might be

⁸³ See Francis J. Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological, and Literary Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 54-69.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

swept into that same relationship.⁸⁵ This is exactly what Don Bosco had done. For Don Bosco, the heart of his educational and evangelizing mission is the “pastoral charity.” It is the love of the Good Shepherd who is ready to lay down his life for the sheep. In fact, Don Bosco’s whole life was spent to sweep the young people into the loving relationship with God the Father which he had.

According to Moloney, “God can be known only through his relationships: loving the world so much that He sends his only Son in an act of ‘handing over’ (3:16). If the accomplishment of Jesus’ mission is to make God known, and God’s love for the world generates the sending and handing over of the Son, the task of Jesus is to make love known. How does Jesus make love known? Jesus certainly speaks about love, but as is normal among human beings, he also (and perhaps especially) manifests love in what he does, as well as in what he says.”⁸⁶ This is what Don Bosco had picked up. He manifested his fatherly love for the young through his actions and words. In fact, “he took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young. Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls.”⁸⁷

Indeed, Don Bosco had become a perfect “reminder” and a “reflection” of God’s fatherly love for the people of his time, especially the young. Father Michael T. Winstanley writes:

I believe that Don Bosco was raised up by God to be sign and bearer of God’s love for the young people. As a human being and a committed disciple of Jesus, he sought to reach out to young people, especially the more needy ones, and to enable them to experience the love of God touching their lives. He ‘pitched his tent’ in their midst; he shared their world; he shared their concerns; he shared their lives; he accepted them, was a source of healing, of meaning, of new life. In and through all this he sought to draw them into the circle of God’s love and life. And for him, like Jesus, the key was his presence, his

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁷ Don Rua, 24 August 1894, quoted in *Salesian Constitutions*, art. 21.

‘being with,’ his “abiding,” his being there, and the quality and style of that presence.⁸⁸

As we reflect on the Fatherhood of God and that of Don Bosco, let us relax into reality, the reality of our abiding in God and God in us. Let’s reflect also on the quality of our “reflection” of God’s Fatherhood for others. Our presence in the world with the young as educators to the faith, with those with whom or for whom we work, those we seek to serve, be it in parishes, training centers or formation houses, should be a reminder and witness of the Fatherly love of God. May the revelation of Fatherhood by Jesus through love teach us how to do the same!

Conclusion

In general, the Father, theologically speaking, is the Unoriginated. He is the Principle and Source from whom the Son and the Holy Spirit immanently originated and proceed, and economically are sent. This title undoubtedly safeguards this confession of the Father. However, the Father’s love and mercy does not pour on man as an abstract entity, but directly on a concrete man (the younger son – the prodigal son). Said differently, the Father’s love is concrete and personal. Here lies the novelty of this title. Thus, in the field of experience (in the economy of salvation) the Father’s merciful love flows on each concrete man with whom Jesus has united in his incarnation.

Indeed, Jesus is the full embodied revelation of the Father, “He who sees me sees the Father” (Jn 14:9). In this sense, the face of Jesus radiates the face of his Father who is merciful. On the other hand, man is called to open his heart to Christ, if he wants to enter

⁸⁸ Michael T. Winstanley, *Symbols and Spirituality: Reflecting on John’s Gospel* (Makati: Metro Manila: Word & Life Publications, 2013), 202-203.

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into a deep relationship with God, the Father of mercies. For his part, Don Bosco had imitated Jesus. He radiated the face of God, who is loving and merciful to his boys. In so doing, he brought them into a deep relationship with God, the Father of mercies. It is here that we can affirm that Don Bosco is truly a father patterned after the Fatherhood of God.