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Fatherhood as Heritage and Vocation: From Karol Wojtyła Sr. to the Knights of Saint John Paul II

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ABSTRACT: This article examines fatherhood as an intergenerational heritage and a personal vocation. It begins with the relationship between Karol Wojtyła and his father, Karol Wojtyła Sr., as reconstructed from John Paul II's recollections, biographical sources, and military records. It then analyzes selected elements of the anthropology and theology of fatherhood in the writings of Karol Wojtyła and the documents of John Paul II, with particular attention to self-gift, responsibility, presence, service, and education. The third part considers how this heritage is received within the formation of the Knights of Saint John Paul II, especially the priority accorded in their Rule to marital and paternal obligations. The final part sets this model against contemporary transformations of fatherhood and research on the intergenerational transmission of values. The adopted perspective understands heritage not as the simple replication of a model, but as its reception, reinterpretation, and realization under new social conditions.

KEYWORDS: fatherhood; Karol Wojtyła Sr.; John Paul II; family; education; Knights of Saint John Paul II; heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

Fatherhood is one of those realities of human life that cannot be reduced either to a biological bond or to a set of duties arising from the structure of the family. From the perspective of Christian anthropology, it is a relationship, a responsibility, and a vocation whose essence is revealed in the readiness to receive another person, care for his or her development, transmit values, and bear witness through one's own life. A father educates not only through consciously formulated guidance. He also exerts an influence—and at times above all—through the way he fulfills his duties, relates to other people, orders his values, and practices his faith.

This question acquires particular significance in relation to the biography of Karol Wojtyła—John Paul II. In his recollections of childhood and youth, the figure of his father, Karol Wojtyła Sr. (1879–1941), occupies a distinctive place. This is not merely because, after the death of Emilia Wojtyła and later of Karol's elder brother Edmund, father and younger son became each other's closest family members. More important is the testimony of John Paul II himself, who years later pointed to his father's spiritual and educational role. In Dar i Tajemnica (Gift and Mystery), he recalled his father's austere way of life, regular prayer, and the experience of seeing him kneeling before God at night. He described this example as his "first domestic seminary." The phrase means more than an account of the origins of the future pope's priestly vocation. It points to a particular mechanism of intergenerational value transmission: the father formed his son not so much through explicitly stated principles as through the consistency between his everyday life and the faith he professed.[1]

The biographical portrait of Karol Wojtyła Sr., supplemented by source-based research, makes it possible to view this relationship beyond an established hagiographic pattern. Military documents portray him as a long-serving professional soldier, first in the Austro-Hungarian army and later in the Polish Army, and as a man described by his superiors as conscientious and honest. A broader reconstruction of the future pope's family environment is offered by the biography by Milena Kindziuk[2] Emilia i Karol Wojtyłowie. Rodzice św. Jana Pawła II. This material makes it possible to study Wojtyła Sr.'s fatherhood not as an abstract ideal, but as a

[1] John Paul II, Dar i Tajemnica. W pięćdziesiątą rocznicę moich święceń kapłańskich, Wydawnictwo św. Stanisława BM – Wydawnictwo WAM, Kraków 1996, pp. 21–22.

[2] M. Kindziuk, "Karol Wojtyła senior w wojsku austriackim i polskim," Saeculum Christianum. Pismo Historyczne 24 (2017), pp. 237–246, DOI: 10.21697/sc.2017.24.22.

concrete practice of life shaped by family loss, responsibility for his son's upbringing, work, discipline, and religious faith.[3]

The question therefore arises whether the experience acquired in the family home may be treated as one of the contexts that help illuminate John Paul II's later reflection on man, marriage, and fatherhood. This does not imply a simple causal dependence between biography and papal teaching. John Paul II's thought has its own biblical, philosophical, and theological foundations and developed in dialogue with numerous intellectual traditions and pastoral experiences. Personal experience can nevertheless provide an important hermeneutical context, especially where the pope speaks of paternal responsibility, self-gift, the witness of faith, and the presence of parents in the education of a child.

In the apostolic exhortation Familiaris consortio, John Paul II devoted a distinct section to "man as husband and father," emphasizing his particular responsibility within the marital and family communion. In this account, fatherhood is associated not with domination but with love, respect for the dignity of women, responsibility for life, and active participation in the education of children. In this context, the autobiographical image of Karol Wojtyła Sr. at prayer acquires additional significance: the fatherhood experienced by the son later encounters a theological reflection on parents' responsibility for the spiritual formation of their children.[4]

The question of a father's presence and responsibility remains relevant beyond the historical context of the Wojtyła family. In Tato, gdzie jesteś?, Andrzej Zwoliński addresses paternal absence, transformations of the contemporary family, and the weakening of the educational and relational functions of fatherhood. The book is not a biographical source on Karol Wojtyła Sr.; rather, it provides a point of reference for analyzing the social and cultural significance of fatherhood.[5]

An instructive example of the movement from the memory of John Paul II to formative practice is the activity of the Order of the Knights of Saint John Paul II. Its Rule defines the community as a formation program for Catholic laymen and, in the case of married members, clearly establishes the priority of a husband's and father's obligations over organizational activity. A particular testimony to the way this identity is interpreted within the Knights is provided by Stefan Czerniecki's[6] Rycerze Jana Pawła II. Ojcowie, o których tak prosił. Because of its fictionalized character, the book cannot be treated on the same level as normative documents or scholarly studies; it nevertheless constitutes material relevant to the reception and self-understanding of the community.[7]

The principal research question of this article is how Karol Wojtyła Sr.'s experience of fatherhood can provide a context for understanding fatherhood in the life and teaching of John Paul II, and to what extent elements of this model can be identified in the contemporary formation of the Knights of Saint John Paul II. The aim is not to establish a simple line of influence running from the pope's father to a contemporary association of men. Rather, the analysis seeks to identify continuity among certain categories: presence, witness, responsibility, self-discipline, prayer, service to the family, care for the development of those entrusted to one's care, and an understanding of fatherhood as a task that exceeds the biological dimension.

Achieving this aim requires several complementary perspectives. A historical-biographical analysis serves to reconstruct selected aspects of the life of Karol Wojtyła Sr. and his relationship with his son. A theological-anthropological analysis examines selected statements and documents of John Paul II concerning marriage, family, men, and fatherhood. Content analysis of the formation documents of the Knights makes it possible to determine which elements of the papal heritage have been adopted and developed in their model of formation. The primary sources—the writings of John Paul II and the Rule of the Knights—are clearly distinguished from scholarly literature and from formative and memoir literature, which serve a supporting function.

The title concepts of "heritage" and "vocation" denote two mutually complementary dimensions of fatherhood. Heritage points to what is received: experience, example, a model of responsibility, and a system of values. Vocation, in turn, presupposes the personal appropriation of that heritage and the giving of a concrete form to it in one's own life. The path from Karol Wojtyła Sr., through the personal experience and teaching of his son, to

[3]M. Kindziuk, Emilia i Karol Wojtyłowie. Rodzice św. Jana Pawła II, Wydawnictwo Esprit – Wydawnictwo W drodze, Kraków 2020.

[4]John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio, 22 November 1981, no. 25; see no. 60.
[5]A. Zwoliński, Tato, gdzie jesteś?, PETRUS, Kraków 2015.

[6]Reguła Zakonu Rycerzy Świętego Jana Pawła II, paras. 26–27, 37–38.
[7]S. Czerniecki, Rycerze Jana Pawła II. Ojcowie, o których tak prosił, PETRUS, Kraków 2021.

contemporary attempts at the formation of Catholic men is not a simple process of reproducing a single model. Rather, it exemplifies how the experience of fatherhood can be remembered, reflected upon, deepened theologically, and then reinterpreted by successive generations.

1. Karol Wojtyła Sr.—Father as Witness and Educator

Any attempt to reconstruct the significance of fatherhood in the life and later thought of Karol Wojtyła should begin not with his mature theological statements but with the family environment in which the future pope's fundamental experiences were formed. His father, Karol Wojtyła Sr., occupies a special place in this context. The point is not to search for a simple biographical key from which all of John Paul II's later teaching could be derived from childhood experiences. It is, however, possible to identify those elements of the father-son relationship that John Paul II himself, many years later, regarded as significant for his religious, moral, and personal formation.

Karol Wojtyła Sr. was born on 18 July 1879 in Lipnik. He devoted the greater part of his professional life to military service. Archival documents indicate that he served professionally in the Austro-Hungarian army for eighteen years, including in the 56th Infantry Regiment, and after Poland regained independence he continued his service in the Polish Army. Later studies based on materials from the Military Historical Bureau–Central Military Archives broaden and, in some details, correct earlier findings concerning his career. For the study of fatherhood, it is particularly important that different groups of sources consistently portray him as dutiful and disciplined, highly regarded for his honesty and his relations with other people.[89]

Military records do not directly describe family relationships, but they make it possible to reconstruct character traits that also appear in later recollections of the Wojtyła household. The model of military discipline should not be mechanically transferred to the upbringing of his son. Yet the convergence between official descriptions of Wojtyła Sr. and John Paul II's memory of his father as a man who demanded above all from himself is striking.

This element appears particularly clearly in John Paul II's conversation with André Frossard. The pope recalled that a father who knew how to demand much of himself did not need constantly to impose demands on his son. This recollection describes a particular model of educational influence: authority is established not primarily through superiority or a system of commands, but through consistency of life. The fatherhood of Karol Wojtyła Sr. thus had the character of witness. His son observed a man who imposed obligations on himself before imposing them on others.[10]

In this sense, one can discern the beginnings of an understanding of authority that would later become important in Wojtyła's personalist reflection. Its source lies not merely in formal position but in the credibility of the person. Educational influence takes place through example, because the child perceives the consistency between declared values and the practice of life. In the case of the young Wojtyła, this concerned both the order of duties and religious practice.

John Paul II presented the importance of this second sphere especially clearly in Dar i Tajemnica. Recalling the beginnings of his own vocation, he pointed to his parents and particularly to his father. The most enduring image was that of his father immersed in prayer at night. The pope acknowledged that he had not discussed a future priesthood with him, yet he called his father's example his "first domestic seminary." The phrase shows that formation can precede direct instruction: it takes place through presence, observation, repeated practices, and the experience of the authenticity of a significant person.[11]

This does not mean that Karol Wojtyła Sr. consciously prepared his son for the priesthood. All the more significant, therefore, is the fact that after many decades John Paul II interpreted his father's attitude as one of the important factors in his own maturation. The father did not design his son's future; instead, he created an environment in which faith had a visible existential dimension. Prayer was not merely a command directed at

[8]M. Kindziuk, "Karol Wojtyła senior w wojsku austriackim i polskim," op. cit., pp. 237–246.

[9]M. Siwiec-Cielebon, "Polski żołnierz na ołtarze. Droga życia Karola Wojtyły seniora i opinie przełożonych o nim w świetle dokumentów wojskowych," Wadoviana. Przegląd historyczno-kulturalny 22 (2019), pp. 42–87.

[10]A. Frossard, „Nie lękajcie się!". Rozmowy z Janem Pawłem II, Znak, Kraków 2005, p. 12.
[11]John Paul II, Dar i Tajemnica, op. cit., pp. 21–22.

the child. The son saw his father praying. Dutifulness was not merely a requirement imposed on the child. The son saw a man who made demands of himself.[12]

The dimension of responsibility became especially evident after successive family losses. Following the death of Emilia Wojtyła in 1929, the main burden of daily care for nine-year-old Karol fell to his father. The situation deepened after the death of the elder son, Edmund, in 1932. The biography of John Paul II's parents portrays Karol Sr. as a man who organized the household, cared for his younger son's education, and accompanied him in everyday life. According to John Paul II's later testimony, successive experiences of loss did not weaken his father's religious life but deepened it.[13][14]

From the perspective of an analysis of fatherhood, this is a crucial point. Karol Sr. appears not merely as a guardian who ensured material security and everyday order. His fatherhood also encompassed the way he lived through suffering and loss. His son observed not a man protected from boundary experiences, but a person who sought to give those experiences a religious meaning. Alongside discipline, a second dimension of fatherhood therefore emerges: presence in situations of vulnerability.

The recollections of the young Wojtyła's schoolmates broaden this picture by revealing the relational character of his fatherhood. In their memories, the Wojtyła home is not solely a space of strict discipline. They recall walks together, conversations, interest in Karol's education, and openness toward his friends. This suggests a synthesis of two dimensions: the normative dimension, comprising order, duty, and responsibility, and the relational dimension, expressed through presence and interest in the son's development.[15]

Separating these dimensions would impoverish the picture. Discipline alone could be read as authoritarianism; closeness without demands, as upbringing without a clear order of values. In the young Karol's experience, the two remained connected. His father was present and at the same time offered an example of self-control and dutifulness.

Methodological caution is nevertheless necessary. John Paul II's memory is retrospective, and the pope's later sainthood encouraged the idealization of his family environment. One should therefore not reconstruct from a few testimonies a complete pedagogical program of Karol Wojtyła Sr. A more modest claim remains sufficiently well supported: John Paul II himself remembered his father as a witness of faith, self-discipline, and responsible presence, and he attributed formative significance to these elements.

At this point one may identify the first element of the title concept of the "heritage of fatherhood." It does not mean the transmission of a ready-made set of propositions about the family or the preparation of a son for a particular ecclesial role. Rather, the heritage consisted in a certain structure of experience: responsibility preceding demands, presence preceding instruction, and witness preceding words. In such a model, the father does not so much tell the child who he or she should become as show, through his own life, that a person is responsible for the way in which the vocation received is fulfilled.

2. FROM THE SON'S EXPERIENCE TO A THEOLOGY OF FATHERHOOD: MAN AS HUSBAND AND FATHER IN THE TEACHING OF JOHN PAUL II

The experience of fatherhood acquired in the family home cannot be treated as the sole source of Karol Wojtyła's later reflection on family, masculinity, and parenthood. His thought developed at the intersection of personalist philosophy, biblical theology, pastoral experience, and reflection on marriage. It is nevertheless worth noting that the question of fatherhood appeared in Wojtyła's writings long before his election to the See of Peter. In 1964, Rozważania o ojcostwie was published in Znak. Promieniowanie ojcostwa also dates from the

[12] See John Paul II, Dar i Tajemnica, op. cit., pp. 21–22.

[13] M. Kindziuk, Emilia i Karol Wojtyłowie, op. cit.

[14] A. Frossard, „Nie lękajcie się!", op. cit., p. 12.

[15] See "Porucznik Wojtyła – życie Karola Wojtyły (seniora)," JP2online, Centrum Myśli Jana Pawła II, https://jp2online.pl/publikacja/kapitan-wojtyla-ojciec%3BUHVibGljYXRpb246MTg%3D [accessed 25 September 2026].

same period, although its full text was published in Znak in 1979. Fatherhood was therefore among the themes present in his thought before the pontificate.[16]

In his analysis of fatherhood in the teaching of John Paul II, Sławomir Kunka identifies precisely these texts as important for reconstructing the pope's later reflection. Fatherhood is not reduced in them to a biological fact. It is a relational reality: it requires going beyond oneself, recognizing the other person, and accepting responsibility for that person. From this perspective, being a father means not merely "having a child," but entering a relationship that also transforms the father himself.[17]

One of the fundamental keys to John Paul II's anthropology is the category of gift. A human being attains fulfilment not through concentration on the self but by overcoming egoism and turning toward another person. In the Letter to Families Gratissimam sane, referring to the conciliar constitution Gaudium et spes, the pope recalls that the person cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self. In the context of marriage and family, this principle assumes a very concrete form: marriage is the mutual gift of persons, and parenthood opens that gift to the presence of a new human being.[18]

In his analysis of the papal teaching on parenthood, Jan Mazur identifies "person" and "gift" as two fundamental interpretive concepts. Fatherhood is therefore not merely a social function. It is one form in which the human capacity for self-gift is realized. Male maturity is revealed in the ability to accept responsibility for another person and to subordinate one's own strength to that person's good.[19]

Witold Starnawski presents the relationship between masculinity and fatherhood in terms of two complementary models: the first emphasizes, among other things, strength, decisiveness, and the capacity for action; the second emphasizes authority, responsibility, and care. Fatherhood gives a personal orientation to a man's capacity for action: strength becomes service, decisiveness is subordinated to responsibility, and authority is to protect the development of another person. Here an analogy with Wojtyła Sr.'s experience can be discerned: demands directed first toward oneself become a condition of credible influence on others.[20]

The most direct development of this idea is found in the apostolic exhortation Familiaris consortio. One section is explicitly entitled "Man as Husband and Father." John Paul II emphasizes that a man is called to live with an awareness of his gift and of his role as husband and father. The use of the category of vocation is fundamental. Fatherhood is not merely a status but a task that requires personal maturation.[21]

Marriage remains the first context of fatherhood. The pope rejects a model of masculinity that leads to the subordination of women and links the maturity of the husband with recognition of his wife's equal dignity. Fatherhood therefore cannot be properly interpreted apart from the way marriage is lived. Nor is a man's responsibility exhausted by professional work or by providing economic security for the family. It includes presence in the relationship with his wife, participation in the lives of his children, education, and the transmission of values.[22]

An important element of the papal teaching is also the connection between fatherhood and motherhood. In Mulieris dignitatem, John Paul II stresses that parenthood is a shared participation of woman and man, although motherhood and fatherhood are experienced differently. This protects reflection on fatherhood from two extremes: treating the father as a secondary figure and constructing a model of masculinity in opposition to

[16]K. Wojtyła [pseud. A.J.], "Rozważania o ojcostwie," Znak 16 (1964), no. 5 (119), pp. 610–613; idem [pseud. Stanisław Andrzej Gruda], "Promieniowanie ojcostwa. Misterium," Znak 31 (1979), no. 11 (305), pp. 1119–1145.

[17]S. Kunka, "Przeżywanie ojcostwa w nauczaniu bł. Jana Pawła II," Verbum Vitae 20 (2011), pp. 253–284, DOI: 10.31743/vv.2046.

[18]John Paul II, Letter to Families Gratissimam sane, 2 February 1994, no. 11.

[19]J. Mazur OSPPE, "Jana Pawła II nauczanie o rodzicielstwie," Roczniki Nauk Społecznych 3(39) (2011), pp. 119–138.

[20]W. Starnawski, "Dwa modele relacji: męskość – ojcostwo. Perspektywa pedagogii personalistycznej," Forum Pedagogiczne 6 (2016), no. 2/2, pp. 217–232, DOI: 10.21697/fp.2016.2.39.

[21]John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris consortio, no. 25.

[22]See John Paul II, Familiaris consortio, no. 25.

femininity. Fatherhood develops within a communion of persons and remains connected with the quality of the marital relationship.[23]

John Paul II presents an even clearer model of fatherhood as responsible service in the apostolic exhortation Redemptoris custos, devoted to Saint Joseph. The document is particularly significant because it presents a fatherhood that is not based on biological generation and yet is authentic fatherhood. The pope speaks of the "service of fatherhood," realized through presence, care, work, and the total gift of one's life.[24]

Paternal authority is redefined here. It does not exist for its own sake and does not aim at subordinating the child. It has meaning insofar as it protects the development of the person entrusted to the father. The father bears a particular responsibility, but its purpose is to create a space in which the child can mature toward his or her own vocation. An analogous structure was visible in Wojtyła's experience: Karol Sr. did not design a priestly future for his son, but created an environment of faith and responsibility in which Karol could discern his own path.[25]

This conception is developed further in the Letter to Families. John Paul II describes parents as the first and most important educators of their children and interprets education as a further dimension of parenthood. The transmission of life begins a process that continues through a long-term educational relationship. One is not a father only by being at the beginning of a child's life, but by participating in the child's maturation. Parenthood requires time, presence, consistency, patience, and a readiness to accompany a process whose outcome cannot be entirely controlled.[26]

From this perspective, education is not the mechanical transmission of norms. Parents communicate meaning through relationship and through the way they live. This is precisely why John Paul II's memory of his praying father is so significant. It reveals the pedagogical power of behavior that was not an organized lesson in religion and yet remained in the son's memory as one of his most important formative experiences.

The papal conception also makes it possible to extend the notion of fatherhood beyond the biological dimension. Spiritual fatherhood does not replace fatherhood within the family, but reveals its deeper structure: the capacity to take responsibility for the development of another person. Kunka notes that, in Wojtyła's thought, the possibility of fatherhood is connected with the prior experience of being a child; a person can transmit good because he himself has first received it.[27]

This logic corresponds well to the concept of heritage adopted in this article. Karol Wojtyła received a particular experience of fatherhood from his own father, but did not reproduce it mechanically. He transformed it through his philosophical, theological, priestly, and pastoral experience. Personal experience provided existential intuitions; personalism gave them the language of person and gift; the theology of the family connected them with marriage, parenthood, and education.

As a result, John Paul II's teaching reveals a relatively coherent model of fatherhood based on several interrelated categories: self-gift, responsibility, presence, service, authority understood as care, education, and the transmission of faith through witness. These do not constitute a closed treatise on fatherhood, but they recur across different documents and texts. The next question, therefore, is what happens to such a heritage when it becomes the basis for the practical formation of contemporary men.

3. FROM TEACHING TO FORMATION: THE KNIGHTS OF SAINT JOHN PAUL II AND THE VOCATION OF MAN AND FATHER

Moving from John Paul II's teaching on marriage, family, and fatherhood to contemporary forms of male formation requires a distinction between doctrinal and practical reception. The first consists in studying and interpreting papal teaching; the second seeks to translate values into the practice of life, a system of formation, and concrete commitments. In the case of the Knights of Saint John Paul II, the second dimension is particularly

[23]John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Mulieris dignitatem, 15 August 1988, nos. 18–19.

[24]John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Redemptoris custos, 15 August 1989, nos. 7–8.

[25]See John Paul II, Dar i Tajemnica, op. cit., pp. 21–22.

[26]John Paul II, Gratissimam sane, no. 16.

[27]S. Kunka, "Przeżywanie ojcostwa…," op. cit., pp. 253–284.

relevant. The community does not limit itself to commemorating its patron, but declares its intention to shape the lives of its members on the basis of his witness and teaching.

Despite the name "Order of the Knights of Saint John Paul II," it is not a religious order in the sense of an institute of consecrated life. The Rule defines the community as a formation program intended for Catholic laymen. The point of departure is therefore the lay vocation of the man, lived in family, professional, social, and ecclesial life. This is of fundamental importance for the question of fatherhood: formation is not intended to detach a man from his primary relationships, but to influence the way he lives them.[28]

The Rule identifies as its fundamental aim the formation of Catholic laymen after the example of John Paul II and lists among its areas of activity the pursuit of holiness, defense of family and life, development of male spirituality, promotion of papal teaching, fraternal assistance, and service. The patron is therefore intended to serve not only a symbolic function but also as a formative model.[29]

This does not mean reconstructing Karol Wojtyła's way of life in its historical circumstances. John Paul II was a priest and bishop, whereas the Brother Knights are Catholic laymen. What can be transmitted, however, are principles: responsibility, work on oneself, a life of prayer, fidelity to commitments, and the integration of faith with everyday life. In this sense, the community seeks not so much to copy the patron's biography as to reinterpret his heritage.

The provision of the Rule most important for the present article is found in the section devoted to Knights who are married. The document states that the sacramental bond of marriage and the duties arising from it constitute a particular and fundamental commitment for a member of the community. It then establishes the principle that a Knight should remember above all his duties as husband and father of a family and must not neglect them because of his activity in the Order.[30]

From the perspective of research on fatherhood, this provision is fundamental. It establishes a clear hierarchy of duties. Religious activity undertaken outside the home, even when it arises from commitment to the community, does not justify neglect of family responsibility. Knightly formation is subordinated to the marital and paternal vocation, not the reverse.

A direct convergence with the anthropology of the family found in Familiaris consortio can be seen here. John Paul II did not regard a man's activity outside the home as a sufficient criterion for the fulfillment of responsibility. A man is called to be present as husband and father. In the Rule, this principle takes a practical form: a member of the community should not justify absence from home by activity undertaken in the name of religious values.[31]

The significance of this provision increases when one considers the character of a male organization that employs strong symbolism, hierarchy, and extensive communal activity. Such a structure could potentially become competitive with the family. The Rule seeks to prevent this by incorporating the priority of marital and paternal obligations into the formation program itself. Fatherhood is therefore not one additional "area of activity" for a Knight; for a man with a family, it remains the primary setting in which his formation is tested.

The formation structure comprises four degrees: Faith, Mercy, Solidarity, and Patriotism. This is not a formal program of education for fatherhood, yet its successive elements correspond to capacities that are also important in the paternal role: work on oneself, sensitivity to the needs of another person, solidarity, and responsibility for the community. Prayer and ascetical duties have particular significance. Recommended practices include family and marital prayer and regular reading of the teaching of John Paul II.[32]

At this point the analogy with the experience of the young Karol Wojtyła is especially clear. One of the future pope's most enduring memories was the sight of his father at prayer. If religious authority is built primarily on

[28]Reguła Zakonu Rycerzy Świętego Jana Pawła II, para. 1.

[29]Reguła Zakonu Rycerzy Świętego Jana Pawła II, Part II: Cel Zakonu and Part V: Stopnie rycerskie.

[30]Ibid., paras. 26–27.

[31]See John Paul II, Familiaris consortio, no. 25; Reguła Zakonu Rycerzy Świętego Jana Pawła II, paras. 26–27.

[32]Ibid., paras. 37–38.

consistency between professed faith and lived practice, the provision concerning family prayer is not merely a devotional obligation. It may be interpreted as one of the mechanisms of intergenerational religious transmission.

This does not mean that the mere performance of religious practices guarantees mature fatherhood. Witness also requires the quality of relationships, the capacity to listen, responsibility, and respect for the child's growing autonomy. The formation structure of the Knights nevertheless contains an element important to the model examined here: a man's religious faith is to be visible not only at community gatherings but also in his home.

The requirements of the Rule are moreover directed first toward the Knight himself. He is to work on his own conscience, take part in retreats, practice prayer, undertake discipline, and perform works of mercy. This structure corresponds to the principle present in John Paul II's recollection of his father: effective education begins with demands made of oneself rather than with multiplying demands placed on others.[33]

The papal conception of fatherhood also makes it possible to recognize a spiritual dimension of responsibility for another person. The Rule lists fraternal assistance and concrete works of mercy undertaken by the Chorągwie, or local chapters. Brotherhood should not be identified with fatherhood, but the two relationships share a fundamental principle: male maturity is tested in the ability to take responsibility for the good of another person.[34]

The importance of fatherhood in the community's self-understanding is revealed by Stefan Czerniecki's book Rycerze Jana Pawła II. Ojcowie, o których tak prosił. The publication is a fictionalized account of the first decade of the community's activity and cannot be treated as a critical monograph or normative source. Its value for the present analysis lies elsewhere: it shows the language in which the community speaks about itself. The subtitle itself juxtaposes two categories important to its self-understanding—knighthood and fatherhood.[35]

The symbolism of knighthood might suggest primarily struggle, strength, discipline, and hierarchy. The narrative associated with the Knights, however, shifts the emphasis toward fatherhood and holiness. In light of the preceding analysis, this may be interpreted as an attempt to subordinate masculine strength to responsibility for persons and relationships. In such a model, knighthood should signify not domination but readiness to serve.

A different type of reception material is found in Andrzej Kurdziel's Święty Jan Paweł II – żyje pośród nas, based on interviews with people who encountered Karol Wojtyła and John Paul II. The publication is not a study of fatherhood, but it illustrates a mechanism by which the papal heritage is transmitted through relational memory: what is preserved is not only texts but also memories of a particular mode of presence, dialogue, and influence on others. This is relevant to the formation of the Knights because their patron functions simultaneously as an author of teaching and as a personal model.[36]

Three levels of the heritage under examination can therefore be distinguished. The first is Karol Wojtyła's personal experience: a father who was present, prayed, and demanded first of all from himself. The second is the mature anthropology of John Paul II, in which fatherhood is described through gift, responsibility, service, presence, and education. The third appears in the contemporary formation of the Knights, which seeks to translate some of these categories into the practices of laymen: the priority of family duties, work on oneself, marital and family prayer, formation of conscience, brotherhood, and service.

This does not mean, however, that the contemporary problem of fatherhood can be resolved simply by invoking a historical model or by belonging to a particular community. This model functions today under conditions of profound social and cultural change. The final step of the analysis must therefore confront the heritage under discussion with contemporary questions about paternal presence and the forms of intergenerational transmission of values.

[33]See Reguła Zakonu Rycerzy Świętego Jana Pawła II, paras. 37–41.

[34]Ibid., paras. 40–41.

[35]S. Czerniecki, Rycerze Jana Pawła II, op. cit.

[36]A. Kurdziel, Święty Jan Paweł II – żyje pośród nas, PETRUS, Kraków 2014.

4. FATHERHOOD AMID CONTEMPORARY CHANGE: HERITAGE, CRISIS, AND THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF JOHN PAUL II'S MODEL

The preceding reflections on Karol Wojtyła Sr., the papal anthropology of fatherhood, and the formation of the Knights lead to the question of the relevance of this model today. It cannot be answered simply by stating that contemporary fatherhood is in crisis. The very notion of crisis is ambiguous: it may refer to the weakening of paternal presence and family bonds, but it may also describe the disintegration of a particular historical model and the search for a new form of fatherhood. From the perspective of this article, more important than preserving an earlier model is the question of which elements of fatherhood retain their significance regardless of social change.

Józef Augustyn, SJ, points out that what is changing above all is the image of the father as the unquestioned head of the family, whereas the desire for and task of fatherhood do not lose their significance. Fatherhood can be understood as service, mission, and vocation, requiring work on oneself, maturity, and the capacity to build relationships. Such a perspective makes it possible to move beyond the false alternative between the father as autocrat and a father deprived of any distinctive educational significance. A change in the way authority is exercised need not mean the disappearance of authority; it may instead mark a shift from formal position toward credibility grounded in presence and responsibility.[37]

Contemporary transformations of fatherhood also have a social dimension. Katarzyna Zielińska-Król notes that the new model of fatherhood is associated with greater expectations of a man's presence in the child's everyday life and greater participation in care and education, while responsibility for the family's security is maintained. This means not simply abandoning previous tasks, but broadening the range of expectations placed upon men.[38]

This perspective helps to interpret appropriately the diagnosis offered by Andrzej Zwoliński in Tato, gdzie jesteś?. The author focuses on various forms of paternal absence. Absence need not mean physically leaving the family. It may result from excessive professional involvement, labor migration, relationship breakdown, escape into the virtual world, or addictions. The question "where are you?" therefore concerns not only the father's physical location but the quality of his presence.[39]

This distinction is also important for interpreting the Wojtyła family experience. Karol Wojtyła Sr. is not a significant example because he represented a family model from the first half of the twentieth century. The importance of his figure lies rather in the kind of presence remembered by his son: shared life, interest in his development, witness of faith, personal discipline, and accompaniment through successive losses. These elements can be carried into the contemporary context without reconstructing the historical configuration of family roles.

Particularly relevant in this context is the research of Anita Famuła-Jurczak, published in 2026 in Wychowanie w Rodzinie. On the basis of 143 narrative interviews with men aged 18–25, the author analyzes the transmission of values, norms, and cultural capital in the father-son relationship. The findings show that sons do not receive their fathers' transmission mechanically: they select, reinterpret, modify, and at times reject it. This finding is crucial for the concept of heritage adopted in the present article.[40]

Inheriting a model of fatherhood does not mean copying it. Karol Wojtyła did not become a second Karol Wojtyła Sr.: he did not repeat his father's profession or manner of functioning within the family. He did, however, receive particular meanings that he interpreted through his own experience. One may therefore speak of continuity of values accompanied by a change in the way they are realized. The heritage of fatherhood is thus always also a reinterpretation of that heritage.

Paweł Piotrowski's approach may also be related to this logic. In the article "Family Musical Heritage in Digital Culture: An Intergenerational Mediation Model for Upbringing," he addresses the intergenerational mediation of family musical heritage in digital culture. Although the object of analysis is musical heritage, the model of

[37]J. Augustyn SJ, Ojcostwo. Aspekty pedagogiczne i duchowe, 4th ed., WAM, Kraków 2009, pp. 7–8.

[38]K. Zielińska-Król, "Tożsamość mężczyzny a nowy model ojcostwa," Roczniki Teologiczne 61 (2014), no. 10, pp. 35–47.

[39]A. Zwoliński, Tato, gdzie jesteś?, op. cit.

[40]A.K. Famuła-Jurczak, "Ojciec, szkoła i świat: o dziedziczeniu i negocjowaniu kapitału kulturowego w narracjach synów," Wychowanie w Rodzinie 33 (2026), no. 1, pp. 25–37, DOI: 10.61905/wwr/221678.

intergenerational mediation itself provides a useful point of reference for understanding heritage as a process of transmission and reinterpretation in upbringing.[41]

Paternal authority occupies a particular place in this process. In his analysis of the father's presence in social life, Jan Zimny emphasizes physical and psychological presence, responsibility, honesty, and involvement in the child's life. Authority is not the result of position alone but is confirmed by one's own conduct. This again recalls the structure present in John Paul II's memory of his father: by making demands of himself, the father did not need continually to enforce obedience from his son.[42]

A similar direction appears in Catholic formation literature in Bill Dodds's Tato w katolickim stylu. The author connects fatherhood with participation in the child's spiritual maturation and with responsibility for introducing the child into the life of faith. The publication is not scholarly and therefore serves only a supporting function in the present article. It nevertheless shows that the category of the father as a religious witness is also present in practical formative reflection.[43]

Similarly, in Zawód: TATA, Krzysztof Pilch connects the quality of the father-child relationship with the ability to listen, predictability of conduct, keeping one's word, and the transmission of spiritual values. Of particular importance is the connection between consistency of attitude and religious witness. A father's credibility then derives not from the mere right to instruct, but from the regularity and coherence of his conduct.[44]

The analogy with the experience of the future John Paul II is difficult to overlook. His remembered image of a praying father exemplifies a form of transmission that does not separate religious content from the person who communicates it. A child observes not only what the father says about God, but also whether the father himself relates his life to God. In this sense, religious education becomes a distinctive form of witness.

Reference to Karol Wojtyła Sr. nevertheless requires a consistent avoidance of idealization. The son's recollection is retrospective, and the later cult surrounding John Paul II encouraged simplified images of his family environment. The significance of the biographical material therefore does not lie in proving that Wojtyła Sr. implemented a complete and exemplary program of fatherhood. Rather, it shows which elements of fatherhood his son retained in memory and to which he later attached significance: presence, prayer, self-discipline, responsibility, and witness.

The diagnosis of a "crisis of fatherhood" requires similar caution. Not every change in the division of family roles constitutes a crisis, just as not every new form of male involvement automatically resolves one. The quality of relationships is a more useful criterion. Fatherhood may be regarded as maturely realized when a man accepts responsibility for the child, builds a lasting bond, participates in education, transmits values credibly, and respects the child's gradually developing autonomy.

In this sense, the model derived from John Paul II's teaching remains relevant because its fundamental categories do not depend on a single historical configuration of family roles. Self-gift, responsibility, presence, service, authority grounded in witness, and education toward freedom can be realized under changing social conditions.

From this perspective, the Knights of Saint John Paul II can be considered once again. Their significance does not lie in possessing a ready-made solution to contemporary problems of fatherhood. Nor would it be justified to treat the community as empirical proof of the effectiveness of a particular educational model without conducting separate research among its members. It can, however, be stated that the Rule creates a space in which selected elements of papal anthropology are consciously transformed into formative commitments.

The principle that the duties of husband and father take precedence over community activity remains especially important. It protects formation from a paradox in which intense religious or social involvement could become a

[41] P. Piotrowski, "Family Musical Heritage in Digital Culture: An Intergenerational Mediation Model for Upbringing," Wychowanie w Rodzinie 33 (2026), no. 3.

[42] J. Zimny, "Obecność ojca w życiu społecznym," Pedagogia Ojcostwa. Katolicki Przegląd Społeczno-Pedagogiczny 2015, no. 2, pp. 16–29.

[43] B. Dodds, Tato w katolickim stylu, trans. S. and J. Demscy, 2nd rev. ed., WAM, Kraków 1994, p. 161, cited in: J. Zimny, "Obecność ojca w życiu społecznym," op. cit., p. 26.

[44] K. Pilch, Zawód: TATA, czyli czego dziecko potrzebuje od ojca, Wydawnictwo Salwator, Kraków 2010.

cause of actual absence from the home. The heritage of John Paul II would then be realized not by the number of activities undertaken but by the quality of fundamental relationships.[45]

The path from Karol Wojtyła Sr. to the contemporary Knights is therefore not a history of transmitting an unchanging model of the father. It is a history of the transmission and reinterpretation of a particular understanding of responsibility. The future pope's father embodied it through presence and witness; John Paul II transformed the experience of fatherhood into an extensive reflection on the gift of the person, marriage, family, and education; the contemporary formation community, in turn, seeks to incorporate selected elements of this reflection into a program for the lives of laymen.

2. CONCLUSION

The analyses undertaken in this article make it possible to view fatherhood as a reality situated between heritage and vocation. The first concept points to an experience received from a previous generation; the second, to personal responsibility for the way that experience is appropriated, transformed, and transmitted further. In this sense, one can trace a path from Karol Wojtyła Sr., through the life and teaching of John Paul II, to the contemporary formation of the Knights of Saint John Paul II.

The biographical analysis has shown that the significance of Karol Wojtyła Sr. for his son's spiritual and personal maturation did not arise primarily from a formal educational program. John Paul II himself remembered his father as a man of prayer, duty, inner discipline, and responsible presence. The description of the family home as a "first domestic seminary" is especially significant. The father educated not only through what he said but above all through the way he lived.

This does not justify deriving John Paul II's later teaching directly from his family biography. The papal reflection on the person, marriage, family, and parenthood has its own extensive philosophical and theological foundations. The experience of his father nevertheless provides an important context for understanding the particular importance Wojtyła attached to witness, responsibility, self-mastery, and self-gift.

In the documents of John Paul II, fatherhood consistently exceeds the biological dimension. A man becomes a father in the full sense when he accepts responsibility for another person. In Familiaris consortio, this responsibility is situated within marital and family communion; in Gratissimam sane, it is developed through the category of education; in Redemptoris custos, it is presented as service. The common denominator is presence, self-gift, responsibility, service, and witness.

Against this background, the Knights of Saint John Paul II represent an instructive example of the contemporary reception of the papal heritage. Their Rule does not develop a separate theory of fatherhood, but translates selected categories present in the teaching of John Paul II into practical commitments. Particular importance is given to the priority of obligations arising from marriage and fatherhood over organizational activity. A man's formation is therefore to find its first confirmation not in knightly symbolism or public engagement, but in the quality of his closest relationships.

Contemporary transformations of the family do not invalidate this model, but require it to be reread. A father need not reproduce the social way of life of Karol Wojtyła Sr. in order to inherit what proved enduring in his witness. Research on the father-son relationship indicates that family heritage is not mechanically reproduced but is selected and reinterpreted by successive generations.

The title concept of fatherhood as heritage and vocation should therefore be understood dynamically. Heritage is received, but vocation must be personally undertaken. Karol Wojtyła Sr. left his son a witness; John Paul II gave the experience of fatherhood an anthropological and theological dimension; contemporary formation communities seek to translate part of this heritage into the lives of another generation of men. Continuity thus does not consist in repeating a single historical model, but in returning to a fundamental principle: fatherhood begins with responsibility for one's own life so that it may then become a responsible presence in the life of another person.

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[45]See Reguła Zakonu Rycerzy Świętego Jana Pawła II, paras. 26–27.

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