

THE GRACE OF A TRUE “ATA” (FATHERHOOD)

(Rev. Fr. Fidelis Eleojo Egbunu, PhD)

Among the most common anthropomorphic portrayals of God is the reference to Him as the ‘*Ata*’ (Father *par excellence*). In this light, every human person is seen as a child of God. Period. God is then pictured as a true Father!

But this is true principally from the dimension of Divine Fatherhood. He is viewed as the Supreme Supernatural “*Ata*”. And we are willy-nilly offsprings of the holy and seemingly distant but most intimate God. This readily calls for some deep insight into certain salient attributes of this Supreme Being.

This entire gamut of ideas appeals to a personal relationship of love and childlike trust in the Father. In many known religions (specifically, Christianity, Islam and the African Traditional) it is manifest that God has drawn close to us over the centuries and granted us the privilege to reciprocate this gesture; be it through the agents called prophets, messengers or lesser divinities, as the case may be! That He continually desires to reveal His fatherly love to us in many and varied manner.

A perfect Father that He is, He offers His help and comfort in difficult times and in bad. So the onus lies on the supposed children to trust in the heavenly Father so that wherever He leads, the children may follow. Little wonder then, His children need not investigate into His wise plans. It is wise enough to keep being in step with the Divine. Yes, so much wisdom in being neither faster nor slower where and when He leads. As it were, He is lovely and mercy-personified and filled with super-abundant goodness. True to His person, He has His precious gift of graces well prepared and garnished for the benefit of His. He remains a giver never outdone in generosity as He literally lavishes bounteous gifts on them even when they slumber.

Indeed, as one of His ancient children puts it, “He is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want” (Psalm 23). This was also re-echoed by a one time persecutor who has surrendered all, thus, “He supplies all my needs according to His riches in glory” (Phil. 4:19).

And as the rule of life seems to say, there is every need to give the Father something in return. Simply put, one good turn deserves another. Therefore, we may bring Him “fruit” by glorifying Him before men, that seeing our good works men may give praise to our Father in heaven. Typical children that we are, He so desires to mirror Himself in and through us. Like

father like son? Alright! Thus, He desires that His miraculous power and glory be purely revealed or made manifest.

True to His name, He is most popular among the Igala race as the “*Ojo Akabale kia chabale*” (God who does whatever He says). He does not speak through both sides of His mouth like deceptive politicians, artisans or businessmen. No disappointment in His Dictionary. If there seems any, they must be blessings in disguise. He truly knows all about the trials, troubles, temptations and tribulations of His children. He knows and leads the way through the wilderness or dark tunnels of insecurity, terrorism and pains to His peace which the world can never offer (John 14:27). His banner over us is Love! As the typical Igala would render it, “*Ojo Ch’ogujo dunyi Kache ma ch’imoto*” (God’s presence symbolizes safety and perfect security).

God alone is Creator, the architect, builder and sustainer of His people. He has the whole world in the hollow of His hands. Whether by force of politics, technological breakthroughs or socio-cultural designs, men could only be co-creators, co-operators and mere creatures. Our dependence on Him makes the bond of Love even stronger. To authentically encounter Him entails pulling off our shoes like Moses of old, doffing our hats and literally adoring His majesty in our dancing steps akin to that of King David. To prostrate before His Supreme Majesty the *Kabiyesi* yoruboic style and stooping to the lowest level in the typical Igala *Gabaidu – Amideju* form is to acknowledge the great awe and the reverence He deserves. To dwell under the shadows of His Almighty *Odobogagwu* wings must remain our pleasure. For He desires unendingly to behold His children live in endless joy, happiness and fulfillment.

And he who desires to know the breadth of His love should picture in spirit the city or kingdom of love beyond. His eyes, ears, legs and toes, arms, fingers and mouth-piece(s) we are. Though we may go by different identities, appellations, titles and even locations in life, we remain images of the self-same ‘*Ata*’. It is in this same vein that we may now step down to the Natural Fathers, employing similar imageries.

Do typical children in ideal families not expect their fathers to be all-wise, all-loving, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-merciful and ever-present? Yet, ironically, does this goodness not entail chastisement? Does a good earthly father not pay attention even to the minutest burdens and worries of the children?

Essentially, fatherhood is naturally related to the state of caring for a child and providing for the needs of the child. By and large, it involves catering for not only the material, physical,

social and educational needs but the emotional and spiritual needs of the child as well. In a nutshell, it entails much nurturing and mentoring.

As a matter of fact, within the natural family unit, the father not only has rights but obligations as well. As he carries out his responsibilities towards the subjects, he garners the moral standing or courage which commands obedience without wielding any stick. This is granted naturally, it is not by base arrogance or pride, show-offism of any shades or colouring, oppressive tentacles, caging stratagems, raw vendetta, evil intent or naked hatred.

Indeed, Fathers parent differently, play differently, build confidence differently, communicate differently, discipline differently and prepare children to the life challenges differently. So also there exist passive fathers, absentee or disengaged fathers, visiting-fathers, dead-beat fathers and pay-cheque fathers who are only concerned about building social capital.

Globally, the lost art of fathering is being rediscovered. Fathers have significant roles in the upbringing of their children. Their involvement in the child's life includes feeding, bathing, changing diapers, carrying the baby, singing lullabies to the child, reading to the child, teaching the child at home, especially in the early stages. Aside these, the presence of the Father at home represents authority figure. The seed of responsible behavior is sown before the school teachers come into their lives. In all this, wholesome parenting which is true fatherhood remains the ideal. Negative influences are expected to be unlearned and positive values are imbibed. This entire healthy atmosphere is God-given. It is an extension of the paternity of God. Man only shares in this creative power and Fatherhood of God via the gift of marriage.

What of those we often refer to as spiritual or social Fathers (*Ata*) among which the Reverend Fathers are prominent. Of course, these are soul-minders, soul-menders and soul-winners. Such a supposed spiritual fatherhood has spiritual undertones for its subject matter. It is in this sense that His Holiness, the Pope is termed the "Holy Father" of Christendom (Catholicism?). And this is often so in the spirit of the Humble Servant of Yahweh (Jesus) himself who stated that He knows the Father and the Father knows Him. Respect and obedience here is reciprocal. And service in this case is not servitude, slavish and perforce. It precludes any arrogant posturing. With the spirit of "*Servo Servorum Dei*" (Servant of the Servants of God). The Pope wields much power. This alone sums the present pontificate of Pope Francis.

Under this umbrella, we may mention by passing, just by passing, the social or spiritual mentorship of other modes displayed in the role of guardians, masters (*ogas*) in various

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professions and even political God-fathers. Such ones may not form part of our concern for now.

To a very large degree, we may address our focus rather on the traditional or royal *Ata* institution in Igala land. Here, it is held that “*onu n’oja k’oja n’onu*” (The King owns the people as much as the people also own him). It may be necessary to note that while the reigning *Ata-Igala* holds sway over his subjects (children?) in his domain or kingdom, he does not possess any other supernatural space. He is thus endowed as he gets naturally married to the land and its people. Logically, it follows that the ideal *Ata* desires the common good of the people. Standing for their progress, development, peace, happiness and prosperity or wellbeing remains his avowed task and responsibility. His developmental agenda for the subjects show unalloyed commitment and is measured by what he is willing to do to bring about this. And in this consists his own happiness though there are different strokes of fathering for every individual *Ata*. It is instructive, however, that what a man gets from his father is an amalgam of what his father taught him, what he did with his father and what he observed his father doing. The heir apparent naturally imbibes a lot from his father for the common good. Yet, there also exist some fathers who realize they are capable of giving to their own children (subjects?) what their own father never gave them.

As a matter of fact, traditionally, the *Ata-Igala*, as it were, is not just a Priest-King like any other. He is more of a Chief Priest and paramount ruler even when some of the powers are exercised in proxy.

It is stunning, to note that the *Ata-Igala* is a ‘divine King’. There is a shade of meaning in the concept of divine kingship that connote intimate relationship with both the living and the living dead. Without the least fear of any contradiction, it must be stated categorically that the *Ata-Igala* stool is the most gracious and eminent Igala ancestral heritage. The *Ata-Igala* stool is said to be a divine throne because the occupant is believed to have the power not only of communing with but holding sway over the divinities, deities or spirits of the land who also collaborate with him in catering for the kingdom and its people. Granted, every legitimate heir apparent so designated, thus enthroned or installed in accordance with the appropriate custom and law of the land within a given dispensation becomes by virtue of such a ceremony or ritual the *bona fide Ata* (Father) of the entire land. He thereby assumes the responsibility of being the representative of the ancestors (heroes and heroines of the land) and custodian of the tradition

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and culture of the people. This is not without grave obligations from both the socio-cultural and religious angles. And since obviously the enormous task is beyond an individual's capacity, the principle of subsidiarity applies, whereby powers are shared or delegated. Powers are shared with various chiefs who are literally considered the arms and the legs (*am'uchowo ch'ere*) or agents of the *Ata*.

Nonetheless, his moral obligations to the community remain sacrosanct. Offering of prayers and sacrifices to the gods on behalf of the entire land including perceived enemies formed part of these responsibilities. More so, the moral obligation to uphold the truth in season and out of season is another inalienable task. Relentless blessing of the subjects for fruitfulness, progress, prosperity, development, good health, bumper harvest, lucrative job opportunities, good fortunes, and so forth remained a very crucial task too.

As the right hand washes the left and the left washes the right, it is incumbent on the subjects (children?) of the *Ata* to give honour to whom it is due by way of appropriate 'homage' to the Supreme Daddy above. It behoves them therefore to pray for the earthly Father to remain indefatigable in doing the bidding of the Father who is the overall *Ata* in heaven.

_____ **Rev. Fr. Fidelis Eleojo Egbunu, PhD**