

The Firemen of Sept. 11 and the Meaning of Masculinity

What's a real man? He's not a bully or a wimp. He transcends his own ego, his own fears, his own selfishness, and sacrifices himself as a gift to those he's called to protect.

By Dr. Philip J. Mango

It's the second anniversary of the September 11 tragedy, and the terrible images from that day are still vivid, forever burned into my memory.

To get past the horror, I think of the extraordinary heroism of the 300 plus firemen who gave their lives rescuing people from the burning towers.

Sadly, for many people, the memory of the firefighters is fading. And that's a shame, because we need their example of masculinity, especially with the controversy over gay marriage so much in the news.

What does gay marriage have to do with the firemen heroes who died on 9-11?

Plenty. You see, the gay marriage issue forces us to ask: what is sexual difference for? What is masculinity? What is femininity? Unless there is a meaning built into the two sexes - whether by God or nature - there is no reason to resist gay marriage.

This goes beyond procreation. After all, reproductive technology - in-vitro fertilization, cloning, maybe artificial wombs - makes the nightmare scenario of sex-less reproduction plausible. And what of single people? They are no less masculine or feminine than married people. They may be in religious life, or they may be consecrated, or they might devote their lives to service to others, whatever the case, single people still live as fully male or female persons, called to express their sexuality through their love of God and other people.

I'll focus on femininity in my next column. Here, I'll explore masculinity. What is it for? What does it look like? Why is it important?

The reason gay marriage seems plausible to some people is that our understanding of masculinity is blurred, thanks to 35 years of hostility to authentic manhood in the universities, in the media, in the arts. There's a masculinity crisis in our society and in the Church. The divorce rate is at 50-percent. Fatherless families are common. Catholic priests are in crisis. Many men aren't doing what they're supposed to do.

Of course, masculinity can't be entirely suppressed. Despite the problems, there are still good and heroic men in this culture who are not being recognized. Until 9-11, many of them were hidden in firehouses, EMT units, National Guard Armories, and police precinct houses. We considered them part of the landscape. They were ordinary guys who were called on and ran toward the flames!

In every walk of life, in war and in peace, men are called by God to be heroes. They want to be activated, to use their natural and supernatural gifts. What is a hero? A man

who transcends his own ego, his own fears, and his own selfishness, and makes a sacrifice of himself as a gift to those he's called to protect.

Heroism isn't only for men. A woman heroically undergoes pain and risk to her life in childbirth. She can also do heroic things in the public realm; but a lack of physical courage would be understandable in a woman, because she has to protect her children and herself as the bearer of new life.

In a man, a consistent lack of physical courage is a problem. Men in their physical identity must embrace heroic self-sacrifice, because it is masculinity's job to protect life and be expendable. Jesus says: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24) A man's identity in the natural order is to defend and protect, to be a leader, a warrior, a lover, a counselor - it's in his nature.

When you talk about men taking charge and protecting the women and children, some people say, "We tried that!" People are afraid of masculinity because they're afraid of a return to an authoritarian, rigid, society that oppresses women - which was never part of authentic masculinity. To avoid upsetting anyone, many men settle for being nice guys, rather than leaders. But "nice" doesn't cut it.

To fulfill our responsibility to spread the Gospel and protect family and community, we use what God gives us - starting with the different male and female natures. In *The Original Unity of Man and Woman* (part of the "Theology of the Body"), Pope John Paul II mentions that the unity of man and woman is a natural "archetype."

An archetype is a natural energy within people that moves them toward specific ways of being and acting. When followers of psychiatrist Carl Jung studied myths throughout history, stories and narratives, tales, dream life, rituals, and religions from all cultures, they discovered that there are four major male characters or archetypes - four images of what it means to be masculine and male - that were recognized in every culture.

They are different than the female archetypes. Every archetype has the potential for good or evil - but these psychologists discovered that we mature into men and women by fulfilling these archetypes. Jung's philosophy was false, but the discovery of archetypes was valuable, which is why the Pope has made use of it.

(1) The king-leader has a vision of what a group of people ought to do, and makes a plan for them. The good king-leader loves the people, and guides and inspires them. There's also the false king-leader-such as King Herod.

(2) The warrior is a noble soldier who fights for something greater than himself. A bloodthirsty soldier is a false warrior.

(3) The lover figure embodies the different types of love: erotic desire, friendship, and at the highest level, agape - the love of the others for their own sake. The seducer, the exploiter is a counterfeit lover.

(4) The wise counselor listens and guides, and is there to help when people are feeling

helpless. There's also the evil magician and the politician who beguiles with language to lead you down a negative path.

The health of a family or a nation is in large measure a result of how well males are taught to develop these four archetypal parts of their nature - in the family, the parish, and community organizations such as the Boy Scouts. Boys need to be formed so they act in a balanced, authentic way as men.

A hero is someone we recognize as fulfilling one or more of these archetypes for the good.

Let me give an example of heroism. On 9-11, we had countless examples. The radical feminists stopped talking for three months. Everyone saw. I counseled some New York City firemen, policemen, and rescue workers who were in the World Trade Center towers on that day. One young man described to me the moment it dawned on him the full horror of what had taken place. He was going up the stairs in the burning Twin Towers. What he had committed his life to do, which before had only been a distant possibility - giving his life for others - had become an immediate probability.

In an explicit, conscious way, he realized: "Right now, I die..." His next thought was, automatically, "but perhaps, before I die... I could save some more people." He didn't say that in an arrogant, proud, "Look at me, I'm a hero" way. It was in a committed, loving, "that's my identity," "these people may need me" way. He knew that death was a possibility, and that higher than death was the saving of human life... at the cost of his own.

You see, heroism is essentially spiritual. Physical risk is a path to it. A hero is given a revelation: "Abram, leave your country and your countrymen... and go into the land I will show you." (Genesis 12:1) The Bible later calls him "friend of God." But now he hesitates. God is calling him to go into the unknown and become Abraham. Abram doesn't fully understand. But he goes. And it costs him.

Jesus goes into prayer daily to discover his father's will. And it costs him his own life.

Let me go back to the archetypes. The 9/11 firemen embodied each of the four.

There were leaders - kings - who guided people to safety and created order.

There were warriors, who, as everybody was coming down the stairs, walked directly up the stairs to save their brothers and sisters. When they were asked why they did this, they said, "I was only doing what I'm required to do."

They were lovers - the men who went back in the days after the towers had fallen, day after day, just to find body parts of their brothers. They consoled the widows and children of their brothers. They were there. This is love.

They were wise counselors, too. I saw a TV interview with one firefighter whose son, also a firefighter, had been killed on that day. He mentioned that he had heard people asking, "Where was God on 9-11?"

The man was crying. He said, "I love my boy. I know my boy is with God... and is praying for me, and he's looking down at me! And God, I know for certain, was there with me fighting this evil. You can't blame God - people are free. God was there for us then, and he is still there for us now."

Some mothers might say: I wouldn't want my sons to become warriors. But Christ was a warrior! In the Gospels he fulfills each natural archetype perfectly. Remember, the warrior is not bloodthirsty. Whatever your opinion about war, most everyone agrees a nation can protect itself against direct aggression. That calls for warriors. How does a Christian warrior act in war? What is his attitude toward the enemy? I have a good example from the first Gulf War. A reporter saw a Marine watching a group of Republican Guard running toward him. The Marine shot above their heads and shouted, "Stop! I will shoot!" But they continued. The Marine has to kill them, because they're going to kill his platoon. So he shot them. And as he was shooting them, he said, "May God have mercy on your souls, my brothers!" And he meant it. This is holiness. This is heroism.

We have to let God develop the archetypes of our nature, which all men have, before we can fulfill our supernatural destiny, which is entrusted to us as Christians. As Pope John Paul II reminds us, by baptism and confirmation, every lay person, even if he doesn't know it, is a priest, a prophet, and a king. We only become able to serve God as mature Catholic Christians -- as priests, prophets, and kings - by bringing to God's service the energies of our natural archetypes.

How do we do that? A priest is called by God to pray for his people and for enemies and sinners, to offer his painful sacrifices for the people, and to stand in the gap between them and God. A priest of the Church does this, and so does the father of a family, drawing on the archetypes of the wise counselor and lover.

The prophet receives the word of God, deeply accepts it, and communicates it in word and deed, like Jeremiah. He has the energy of the warrior and the love for the people of the lover. He lives God's message in the workplace, in the family, in the church, and in society as an apostle - despite threats, seduction, laughter, or being ignored. We are all called to be prophets, and there can be no wimpy prophets. A prophet is not a crank or a hostile son-of-a-gun who gets his kicks harassing people in the name of God. He's in love with God and with people. He has a message to deliver and is not deterred.

Pope John Paul II defines the king as a man who recognizes his passions, sins, and weaknesses, and with Christ's grace, takes dominion over them. The king-leader becomes, in the spiritual order, the Christ-like king.

This is what most women today want men to do. Many women long for their fathers, husbands, and boyfriends to avoid being bullies or wimps. They want a man who loves them and transcends his ego for their sake. But they can only support and pray for him; they can't give him heroism. It is developed in him by other men.

Christ is the model. He was the model for the apostles, and he is the model for men

today. Unfortunately, our images of Christ aren't always masculine. In most of the movies of Christ, he's walking around with a long face, giving lectures. They've emasculated and sentimentalized him.

Christ was a blue-collar worker. He worked with his hands, with his father. He was a man's man - otherwise he wouldn't have attracted all those guys to his cause. He was a man of incredible courage, compassion, and love who attracted women in the natural and supernatural order.

The real Christ must have laughed a lot. He drank wine, but I never see him in movies drinking wine, or telling jokes to his apostles.

To redeem the culture, we need to recognize the quiet heroes that exist all around us. For an ordinary guy, a bus driver with a family, getting up early to get to work, if he thinks that there's nothing heroic in what he does, he's wrong! To live a Christian life is a heroic adventure.

"I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49) Fire isn't good or bad. If it's unleashed as it was on 9-11, it can destroy. When it's harnessed in Christ, it becomes the fire of love, energy, creativity, courage, virtue, and self-sacrifice. It will fire up believers and build marriages, families, and communities. It will fire up the Church, which will be exciting - even to people who don't know God -- because they will see the fire.

The firefighters showed us the truth about what masculinity can be. In future columns, I'll explore genuine femininity - which has nothing to do with being weak. I'll explain how the masculine and the feminine complement each other, enabling men and women to form relationships of self-giving love. I'll also explain why same-sex partners, even with the best of intentions, can never achieve genuine union, can never truly become "one flesh."

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