

Salient Joe

'I will send you the prophet...who will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers' (Mal. 4:5, 6).

The late Dr. Joseph Nicolosi popularized the ideal of a 'salient' father who embodies both tenderness and strength. His point? Children who grow up respecting such a dad while welcoming his kindness proceed successfully into adulthood and are less likely than detached children to spin out into sexual and relational brokenness.

I had the privilege of honoring Joe at his memorial service last week in California and recalled him as a prophet who never lost focus on repairing the wound--the gap in connection between fathers and children that render us vulnerable to seeking sexualized mothers and fathers. In sunny immoralist Southern California, Joe stood as a prophet who insisted that restoring breaches in father/child relating could redirect the wandering of pleasure-seeking orphans.

He was and still is demonized by the professional community he represents for coining the term 'reparative therapy', which simply means that same-sex attraction is a symptom of an early attachment wound and sound psychotherapy can begin to heal it. Joe made a way for us to name the wound and access real mercy—'my feelings are not my fault'—and at the same time to challenge us to resume the journey to gender wholeness. Joe was salient: equal parts tenderness and strength. The host of spiritual sons and daughters who honored him last week—mostly psychotherapists who trained under him at The Thomas Aquinas Psychological Clinic he founded in 1980—bore witness of his fruitfulness as a spiritual and clinical father.

The most moving part of the memorial was Joseph Jr.'s tribute to his dad. I witnessed a grateful son grieving for a father he loved and respected who was taken away too soon, without warning. Salient Joe imparted the whole of his life to his only child who proceeded on to become a devout Christian and psychologist and who now heads the Aquinas Center. Joseph Jr. spoke eloquently and honestly—equal parts tears and joy—of the adventures he shared with his father. The elder passed on to the younger a vocation of fathering vulnerable ones into wholeness. All the while, salient Joe loved his son well. His final witness lies in the fact that the ideals he taught he also lived. Bravo, salient Joe.