

## FATHERS IN FAITH AND FAMILY

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### I. **Pleasantries and acknowledgments**

My brother knights and Catholic gentlemen of the Springfield area:

I am grateful for your invitation to join you this morning for the celebration of the Holy Mass, to address you and to share a meal with you, just as Jesus shared breakfast with his disciples and taught them on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (cf. John 21:9-14). I thank you as well for the warm and hospitable welcome you have given me and I hope our time together will be an occasion of many blessings from the Lord.

As Jesus encouraged his disciples in their desire to follow faithfully after him, so I hope to encourage you to live as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. You have chosen as the theme of your gathering, "Fathers in faith and family." It seems beneficial to me, then, to consider each of these three topics – fathers, faith and family. In this way we will

discover – God willing – deeper insights into the vital and necessary role of faith for men to whom the Lord has entrusted families.

The family is intimately connected to fatherhood in a natural way, while faith is intimately connected to fatherhood in a supernatural way; both are indispensable to the nature of fatherhood, but the supernatural role builds upon and perfects the natural role, as we shall see.

## II. **What does it mean to be a father?**

We see all too clearly today that many men do not know what it means to be a father; they know neither their natural nor their supernatural roles. Certainly, they know what it is to conceive a child, to be a father in this most basic sense. Perhaps they also know how to provide for a child and do so as best they can, although even this fundamental notion of fatherhood has been significantly weakened in recent years. Some may even be aware of the necessity of fathers to raise their children with a set of ethical values that they might live well in society. But do any of these really get at the heart of authentic fatherhood?

In the natural realm, a father is to be the protector of his family, which presupposes and necessitates that he be a man of great courage. It is in the nature of love to willingly sacrifice one's own good for the good of

another; it is the virtue of courage – of fortitude – that allows love to be self-sacrificing. The Lord himself said to his disciples, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

It would be wise of us to consider briefly the nature of masculinity, of what it means to be a man. “In the Roman world, the idea of ‘manliness’ (*virtus* in Latin) was closely associated with notions of rugged personal independence and aggressive physical strength. The measure of a ‘man’ was his capacity to do for himself without needing the help of others. A true man was especially to hold his own against others in physical combat.”<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, this notion of masculinity is making resurgence.

“Manliness” is still largely equated with a brute strength, a rugged independence from others, and an aggressive sexuality. Even a simple look at popular culture, advertising, sports, and entertainment could serve to prove this. If we were to look at the tragic crisis of fatherhood and commitment in our society, we would see even more deeply how flawed our models of manhood have become.<sup>2</sup>

When a man is more concerned with his own independence, he cannot properly fulfill his role as a father, of protector of his wife and children.

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<sup>1</sup> José H. Gomez, *Men of Brave Heart: The Virtue of Courage in the Priestly Life* (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.: Huntington, Indiana, 2009), 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

Simply consider for a moment the men who are held up as role models for the young today. There once was a time when we held up men of courage and selflessness – firefighters, policemen and the like, those who protected others; today we hold up actors and singers, those more concerned with their own advancement and fame than with the needs of others. We once held up authors and scientists, doctors and explorers for examples of good men, those who sought the authentic advancement of society and of humanity; today we hold up men who spend their days womanizing at the gym and the beach.

In the face of such questionable role models and being surrounded with and taught an uncertain definition of masculinity, many boys and young men may well find themselves asking, “What does it mean to a man?” Who will answer this question for them if not you? As those who are immediately present in their lives – whether as fathers, grandfathers, uncles, teachers, neighbors or friends – they will look to you to see what it means to be a man. What example will you leave for them?

The ancient peoples held the virtue of courage to be within the field of battle; a courageous man, they said, willingly risked his life for the good of his king and countrymen. We know, of course, that courage involves

much more than simply risking one's life in battle, as important and courageous as this is for the defense and stability of countries.

The celebrated philosopher Josef Pieper has noted, "The brave man suffers injury not for its own sake, but rather as a means to preserve or to acquire a deeper, more essential intactness."<sup>3</sup> This deeper, more essential intactness is found in keeping one's integrity, by holding firm to that which is good even in the face of evil; this is the true mark of courage without which no one can really be called brave.

This insight is one gained by Saint Thomas Aquinas who saw that courage can also be exercised by a man's "pursuing of some good."<sup>4</sup> This observation opens the field of courage to all goods that are, strictly speaking, human, but especially to those goods that are divine, to the higher and greatest good.

If a man, then, is to be courageous he must know that which is good, that which is worth fighting for, that which is worth dying for; "he must be brave for the sake of the good."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 119.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, pt. 2a-2ae, q. 123, art. 5. In Gomez, 166.

<sup>5</sup> Pieper, 122.

### III. The necessity of a courageous faith

A man must be brave not only to properly protect and safeguard his family; he must be a man of courage to stand firm in his faith in the face of so many pressing attacks for what greater good does man have than the gift of the faith? This is that “one pearl of great value” for which a man must give all he has to obtain; a father must obtain this inestimable gift and hand on to his children (Matthew 13:46). The faith of Jesus Christ is like those talents entrusted to the servants; it must be increased and not simply kept safe (cf. Luke 19:11-27).

If we think for a moment of the example of Saint Joseph, husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus, we immediately see the role of courage in the life of faith. When Joseph took Mary into his home as his wife it required great courage to stand in the face of others who would accuse her of adultery. When he took Mary and the Child to Egypt, it took great courage to flee from Herod and raise his family in a foreign land. And yet he did both of these things, and we can be sure many others besides. His faith was strong and humble, for he was a righteous man; even so, it would take the exercise of the virtue of courage to keep his faith, to follow the path the Lord set out before him.

There are some who view a life of faith to which only the weak cling. For example, a few years ago I was talking to the General Manager and Coach of a National Hockey League team. I asked him if his team had a chaplain, as many sports teams do. He said no, that some players on the team were religious but they were afraid to show it because hockey players wanted to project a tough image and they thought that being perceived as a religious person would be seen as a sign of weakness. I thought: how unfortunate and how untrue! If one truly understands the faith one comes to realize that quite the opposite is true. Standing up for one's beliefs often requires great courage and bravery. Who would call Joseph - the man who followed the command of an angel, the man who humbly accepted the accusations and torments of his fellow men, the man who opposed King Herod and thereby the Roman Empire - of being a coward? In the life of Saint Joseph and in so many others we see that living the faith is the only authentically masculine thing to do. Living in accord with the faith of Jesus Christ is not for the weak or faint of heart; it takes tremendous strength, courage and conviction. To do so, we must remember that the

Lord has not made us for ease, but for holiness.<sup>6</sup> And holiness can never be found through cowardice.

#### **IV. Courage and the responsibility of faith**

There are many today who seek to separate their faith from the rest of their lives, imposing upon themselves a false notion of the legal separation of Church and State, a situation that is lamentable for its cowardice. Such a dichotomy between faith and daily living shows that a man has not yet truly given himself fully to Christ Jesus.

Those who seek to live in this way often say that do not want to offend anybody or that they do not want to impose their views upon others. The authentic living of the Christian faith would do neither, for, as Pope Benedict XVI is fond of saying, the Church imposes nothing but proposes the truth revealed by God. The man of true courage lives his faith at all times, humbly and with love, and is not afraid of the insults or attacks that may come.

The faith that we have received in Baptism requires something of us. To accept and hold the faith of the Church means that we have placed our

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Address to His Countrymen, April 25, 2005.

lives – every part of them – in the service of Jesus Christ; therefore, faith cannot be boxed up and reserved to only a small part of our lives.

As you know, I am deeply devoted to my two patron saints, whose names I bear. Saint John Fisher was the Bishop of Rochester during the tumultuous reign of King Henry VIII, whom at one time he tutored. When King Henry sought to divorce his wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon, in order to marry Anne Boleyn, Bishop Fisher strongly and publicly opposed the wishes of the King, defending with great zeal the indissolubility of marriage. Bishop Fisher even compared himself to Saint John the Baptist because he, too, was willing to give his life in defense of the good of the sacrament of marriage.

When Parliament passed the Act of Succession – which required the taking of an oath recognizing King Henry's attempted marriage to Anne Boleyn – Bishop Fisher refused to take the oath. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London on April 26, 1534. The saintly bishop refused to change his position and was tricked falsely by Richard Rich into revealing his true thoughts to the King. In May of 1535, Pope Paul III created Bishop Fisher a Cardinal of the Church and while the red hat was on its way to the Tower

of London King Henry ordered his execution for treason. Bishop Fisher was beheaded on Tower Hill on June 22, 1535.

In our own day there are many attacks on the truths of the faith from all sides and men of courage and faith must stand in opposition of these attacks in defense of the truth. Following the example of Saint John Fisher, and countless other saints, our faith must shape and influence everything that we do, especially the way we understand the relationship of a father to his family.

## **V. The supernatural role of fathers**

Throughout the Sacred Scriptures we read of the true role - the supernatural role - of fathers: to pass on the faith to their children so that they might know God and live in communion with him. The primary concern, then, of fathers lies not here below, but on the everlasting life promised to those who are faithful. This role cannot be fulfilled without the assistance of divine grace, a gift given through and received in faith.

When Moses received the Ten Commandments and the Law from the Lord on Mount Sinai, he said to the people: "Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

What are these words that Moses shared with the people? They are the summary of the Law: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

I have chosen for my Episcopal motto, *Lex cordis caritas*. “In chapter 31 of the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet tells us that God has written his law on our hearts. In chapter 13 of the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul says that love is the fulfilment of the law. Putting these two passages together, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, we arrive at the truth that God has written a law on each of our hearts, and the law that he has written on our hearts is fulfilled in his love.”<sup>7</sup>

Lest anyone should question why it is important to keep the commandments of the Lord - to keep the love of God and the love of neighbor - Moses made clear the purpose of the commandments: “so that you and your son and your grandson may fear the Lord, your God, and keep, throughout the days of your lives, all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you, and thus have long life” (Deuteronomy 6:2). Jesus put it this way, “If you keep my commandments,

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<sup>7</sup> Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, “Lex Cordis Caritas,” *Catholic Times*, 18 July 2010.

you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:10).

Saint Paul likewise clearly states the true and proper role of fathers when he says to the Church at Ephesus: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up with the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

The role of a father, however, is not comprised solely of teaching the faith to his children and training them to live according to it. King David, himself a father, sang these words: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on the faithful" (Psalm 103:13).

A father, then, is to reflect to his children - and to everyone he meets - the love of God the Father, for it is only because of him that he is called such. It is particularly here that a father must be wary, for the manner of his life contributes greatly to a child's understanding of the fatherhood of God. If a man is a poor father to his child, if he fails to teach the faith well and to model it by his good example and by his compassion - by his willingness to suffer with and for his children and his wife - the analogy of God as Father will be made meaningless and in his primary purpose as a father he will have failed. If he fails to reveal the love of God to his

children, then he will also necessarily fail to teach them to keep his commandments so that they may live in his love.

We might summarize the role of the father in three familiar words: priest, prophet and king. As priest, the father is the one who leads his family in prayer and teaches the faith; he is the head of the domestic Church. As prophet, he is the one who speaks to his family of the will of God and guides them in moral living. As king, he is the one who governs, protects and cares for his family. Clearly, a father cannot fulfill these tasks if he is not, first and foremost, a man of deep faith and of courage.

If he does not live the faith he received at Baptism when he was made a sharer in the priestly, prophetic and kingly mission of Christ, then he has failed at his mission to be a true father.

My other patron saint, Thomas More, is a fine exemplar of fatherhood. He, too, lived during the troubling reign of King Henry VIII. At one time he was the King's friend and trusted advisor and for his loyalty and love was named the Lord Chancellor of England, the first layman to wear the chains of office. But when the issue of the King's Great Matter rose, Saint Thomas, too, refused to take the oath of succession and for this reason he was also imprisoned in the Tower of London. On July 6,

1535 he was led to the executioner's block where he lost his head, but not before proclaiming these famous words: "I am the King's good servant, but God's first."

More important than being a great and able statesman and lawyer, Saint Thomas was the husband of Jane Colt, with whom he had four children. When Jane died in 1511, Saint Thomas married Alice Middleton, who brought to their marriage a daughter from her previous marriage; Saint Thomas raised her as his own.

He was a loving and devoted husband and father, who educated his children and taught them well in the ways of faith. When the Servant of God Pope John Paul II declared Saint Thomas the patron saint of statesmen and politicians, he summarized More's family life in these words:

Throughout his life he was an affectionate and faithful husband and father, deeply involved in his children's religious, moral and intellectual education. His house offered a welcome to his children's spouses and his grandchildren, and was always open to his many young friends in search of the truth or of their own calling in life. Family life also gave him ample opportunity for prayer in common and *lectio divina*, as well as for happy and wholesome relaxation. Thomas attended daily Mass in the parish church, but the austere penances which he practiced were known only to his immediate family.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Motu proprio*, October 31, 2000.

In this, we see Saint Thomas to be the model father.

He once said of family life, "The ordinary acts we practice every day at home are of more importance to the soul than their simplicity might suggest." His words are a clear reminder that the first duty of a husband is to help his wife grow in holiness and so enter into the eternal life of heaven; his second duty is much the same: to help his children grow in holiness and so enter into the eternal life of heaven. Everything else is secondary.

## **VI. Encouragement and Conclusion**

Dear brothers, I encourage you most strongly in the Lord to devote yourselves anew to your supernatural responsibilities as husbands as fathers. By living as holy husbands and fathers, you will raise holy families, the building blocks of society. Your holy families will then influence society in profound ways and promote the authentic common good.

Be assured of my constant support and prayers for you. May the examples of your own patron saints lead you to a deeper union with Jesus Christ! May the Lord grant us this grace. Amen!