My Beloved Ones,

This Sunday is a great yearly celebration as we seek to properly honor our fathers. I begin this week’s message, however, with a reflection about the stork. This will not seem so strange when you understand that the stork is a creature which remains devoted to its children, long after their offspring can feed themselves. Unlike so many of the creatures that live and breathe on this earth, human beings are also unique in that the parent-child relationship does not simply end when children have become independent—instead, it lasts for all our lives.

This perhaps is just one of the reasons that our Creator is also called our Heavenly Father: His love also does not have an ending. This comparison is made when we read in the Psalms that, “...a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Psalm 103:13).

In the minds of the Ancient Greeks, this devotion also passed from parent to child: younger storks were thought to fly in groups, carrying their aged parents to help them feed when they could no longer fly. Indeed, the Ancient Greek law which required a grown citizen to take care of his aging parents was called Pelargonia, which comes from the word stork, and antipelargesis is defined as “the reciprocal love of children to their Parents.”

However, it is also known that in an Ancient Greek city-state like Sparta, strength in war was prized above all things. Weak children who were unfit to serve as soldiers were abandoned, and so were the old men who could no longer fight. One parable tells us that the practice of antipelargesis began when a Spartan warrior wrapped his elderly father in a blanket and brought him to a mountain, to end his life by starvation and exposure. However, as the soldier walked away, he heard his father call over his shoulder, “Take this blanket! Your son will need it when he brings you here.” Hearing this, the son returned to his father a wiser man, and carried him home into the city so that his fellow citizens could see correct behavior. From that moment the practice stopped, and all aged parents were treated with antipelargesis.

This understanding of mutual love and respect crosses all times and places, for even in the Old Testament Proverbs we are instructed, “Listen to your father, who gave you life...” (Proverbs 23:22). May we take time during their special day to thank our fathers for all they have done for us; and may we demonstrate the proper antipelargesis for all they continue to do for us. And for those of us whose fathers have departed this life, may the Lord, our Heavenly Father, continue to keep them close, until that day when we may be together with them once more. Happy Father’s Day!

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Metropolitan of Atlanta