

Homily Sunday 11B 17 June 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

This Sunday is Father's Day. And so it is timely to reflect on the place of the father in the modern world. Unfortunately, dad has become an ambiguous figure in contemporary culture. The media portrayal of fathers is often unfavorable. They come off as stupid, lazy, negligent, abusive: one thinks of those notorious stooges of the TV sitcoms--Archie Bunker, Ned Bundy, and Homer Simpson. The failings of fathers have become public knowledge. In some circles of society, alternative family models have been proposed where there is no place for father at all. The reputation of the spiritual father, that is, the priest, has suffered a similar fate. The sins of the fathers have become a familiar feature in the headlines.

In view of all these storm clouds swirling about the modern father, it is worthwhile to examine Paul's teachings in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, a couple verses of which constitute today's 2nd reading. Paul's words are valuable because he considered himself a kind of spiritual father to the communities he founded and fostered. His writings express paternal concern for the disciples he had begotten through his proclamation of the Gospel. The epistle we are considering, the 2nd letter to the Corinthians, is one of the most personal and passionate in the apostle's writings. For Paul tells of the many struggles he has endured in the ministry. In the verses preceding this selection, he recounts the numerous trials and tribulations he has undergone for the sake of the gospel. He uses the language of martyrdom, speaking of how he is constantly being given over to death for Jesus' sake. Moreover, in other parts of his letters to the church at Corinth, it becomes evident that Paul has fathered a dysfunctional family, to borrow a current phrase. For the Christians of Corinth were guilty of many grave sins against faith and morals: incest, prostitution, lawsuits against one another, discrimination against the poor; the community was divided as various factions gave their allegiances to different leaders; even their assets became liabilities, as rivalries broke out which spiritual endowments were most important--prophets vied with teachers, charismatics, and others for prominence in the church; fundamental tenets of the faith, such as the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the resurrection of the body were denied. The brokenness of this community caused grave suffering for the apostle himself, much as the sorrows of children are visited upon their fathers.

Paul was a spiritual father who was familiar with the painful dynamics of family life and the arduous demands placed upon the head of the household. In the brief words of today's selection, he sets an example for fathers, for he teaches by word and deed how his children are to behave. Indeed one of the most important tasks for fathers is to give direction to the lives of their offspring. Paul does precisely this. He teaches these confused Corinthian Catholics that they must walk by faith, not by sight, because they are on a journey to the Lord. They will one day appear before the judgment seat of Christ; there they will have to give account for the lives they have lived. It's very simple really, though the details of how Christians ought to live in light of the gospel will fill many pages in the ample collection of Paul's letters.

The important lesson for fathers is that they are the primary educators of their children in the Christian faith. They exercise this ministry in tandem with mothers, of course, but the two parties bring complementary gifts to the endeavor. Mothers usually excel in communicating compassion, acceptance, and warmth. Fathers on the other hand tend to bring direction and discipline. Often it falls to the father to correct what is wrong, to challenge the child to grow up, and to redirect him when he wanders on an errant path. Fathers must be the firm voice in the family home which calls children to grow beyond childish ways, to place God first, to heed the Lord's commands, and ultimately to discover and embrace the vocation to which Christ calls them. One particular need for fathers is to resist the pressures for their children to mimic the lifestyles of their pagan peers. I speak especially of the enormous amount of time, money, and energy given to extracurricular activities such as sports and so forth. While these undertakings can be good within limits, when they become so numerous that religious formation suffers, e.g., when children don't get to Mass on Sunday because they are playing silly-ball, priorities are out of whack and must be corrected. My dear people, my dear fathers, we must be asking first and foremost whether or not we are fulfilling our primary duty vis-a-vis our young by helping them get to heaven. Mass and prayer and keeping Christ's commandments lead to heaven; playing silly-ball umpteen hours a day does not.

The father's role in the formation of the family's faith is essential; it cannot be delegated to mom or the parish priest. For thru Baptism people become children of God who call upon God as Abba, Father. And so all fathers, both natural and spiritual, reflect the divinity to their children. And so fathers' fulfillment of their duty is of crucial importance for the future of the Church. I would just like to point out a few challenges for our local community. First, there is the need to foster vocations to the priesthood, so there will continue to be spiritual fathers in the church. This is done first of all by prayer; it is also necessary that young men who show signs of a priestly vocation be encouraged by family and friends. Secondly, fathers must own their role as the head of the domestic church; they are to provide for the spiritual welfare of their families just as they do for their material welfare. This is done by getting their children to church, by witnessing to the faith in what they say and do, by taking an active part in the religious formation of their children, say, by leading prayer at the family table, by answering their questions about the faith, by correcting them when they do wrong and affirming them when they do right. In this way, the young people of our parish will better understand our God as our Father, and respond more readily to the Father's will. May this Eucharist help us experience more fully our Father's love and respond to this love more wholeheartedly.