

The Message of St. Joseph as Father

Deacon George Collins

Until a few years ago, anyone browsing through parenting books and magazines might have noticed something quite peculiar. Although dozens of publications devote themselves to the mother-child relationships, hardly any emphasize the role of father. A relationships and strength of character has been passed over and neglected. Statistics show that 36% of children in this country lack a father role model. It has been observed that more and more young people emerging from childhood have serious problems deriving from weakness of character, immaturity, irresponsibility, and drug and alcohol abuse. Religious indifference, marital instability and divorce rank high in the underlying cause. They lacked strong moral leadership during their formative years. This is what selfishness has done. A father is one who balances the family's needs in faith, hope, charity, discipline and temperance.

Fathers have a choice between two opposing points of view; that which the world defines as a father and that which God reveals as a father. We have to look no further than to the life of St. Joseph, the husband of Mary and the guardian of Jesus, to find out what God intended as fatherhood and family life. St. Joseph is the model of fatherhood; from him we learn what it is to be a father. As a child, Jesus would have imitated Joseph, as he was the man of the house. Jesus would have copied Joseph's mannerisms, his accent, and his walk; for children are imitators. As Joseph taught Him, played with Him, worked with Him, he taught the good things of humanity, not its vanities, such as how to be a help in Joseph's workshop, how to help Mary His mother, and how to make their home bright and cheerful, all in the midst of poverty. Joseph was not one for easy solutions or little miracles, but was a man of perseverance, effort, and ingenuity. He had a desire to contribute to the well being of other people. For Jesus, the life of Joseph was an ongoing discovery of His own vocation.

The key ingredient of fatherhood is integrity. Integrity is the foundation of our hope and our covenant with God the Father, with spouse and with family. The one who takes a position of self-importance is one who loves only himself. The more one gives of himself, the more he loves God and family. Conversely, the more one acts selfishly, the lower he makes the quality of family life. It becomes a tendency to break the marriage and family covenant. Fatherhood is not just a matter of saying yes at the altar. It is a matter of doing yes for family everyday and finding joy in doing so. When a man says yes at the altar, he says yes to its obligations which require self-discipline and self sacrifice. The obligation is to teach family by example of moral action, justice, righteousness and holiness; to reverence the gift of life.

For a father to discover his own vocation, St. Joseph shows us what it means to belong to God. A father is not just an identification mark; it is his fame and reputation. A father's name survives in his family. It becomes a disaster of untold proportion when a father's name is blotted out, scandalized or ignored. Not all men cultivate the virtues of fatherhood. Many cultivate the vice of greed, convenience, denial and injustice. The virtue of fatherhood simply means to be in love.

Those who have the right to celebrate as fathers work in many different professions, have many different complexities and anxieties, have many different stress and strain, problems and hurts. But these difficulties and pressures are part of what our vocation as father means. This is what the Gospels tell us of the life of St. Joseph who accepted his fatherhood from God. It is not what a father gives that profits salvation; it is why it is given. "It is given for love." The world celebrates fathers who make babies; God's people celebrate fathers who make families. The life of St Joseph was truly about family.