

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FATHERHOOD

MSGR. FRED DOLAN

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Well, the bottom line of this time of prayer together is that you dads are the best. We want to consider a fatherhood in the presence of Our Lord God, of our Father God, in order to grow in our appreciation of this vital role, of the vital importance for your own family, for all of society, and to take into account that this is taking place, our time of prayer, within the Year of the Family. These considerations are meant to jump start a conversation, a conversation with your spouse, with your children. In those cases in which your own children are grown up, you might think well, that's- that's- those years are behind me. Well, maybe these ideas can spark a conversation between you and some young dads in your life, maybe even with your own children who are now young dads.

Your role as father is your most important project and that is because you are setting in motion individual lives, lives that they will pass along the impact of your fatherhood down through the ages. Just recently, and in the Mass, we read a very sobering thought from the Book of Wisdom: "Now will I praise those godly men, our ancestors, each in his own time. But of others, there is no memory, for when they ceased, they ceased. They are as though they had not lived, they and their children after them." That's quite a dichotomy. There are these godly men who continue to live on through their own children. There are others who really, if we can read between the lines, did not pay much- did not pay much attention to what it means to be a father. They did not pass anything on to their children. And of them, there is no memory, for when they died, they died. It's as though they had not lived. But those godly men, their virtues have not been forgotten. Their wealth remains in their families, their heritage with their descendants. And for all time their progeny will endure, their glory will never be blotted out.

It's a very eloquent- very eloquent invitation for us to take this- this sobering responsibility really seriously. We are responsible for who knows how many lives down through the ages. For priests, who are fathers, spiritual fathers, it's a very sobering thought because we- we can have such an impact on countless lives. And for each one of you that have your own children, your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren, the list goes on and on.

Now way back in 1981, forty years ago, St. John Paul II wrote a- an encyclical on human work, *Laborem Exercens*. At one point, he's talking about the role of mothers, the crucial role that mothers play. We can

apply his considerations to fathers, to each one of you, where he talks about the need the children have for care, love and affection in order to develop into responsible, morally and religiously mature, and psychologically stable persons. There are no shortcuts. Your roll, your impact, really and truly helps your children develop, develop into responsible morally, religiously mature, psychologically stable persons.

Well, the thought comes immediately, how do I get better? How do I become a more effective father? It really does come down to relationships, to giving tremendous importance to relationships. And the first place with your relationship with your Father God. To the extent that each one of us invests in those relationships, everything works out well. You invest in your relationship with God, with your spouse, your children, you invest time, prayer, thought, reading. And they are the beneficiaries.

During this time of prayer together, I'd like to offer just a series of different considerations, no real order, but ideas that can help, perhaps, to inspire a little bit of examination of conscience, to help to come up with a strategy for the months and years ahead. One way to develop those relationships is to really listen. Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia* - The Joy of Love - that great, great encyclical, at one point he devotes a lot of time to this central point where he says *really listen*. And just think of a typical dinner table situation at home, so much depends on your- you're creating this atmosphere in which each one of your children really and truly feels free, interiorly free, to say whatever they're thinking. If there is any kind of temptation to put down something they say, criticize it, whatever, we have to resist that because that would inhibit their freedom and it would also spill over into the way that they listen to their friends. Whereas if we really listen with this desire to learn, to get it- to find out their point of view, well then they will pick that up and learn and they will do the same thing with their friends.

It is so important to be open to ideas, open to dialogue. At the dinner table, you have to be able to say to that- that teenager of yours, *that is really interesting, tell me more*. It would never occur to any of us to say to someone at the dinner table, well, that's ridiculous. That- that makes no sense. Or, what are you trying to say? Because, end of conversation. Along the same lines, it's so important that we be open to all types of people. The- the children, whatever age, they will notice that. They will notice that we deal with all sorts of people, all different cultures. We respect everyone; we want to learn from everyone. This is especially important in our current circumstances, the so-called "cancel culture" in which, if anybody who disagrees with somebody else, they will then shut them down, or quote, "cancel them" which is- which is ridiculous, and we dare say diabolical. We need to be open to different points of view.

It's very important to find ways of passing on stories about your childhood, about your ancestors, your grandparents, where they're from, where their parents are from, and stories that you've heard about the old days, about the Great Depression and how your grandparents managed through that because those stories will set in motion and put in place a deep foundation so that when your children come up against any difficulties they can draw on those stories. And they can say, this difficulty I'm dealing with right now - Covid, for example, is nothing compared to the Great Depression or the Spanish Flu of a hundred years ago, etc. It is nothing. It's so important to pass on resilience starting with our own resilience, our own

toughness. The children need to know that we are capable of getting out of bed right on the dot, of making good use of our time, of working hard. It's so important that they see us work - not just go to work, but at work.

I hope you don't mind if throughout this meditation I intersperse occasional memories of my own father as a way of honoring him, but I can picture him there on Lambeth Road in Bethesda, Maryland putting, I don't even know what the right verb is- is Zoysia plugs. Now, if any of you know what Zoysia plugs are, you get a special prize. But he would involve all of us, the six of us kids. I don't even know if Zoysia plugs still exists, it's a kind of grass, but here I am so many years later thinking of that. We have to- they have to see us work. And seeing us work does not mean watching us type something in order to engage the local gardener to come over and put in Zoysia plugs because that's- that doesn't count. We have to do it. Deep work.

It's so important to pass along this vision of concentration. How do we do that? By explaining, by verbalizing the fact that we are determined in any given situation to concentrate. If we do- if we are working on something intellectual, we have to say to the- to those- to the- the kids- to those around us, okay, I'm going for the next hour, I'm going to focus on this thing, this project, doing the taxes, whatever. And for that reason, watch this, I'm turning off all notifications, I can't be reached. And then when you talk to the children, the grandchildren, about their way of studying, you can teach them the value of doing the same thing, one hour, maximum concentration, no distractions, as a way to show them, to get them ready for work in the big leagues as opposed to multitasking, not retaining anything and the list goes on and on.

And this also brings up the crucial topic of reading. I'm sure none of us needs to be convinced that the young ones read less than anybody because they always- they always have the earbuds in and they have YouTube and so many different visual and audio input resources. They don't read. Well, it all begins with our reading. They have to see us reading a book and then talking about it, perhaps bring into a dinner conversation an anecdote that we found very interesting in a biography of a great person or reading *The Economist* and bringing a really interesting article to the dinner table. And for those who are really young, the 10-12 year olds, anything to encourage them to read a book, especially great books.

Other principles we have to pass along. One of the biggies now more than ever is a mature use of the internet. Those of you with children at home, maybe grade school, high school students, this is crucial, that they acquire these attitudes before they leave the nest and head off to university because once they're out of the house, all bets are off. Either they have learned how to be responsible or arrivederci, which means showing them that if they use the internet in the wrong way, they could do severe damage to their psyche. It could drift into pornography and it just does very, very bad things to the brain, not to mention their soul. We have to teach them how to make commitments. And we do that, of course, not so much by lecturing but by doing. If they say to us, dad would you like to come? They said you. Would you like to come watch me play baseball? And we say yes. Well, that yes better mean yes. And when you show show up, even though you could have gone golfing or something else, they remember that.

You are aware, probably, of a best-seller out there, the title of which involves twelve rules. Well, the author recently published a new book with more rules. And in a recent tweet he explained, “Any author, when he's getting the final copy ready to be printed, ends up leaving some things off on the cutting floor, so to speak. And here's one of them, the thing that didn't make it into the final version is really good,” he says. “Christ reserves his most terrible sentence for those in the middle. I know your works.” This is from the Book of Revelation, “I know your works. I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot, but because you are lukewarm, I will vomit you out of my mouth.” Those are strong words from the Book of Revelation.

Well, then Jordan Peterson goes on to say, “This is an indication of ultimate disgust shown towards those who will not commit, who play both ends against the middle, who will not take risks, who wait forever as their lives tick by, they wait forever for a certainty that will never make itself manifest. These are the people who are terminally lukewarm. There is nothing but ultimate danger in that, both practical and metaphysical.” It's a powerful commentary. We can't be hedging our bets. We can't be, to quote a recent term, FOBO, fear of- fear of better options, FOBO, people who never commit because once they commit, they can't- they can't respond if a better option shows up. I can't respond- I can't go- can't commit to the baseball game because I might be invited to play golf. Bad. Don't do that. We can't do that, nor can the children. One of the great rules of life. We have to be interesting, you have to be fascinating.

The- one of the great commentators of families and of fatherhood is Jim Stenson. You undoubtedly have come across some works by Jim Stenson, an educator located in Boston whom I've known for over half a century. At one point in one of his books, he says, “North American families seem to fall into two broad categories: the self-absorbed, consumerist family and the character-forming, sporting, adventure family.” Let's stick with the character-forming, sporting adventure family. Let's say at the house- in your home, there's something that needs to be fixed. You could either pull out your smart phone and dial somebody to come over and fix it or you can say to your children, let's study this. Let's look up on YouTube and find out the best way to fix this thing. Could be plumbing or electricity? I don't know. Let's study it. Let's get in the car, let's go to the hardware store. Let's talk to the people there. You know, you, Jimmy, thirteen years old, you talk to the person who knows all these things and let's do this together. They will never forget that. Whereas, if you simply click on Amazon and order something, then they will forget that, they will never even pay attention to that.

Going back to Jim Stenson, he says a couple of- well, he says a lot of things, but let me let me just read from one of his books, an article that he wrote. He says, “Do not count on your wife to do the job with your sons. She can support you but she cannot replace you. Preteen and adolescent boys need a manly father, not a second mother or a sibling-like pal or a laid-back, shadowy figure around the house. If boys this age, preteen adolescent, if they do not respect their father as a manly, moral leader, then they will follow after other attractive figures - mostly entertainers, showbiz celebrities.” Jim goes on to say, “Do not count on improving your sons” - we could say your children - “unless you first work at improving yourself. If you want your sons

to become avid readers, you must become one yourself. If you want them to love and practice their faith, you have to lead by example. If you want them to go beyond mediocrity, you must try to let them see in you a manly excellence, a life moved by passionate love, a life that gives glory to God. If you want to be a great father, you must first struggle to be a great man.”

Now, I said at the outset that we would be jumping around, not really following any order. What comes to mind right now, a couple of memories from my own father that I bring to this time of prayer as a way of honoring him and also as a way of pointing out we cannot imagine- you can't imagine the impact of just doing one thing with that ten-year-old son of yours or that ten-year-old daughter. I have such a powerful memory of going to Griffith Stadium, which is three stadiums ago in Washington, D.C. to watch a team that has ceased to exist a long time ago, the Washington Senators. One memory of that game - we went to a number of them - but one of them is sitting there in the stands and seeing the hot dog vendor going through flashing his- one of the hot dogs and saying, “Get your red hots! They are nutritious and delicious.” Why do I remember that fifty years later? I don't know. I have no idea what I had for lunch today. Doesn't matter. But the other memory is after the game, we went around to outside the locker room, waiting to get some- some whatever we call the players to sign. My dad was a big guy, and at one point, some kids saw that I was standing next to him with a pad and a pen so they assumed he was a baseball player. So they came up and asked him for his autograph. He said, sure. So he signed their, whatever. They walked away and I said, “Dad, what did you put?” And he said, “I signed George Washington.”

Well, that, you know, that's a memory I will- how can you forget that? Powerful stuff. There's one final memory, if I can, if I can make it through this one, because it is very powerful. And I bring this to this time of prayer as a way of honoring my own father and also of pointing out the value of surprising your spouse. I mean, obviously, you- each one of you is really great at remembering anniversaries and birthdays and flowers and candy and things like that. But to surprise her at moments that she does not expect. So, this little vignette must have taken place in 2014 or 15 or 16. No, excuse me. My dad passed away in 2013. So we're going, we're going back a ways now. But anyway, I was at this time here in Montreal. My parents were in Bethesda, Maryland at home. We were on a phone call and they were- my mother was in the kitchen, my father in the bedroom on two different lines. We were talking and all of a sudden my mother said, what's this? It became very clear that she had found there in the kitchen table and envelope with her name on it. So while the two of us listened, my dad and I, she opened the letter. There was a long silence. Then she read the letter that my dad had written to her. They had been married- they had been married for sixty years at this moment. And he wrote “Dear precious one. Every few generations a special person is put on Earth to lead, to inspire, to give hope, to spread love and to be loved. I am so grateful that you said yes when I on bended knee in Dahlgren Chapel at Georgetown University, I slipped an engagement ring on your finger. The angels- the angels in Heaven watch over our growing flock and we are blessed beyond our dreams. I love you, my one and only brown eyes.” Well, it's a miracle that I got through that, I usually don't. But let's face it. Something like this, it has no price. And here we are, and something- this is an absolutely precious heirloom.

Well, it's time for us to finish. In fact, I have gone way overboard, I apologize. But for dads, anything. In summary, if I can once again quote Jim Stenson, "Treat your children the way that God treats all of us. With high standards, loving protection, great hopes for the future, affectionate understanding, readiness to forgive, and never failing love." This really does say it all. So dads, you're the best. We ask Our Lady to shine upon you, to shower you with her tender mercies, with her love, with her protection, to accompany you as you go about setting in motion these lives, these virtues, these values that will benefit society down through the ages. Mary, help each one of us.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless.



ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE
WWW.STJOSEMARIA.ORG

Content may not be published or reprinted without permission.

*We are pleased to offer a transcript of this podcast to serve the needs of all our subscribers.
Please note, however, that this transcript is generated by AI and may not be perfectly accurate.*