



LIVING ICONS

MOTHERS, FATHERS AND THE GOSPEL OF THE FAMILY

LIFE, MARRIAGE † FAMILY OFFICE

sustaining human ecology



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INTRODUCTION

Ordinary, everyday things can in fact be extraordinary. What feels so familiar as to seem unremarkable in the eyes of some, can be quite the opposite. Being a father or mother is like this – seemingly ordinary but in fact extraordinary. Furthermore, God chooses ordinary and imperfect people – mums and dads – to reveal his extraordinary love.

The Holy Family of Nazareth are an iconic example. They had their share of troubles; an out of wedlock pregnancy that threatened the marriage (Mt 1:18-25), followed by an attempted murder, homelessness and forced migration (Mt 2:13-22). Jesus, Mary and Joseph were certainly not spared hardship.

Despite being the Son of God, Jesus spent 90% of his time on earth going about the everyday routine of family life. St Joseph, who was the guardian of our salvation, fulfilled his mission while working as a carpenter (Mt 13:55). Mary, Queen of Apostles, spent decades doing the household tasks that are still familiar to many mothers today.¹

Love and salvation are for most of us, discovered within the ordinariness of family life. Fathers and mothers are the means God uses to teach us about himself – about love. For this reason, Pope Francis describes married couples as “living icons” of God’s creative love.²



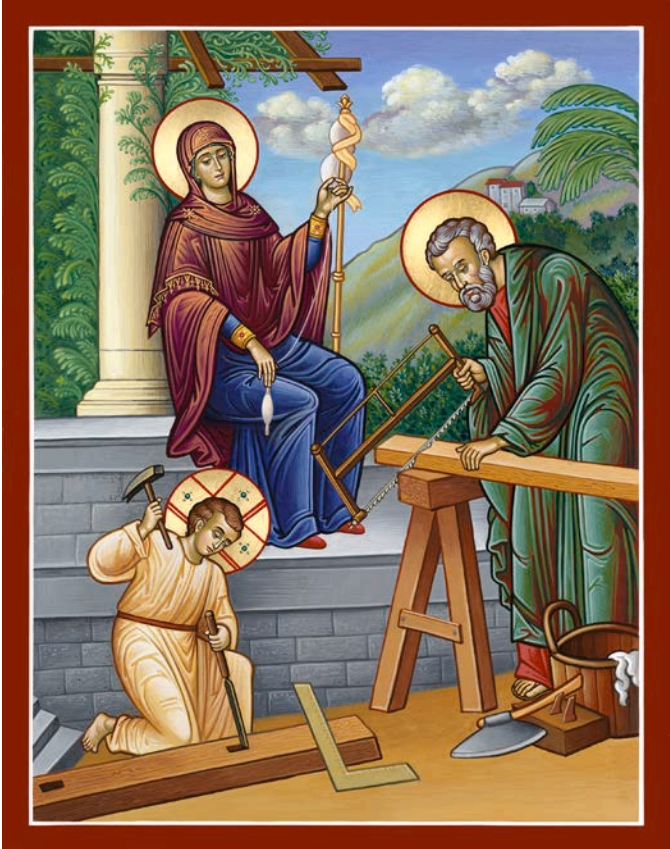
THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTS

While the world around us is changing at an ever-increasing rate, some things remain the same. A recent 35 year-long study found that in spite of all that is changing, it's parents – not technology, teachers or friends – that remain the most powerful influence on the values, attitudes and behaviours that we carry into adult life.³ When parents live with integrity – practising what they preach – and combine high expectations with warmth and affection, children are far more likely to follow their example.⁴ For better or worse, what parents do is enormously important!

NONE OF US ARE PERFECT

Who would argue with Pope Francis when he says that families don't drop from the sky perfectly formed?⁵ Every family has its share of troubles. But while the weakness and frailty of human nature is something we all have to contend with, the upside is, that for each of us, there is hope for improvement. Things can always be better. The question we face in our families and in life more broadly is, "how can I make tomorrow better than today?"

Pope Francis commends this attitude of hope in the face of hardship when he says, "I thank God for the many families which, far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling, and keep moving forward even if they fall many times along the way".⁶ Our children are best served when those they look up to – especially parents – resolve never to stop striving for the perfection that Christ calls us to (Mt 5:48) in spite of our shortcomings.



UNITY, NOT UNIFORMITY

Fathers and mothers play distinctive yet complementary roles in raising children. Respecting the equal dignity of men and women as parents is not served by cancelling out differences between male and female, pretending they don't exist or worse – turning them into a battleground because we no longer know how to deal with them.⁷ Pope Francis says, “We have to free ourselves from the feeling that we all have to be alike”.⁸ He suggests that good parenting involves finding approaches that unify and build on our differences.

The Holy Father also offers a word of caution. A rigid approach to gender differences that distorts or over accentuates particular masculine or feminine traits can hinder and even harm a child. It may for example, lead a boy to avoid art or creative pursuits. A girl may be misled into thinking that leadership is unbecoming of a woman. Clearly, the Holy Father says, this would be a mistake.⁹ Such attitudes risk robbing us of another Michelangelo, or the next St Joan of Arc. That being said, social science underlines the fact that the interaction of fathers and mothers with children provide distinct benefits.



MOTHERING AND FATHERING

Empirical evidence supports our innate sense that the love of our father and mother has a powerful life-long impact. Research also points to differences in their respective contributions.

A recent analysis combining data from 551 studies done between 1975 and 2016, representing 149,440 individuals across five continents, highlighted some noteworthy gender differences.¹⁰ While the similarities between fathers and mothers outnumber the differences, the differences are statistically significant. The research also noted a variation in the impact these differences have on boys compared with girls.

Generally, the absence of a father – physically or emotionally – has a more significant negative impact than that of a mother.¹¹ Though important for both, when a daughter feels accepted by her father, the positive impact in adulthood is greater than for sons. Paternal rejection also plays out differently in children. Boys tend to struggle with aggressive and anti-social behaviour while girls are more likely to suffer higher levels of anxiety and depression.¹² Engaged fathers have a powerful positive influence on the future relationships, social integration and educational success of children.¹³

Where circumstances may separate a father from his children, whether due to work schedules or a relationship breakdown, to the extent that he consistently engages in positive ways with his children, they benefit. Thus a less than ideal situation can at least be made better. Pope Francis encourages this for our children's sake.¹⁴

In contrast to fathers, specific forms of hostility and rejection by a mother have a significantly greater negative impact. Maternal hostility also harms sons somewhat more than daughters.¹⁵ On the positive side, Pope Francis believes that a mother's witness of tender dedication is the strongest antidote to self-centred individualism.¹⁶



The active engagement of both parents best serves the healthy development of children. Dr Louann Brizendine is a neuropsychiatrist whose work draws attention to the biological differences between the female and male brains. She notes that there are small but significant neurological differences¹⁷ and that these differences complement one another. As a therapist and researcher, she notes that both biology and experience indicate that parenthood was never designed to be a solo project.¹⁸

Those who find themselves raising children alone would generally prefer to have the support of a loving and committed spouse. Both couples and children benefit from the positive contribution of a father and a mother. While circumstances can result in less-than-ideal situations, we can all try to make things better.



PLAY

Pope Francis recently asked parents, “Do you waste time with your children?”¹⁹ The Holy Father laments the fact that some parents, at times overworked and anxious about other things, fail to appreciate the value of playful interaction with their children. They mistakenly treat play with their little ones as a waste of time or luxury they can’t afford. His concern is well founded. Research shows parental play with children is critical to their development. Studies looking at play styles highlight how the active engagement of fathers in physical play leads to children being better adjusted as adults²⁰ while the visual and verbal play mothers tend to engage in influences the cognitive development upon which literacy and numeracy depend.²¹

The rough and tumble play that fathers generally enjoy helps children develop confidence and self-control. Steve Biddulph is a psychologist who has spent many years focusing on the distinctive educational needs of boys. He notes that particularly for a son, wrestling with dad teaches him how to use his strength without going too far. If things get out of hand, the game normally stops. If it resumes when he regains his composure, and that process is repeated, a vital life lesson is learnt.²²

Biddulph points out that these early lessons in self-control become critical when men face challenging situations with other men and especially with women. The confronting discussions that are a necessary part of any mature relationship – especially an intimate relationship like marriage – cannot take place unless there is safety and trust. A man who hasn’t learnt to control his anger is likely to be a danger to women and sadly, will then struggle to form healthy relationships.²³

He also notes how a girl whose father has been firm yet affectionate, helps her to regulate her emotions, but also to recognise the boundary between strong but respectful confrontation and violence. If a dad’s wrestles, tickles and challenges are done with

love in her childhood, he has gone a long way toward protecting her in the future.²⁴ Research has shown that children who are highly motivated to join in rough and tumble play with their father are generally more capable of managing conflict later in life.²⁵

While a mother's witness of tenderness helps a child develop a sense that the world is a good place – a necessity for their self-esteem – the engagement of fathers helps to set limits and encourage openness to challenges and hard work. These are qualities Pope Francis identifies as important for fathers and mothers to cooperatively foster in their children.²⁶





DISCIPLINE

While unity of effort when it comes to guiding children and instilling discipline is necessary, research points to differences that are helpful to keep in mind. Across cultures, fathers see their role as being that of a firm guiding force in the life of their children and especially for their sons. They tend to give direct orders. By contrast, mothers, who can be more emotionally sensitive, are often not as blunt and direct.

Both are important. An attuned, intuitive mother can sensitively adjust her correction to her child's needs. However, the world outside the home is not so tender and patient. What can seem to be the hard and uncompromising approach of a father, provided it isn't too extreme, is part of a child's necessary preparation for the hard realities of life.²⁷

Clearly balance is needed. Excessive control, aggression or emotional manipulation are harmful and counter-productive. Pope Francis encourages parents to find a healthy balance which is neither an overly protective approach that smothers a child's personal freedom nor the other extreme, an absence – physical or emotional – that fails to provide the guiding framework needed for freedom to mature.²⁸

While in our culture it may once have been that fathers were excessively authoritarian and overbearing, Pope Francis laments that in our time, the opposite problem seems more prevalent – the physical or emotional absence of fathers.²⁹ Instead, he draws attention to the example of fatherhood Jesus speaks of in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) which, he says, could equally be called the Parable of the Merciful Father. Despite the disrespect his son had shown him, the moment the father sensed remorse, he showed mercy.³⁰ We too, should seek to exercise this merciful love.

MERCY

If we want to become the icons of love we are created to be, we can call on our heavenly Father, “from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Ep 3:15). While God calls us to perfection (Mt 5:48), he sympathises with our human condition (Ps 103:14). And regardless of how we fail, or how our parents may have failed us, we can pray with the psalmist:

No less than the height of heaven over earth
is the greatness of his love for those who fear him;
He takes our sins farther away
than the east is from the west.
As tenderly as a father treats his children,
So the Lord treats those who fear him.

(Ps 103:11-13)



SUGGESTIONS

For Everyone

1. *Begin at home* – Each of us is part of a family. Those who don't have children of their own won't have to look far to find a family needing a hand. Pope Francis asks everyone to see what they can do to support struggling families. Take a meal, offer to fold laundry, wash dishes or babysit – practical acts of service.
2. *Different kinds of mothers and fathers* – Everyone needs to find a way to fulfil their fatherly or motherly potential even if they aren't biological parents. We speak of Mother Teresa as a “mother” for a reason. We can all play a part in guiding, nurturing, serving and supporting others. Who among your neighbours, friends, parish community or work colleagues would benefit from some practical fatherly or motherly support?

For Fathers

1. *Be an example* – They are watching. If you have them, it's your sons and daughters. If not, your nephews and nieces, work colleagues and others. What we do, not what we say will be remembered. Credibility demands integrity.
2. *Be Present* – If you're married, to your wife and children. In joy and sorrow, the most important thing a father can do is be a dependable presence. Don't allow work or personal pursuits to keep you from your family. Not married? Who do you know who needs a dependable friend? Be there for them.
3. *Protect* – Correcting and setting legitimate limits is like building a protective fence that allows your family to reach maturity in safety. Be clear and firm. Be prepared to explain why it is good for them and the harm you are keeping them from.

4. *Generous mercy* – When they fail, be patient and merciful. Never lower the bar and never fail to forgive. Help those in your care, back on their feet and encourage them never to give up.
5. *Stand Firm* – Even St Joseph in a moment of crisis and uncertainty considered leaving. However, with God’s help, he stood firm (Mt 1:18-25). We all face unexpected difficulties. Take courage, trust in God, stay and fight for your marriage and family.

For Mothers

1. *Value Motherhood* – Pope Francis notes that it is desirable for women to study, work and develop personally and professionally, yet encourages women never to lose sight of the unique nobility of motherhood.³¹
2. *Tender generosity* – The quiet self-giving witness of mothers is, the Holy Father believes, the most powerful antidote to self-centred individualism.³² Be an example of tenderness and generosity.
3. *Listen* – Pay attention to your children if you have them and to others around you. Slowly and patiently consider what their real needs are. Help them grow in self-awareness.
4. *Encourage Fathers* – Many fathers want to be involved but can be uncertain as to how best to do that. Women can help or hinder that.³³ This is especially so, where there has been a relationship breakdown. If you’re a mother (grandmother, sister or aunt) do all you can to encourage and support the involvement of the fathers you know.
5. *Attract* – By example and encouragement, draw others on and up. In your relationships with men; your husbands, brothers, sons and the others in your life, use your feminine genius to encourage and inspire them to be their best. Few things encourage a man to improve himself more than the admiration of a woman he admires and respects.

RESOURCES

Videos

- Living Icons: Mothers, Fathers and the Gospel of the Family Video Series
- Pope Francis: Do you have time to play with your kids?
- The Importance of Roughhousing

Print Resources

- Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love), Pope Francis
We encourage couples and parents to read Chapter Four: Love in Marriage and Chapter Six: Toward a Better Education of Children
- Pope Francis' Catechesis on the Family #1: The Holy Family of Nazareth
- Pope Francis' Catechesis on the Family #2: The Mother
- Pope Francis' Catechesis on the Family #3: The Father (Part 1)
- Pope Francis' Catechesis on the Family #4: The Father (Part 2)

All resources can be found at: www.goo.gl/i9pd36



ARTWORK

Page 4: Icon of The Flight Into Egypt, courtesy of www.monasteryicons.com

Page 8: Icon of The House of Nazareth, courtesy of www.monasteryicons.com

Back cover: "A Quiet Moment" by Timothy P. Schmalz, courtesy of www.sculpturebytps.com

ENDNOTES

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PRAYER TO THE HOLY FAMILY

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendour of true love;
to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again experience violence,
rejection and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalised
find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
graciously hear our prayer.

Amen.³⁴

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