

## Faith and Fatherhood

Nearly everyone of us who is a father knows that fatherhood is probably the most important job in our entire life. While the pressures of professional work can be demanding and even seem to take priority for a time, we would almost all agree that what we most want to be remembered for, more than being a good employer or employee, is raising good kids.

We have only one chance to raise our children well, and yet, for something so vitally important, we probably don't take as much time as we should to reflect on what we could do to better.

The premise of this reflection is very straightforward:

**If we want to be a good father to our sons and daughters, we need to be good son to our father, our heavenly father.**

Five parallels come to mind, that are worth exploring.

**Idea #1:**

**Just as it is important that a father share his professional work with his children,  
So too it is important that a father share professional work with his heavenly father.**

I'm not sure if the term is still as common, but Derry used to be called a "bedroom community" - meaning most people who live there commute to work far away, such as in Boston. But even if we don't work that far away, modern life does, unfortunately, tend to separate our work from our families. In fact, there is the danger that young children can see their Dads as mysterious beings, who disappear every morning before they are seen, and return late in the day - exhausted, maybe even grumpy, and that this daily ritual is somehow connected with why they have a roof over their heads and food on the table. They are told they should obey and be grateful to this big guy, but they don't really get it.

To make matters worse, during the peak of their day these young boys do see very active men as teachers and coaches, practicing all kinds of skills and virtues. Small wonder Dads have lost some of their prestige in this culture and within the family. It's not so much our personal fault as it is a lack of opportunity for kids to work with, and for, and around, their Dads.

So, to the extent you can, let your kids in on the secret of your work. Take them with you occasionally, or better, involve them somehow. Let them see you at your best in the professional world, carrying important responsibilities, not just at home relaxing. Heaven forbid someone ask one of our kids at school what his Dad does, and, after reflection, he pipes up "Oh, he's a couch potato!" Ouch.

Now the parallel with Faith: Do we actively bring our concerns about our professional work to God, or do we somehow think that is inappropriate? Do we talk to God when we are at work? Put another way, do we bring God into our workplace, and do we bring our workplace to God when at prayer?

It might be helpful to remember that Almighty God chose to become a human being only one time in all of history, and that person spent most of his life, doing what? Working! Only a small fraction of his life was spent on his public ministry, preaching and performing miracles. Apparently he worked as a carpenter, without any miracles or grand speeches or fuss. That tells us a lot about the value of work in God's eyes, and why we should be confident he wants very much to share that part of our life with Him, as that is exactly how he chose to spend most of His time on earth with us. The realm of work and the realm of prayer should not be separate worlds.

**Idea #2 - Just as fathers should spend time alone with their kids away from the normal routine,  
So too fathers should find time alone with God.**

If you look back over your own childhood, I can almost guarantee that your most vivid family memories come from vacations - those special times of being away together.

Sure, it can be hard to make the time or meet the expense of a vacation, but it could be just going camping locally. The effort to make it happen is worth it.

When you do this, you are showing, without even saying it, that your kids are not an afterthought, or a burden on your busy day and your professional advancement, but rather they are your priority, your joy.

On the faith side, I think if we are honest, we can sometimes look at making time for God as a burden, a distraction from what really matters. But once a year, make the time to go “on vacation” with God. Make an annual retreat, for at least a weekend. I can tell you that for me, vacations with the family are definitely a highlight of my year, but so is my weekend alone with God on a silent retreat. Try it.

And really, this “time away” with God should be, on a much smaller scale, part of your everyday routine, taking the time for private, personal prayer. But more on that later.

### **Idea #3**

**Just as we want our children to respect their earthly father's authority,  
So too we must set the example by striving to live under our heavenly Father's authority.**

A common reason kids rebel as teenagers is they view their parents, or authority figures in general, as either unfair, or hypocritical. But kids are not as likely to rebel if they see you living under the same rules they are taught to live under. In essence, let your kids see that we are all in this together, we are all unfinished products, and we all need to obey the same guidelines of moral behavior which come from the same divine authority.

Here are a few challenging examples, again paralleling demands of Faith with the challenges of succeeding as fathers:

-We won't have credibility insisting our kids attend religious instruction if we are not faithful in getting to church every Sunday.

-We won't have credibility insisting our teens never touch alcohol or cigarettes if we over-indulge ourselves.

-We won't have credibility telling the kids they watch too much TV and internet, if we then retire with our wives to late night television in bed every night.

-We won't have credibility demanding our teens drive cautiously, if we take out our own frustrations on the road.

-We won't have credibility exhorting our kids to study hard and love reading, if they never see us reading or studying.

-We won't have credibility insisting our daughters dress modestly, if we then gawk admiringly at women who dress immodestly.

-We can't hope our kids will grow up loving the Christian faith if they do not see us as happy because of that faith.

-We cannot hope our kids will be men and women of prayer, if we do not pray.

-Lastly, we can't hope our kids will stay close to their faith if they are immersed in the opposite world-view the vast majority of their waking hours, year after year. I am referring to the influence of television and public schools. How can we be so naive as to think our kids will not absorb this toxic world view if we allow them to marinate in it most of every day?

I will share two personal experiences on this:

One of my best decisions as a father was to raise our family without a television. It fosters much more conversation among family members, motivates kids to find more productive activities, and of course avoids an onslaught of very harmful ideas and role models from being brought right into the bosom of the family. I know it may sound extreme to live without television, but I can only say not one

of my kids has ever complained, nor has one of us ever felt deprived.

Then there is the tough question of schooling. Again, I can only share my own experience. My wife and I moved to Derry in no small part because it had a solid elementary Catholic school attached to the thriving parish of St. Thomas. We did indeed send all 9 kids through St. Thomas Aquinas school. So far so good. But what then? My wife and I knew Pinkerton Academy, the local public high school, had a great reputation, and it does have wonderful resources. But we were, frankly, appalled at the influence it had on the first two children we sent there. It is not that secular schools directly attack Catholic teaching, but rather that they present the non-religious and sometimes anti-religious view as the sensible one, the cool one, the intelligent one, the right one - from the course material, to the teachers to, and most importantly, to the kids. At that age kids are starting to take their standard of behavior not from their parents, but from their peers. Anyway, we were alarmed enough to make the sacrifice to send the next two children to a good Catholic school in Massachusetts, where they thrived, even though it required some boarding. The next child pleaded with us to be able to make his own way at Pinkerton, and we decided to respect that wish. Well, he became a strong advocate of the new atheism, and even set up a blog to evangelize his viewpoint.

I am not saying there is a direct cause and effect relationship, but of the three who went to Pinkerton, two have left the church entirely. The contrast with the other six is obvious, and seeing the faith flourish in our family today, where we pray the Rosary together as a family for example, is one of the greatest joys of my life.

Now this is where living out the consequences of our Faith is hard, where it hurts. But if we are not willing to make sacrifices for our faith, especially for our kids, do we really have faith at all? For us this meant that almost half of our entire annual budget goes to Catholic education. We are convinced that, despite the very real flaws of small Catholic schools, the investment is worth every penny. As imperfect Catholics **and** imperfect parents, we desperately need the school - its curriculum, teachers, and students to support the values we are trying to impart to our kids.

#### **Idea #4**

**Just as being vulnerable with our children will deepen our relationship with them,  
So too being vulnerable with our Heavenly father will deepen our relationship with Him.**

Now, I am not saying we should share our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, with our children all the time. But selectively, especially with older children, we need to help them see us as “three-dimensional.”



Let me give a personal anecdote that will illustrate the point: A couple years ago I decided to visit one of my older kids who lives out of state. We went on an overnight trip together and had to find a hotel. While looking, I shared that when I used to travel a lot for business, I would call the hotels ahead of time and try to find one that would remove the television from the room, because in those pre-internet days there were the porn channels, that had teasers for free, and it was hard not to look. I said that almost no hotel would remove a TV, so I started the habit of covering the TV with a towel when I arrived, and even putting a picture of my family on top, to help me stay focused on what really mattered. And I admitted it was very hard and that I did not always succeed.

I did not give the anecdote much thought, but after I returned home my son called me, shared that he was struggling with looking at porn, and he asked if I would be one of his “partners” when he signed up with an internet filter service called Covenant Eyes. If you don’t know about Covenant Eyes, I highly recommend it.

Anyway, of course I agreed, and we resolved to touch bases every week by phone. It led to long, open discussions of up to an hour, every week, for a year. All because I was willing to share a vulnerability of my own.

Again, this should be done selectively, but let's not put on a mask all the time as "Mr. Tough Guy," or "Mr. Perfect" so that our children really never get to know us.

On the faith side, for some reason I think we men seem to think we need to play the strong guy even with God. We don't want to share our weaknesses (as if we could hide them!). Or we think we need to impress God, (as if we could). Or we think we need to make formal reports or speeches to Him, as if he was a scorekeeper or a taskmaster. But keep in mind the only people in the Gospels that made Jesus angry were those who thought they were in full control, who knew the rules and followed them - in short, the "good guys."

I heard it put this way recently: "God flees from those who try to raise themselves up to Him; but he rushes to those who bow down before Him."

God will not open his life and his love to us, unless, and until, we are willing to really be open and honest with him - about the good, and the bad, and the ugly in our lives.

This of course brings us to the beautiful sacrament of Confession. Go to confession, ideally every month, and at least invite your kids every time you go. Show them it is a priority in your life, and that you need it as much as they do, maybe more.

## **Idea #5 - the last point**

**Just as greater intimacy with your children requires giving them personalized, one-on-one attention**

**So too greater intimacy with your heavenly Father requires personalized, one-on-one communication.**

I'm willing to bet one of the most moving and rewarding experiences of your entire life, and certainly as a father, is when a child comes to you alone and says "Dad, can we talk...?" and he or she shares a deeply personal problem or crisis and seeks your advice. Right? It is a beautiful moment of intimacy, vulnerability, dialogue, and compassion. In fact, if you remember nothing else from these reflections, I hope you will remember this: this personal encounter is perhaps what your kids need more than anything else in their entire lives, no matter their age.

What I would also suggest is that a personal encounter with our heavenly Father is probably what you and I need more than anything in our entire life.

Let's be honest, for many Catholics this idea of an intimate, personal dialogue with God is foreign, and even our idea of what it means to be a member of the Catholic church is very limited.

Consider this parallel: Suppose your child came to you one day and declared: “Dad, I get it - family life can be summed up as follows”: One - Follow a few basic rules; Two, make an occasional appearance at the house; and, Three, chip in with paying for some household items. We would be horrified, right? Could anything be further from the reality of a true vision of a loving, intimate family life? But isn't that how we can look at our life as church members: first, church is a place of rules, of what you can and cannot do, second, we need to make a Sunday appearance, and third, we need to donate to the collection basket? We should be horrified! Nothing could be further from the reality of the Christian faith where we dare to call Almighty God, Abba, or Daddy.

The truth is, God is a much more patient, and forgiving, and doting father than we are and he longs for intimate communication with each one of us. And He also knows that is what we most need to find real happiness.

Maybe you are starting to tune out at this point. Another exhortations to pray more! Ugh. We tend to leave that prayer stuff to our wives, or our mothers....it's not really a guy thing...

So, in these very few minutes left I want to try to leave you with a different way of looking at prayer.....

To do this, I'll call on two very different concepts of truth - namely, the truths of inspired scripture and the insights of modern science.

First, let us imagine ourselves back in the Garden of Eden, before the fall. The poetic details of a talking snake or a forbidden apple are not important, nor do we need to believe them. What IS important is that there, in that unspeakably beautiful garden, a man and woman came into existence who were intended to live in a constant dialogue with God, to be loving children of a perfectly loving and ever-present Father. There they would dwell, enjoying all imaginable sensual and spiritual delights, without sin, without suffering, as a family, forever. The families that were supposed to flourish from the union of that first man and woman would be full of joy and laughter, and fill the earth, until, we must assume at some point they would ascend to another realm.

Yet we find ourselves in a very different situation. What on earth happened!? Sin, and sorrow, and pain, and loss and disappointment in all directions, and, most tragically, Almighty God, Creator of all that is, can seem almost a figment of our imagination.

Now let us turn to science to reflect on our evolutionary journey....

Our universe is 13.7 billion years old, and in the beginning matter was compressed into a single point. When it exploded, atoms were hurled into the void in all directions. Gravity eventually brought together clusters of matter, which coalesced into galaxies, stars, and suns, and planets. Our tiny planet was formed 4.5 billion years ago, and very quickly this strange thing called life began, about 3.8 billion years ago. Simple life forms at first, but eventually a veritable explosion of seemingly random living creatures, complexifying in astonishing ways.

Consider that even the most complex life forms are made of quite simple compounds. Humans are 99% oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorus, and a pinch of calcium. We are, literally, just a handful of dust.

Somehow that handful of dust is put together to form fantastically complex cells, each with DNA codes with millions of combinations of microscopic data that can replicate in mere minutes, perfectly. These cells interact and specialize on a scale it is impossible to comprehend, and in your body there are 37 trillion cells!

But many animals share this staggering complexity. so what makes humans so special? After all, many animals enjoy all five senses, furthermore, they also mate, they sleep, they live in community, and some have basic forms of consciousness and even language. Almost everything you and I do every day is shared with animals.

Except...except - we were created to be conscious, not only of ourselves and our world, but of our Creator, and to be able to turn to him and say "Thank you" and "I love you." We were created to be in loving dialogue with the creator of the universe. Love was planted in the human heart not just for each other but for Him as well - our original nature was to live in love on both the horizontal, earthly plane, along with the vertical, divine plane.

In fact, THAT is the highest purpose for which the universe was created. Just maybe there are other story lines in other parts of the universe, but clearly God wanted no other storyline in this entire observable universe - because creating conscious beings, who live forever, fashioned out of nothing but dead matter, just a few simple compounds, is enough of a story, isn't it?

Is 3 billion years a long time for life to evolve if the end product is billions upon billions of newly generated **eternal** beings, (you are one of them) each of which was destined to live in bliss with the Creator God? No, it is not a long time. Relative to eternity it is no time at all. The universe is actually young, and the story of human life probably just beginning.

But remember, the essential difference between us and all other life forms is..... what? The ability to dia-

logue with God, in other words, to pray! **That** is what creation was pulsing towards across all those billions of years. Your and my ability to pray is apparently worth 13.7 billion years of divine anticipation, and divine preparation. Putting it most bluntly, if we do not pray we are ignoring the highest purpose for the creation of humans and, from all that we know, of the universe itself.

So prayer is not an extra in life, it is not just for the priests, or for the idle, or for the desperate, or for women. It is not something we just do in church, it is meant to permeate every activity, naturally, like an ongoing conversation with your closest friend, or like the loving dialogue between a father and his son.

I hope this way of looking at prayer will impact your life, as it has mine.

Now there is good news and bad news about prayer in our current condition. Let's cover the bad first:

The bad news is that in our fallen state, we do not like to pray, we do not know how to pray, and prayer does not seem to be very important or effective. So don't take it as a personal failing that you might find prayer boring, empty, even foolish. Remember, the first humans rejected that vision of constant communion with God, and we have spiraled downward ever since. It is just no longer natural to



us. And God is now very often mysterious, obscure, invisible.

The Good News is this: Despite our weakened state, and our fixation on the horizontal dimension of life, we CAN still live with a vertical dimension, a dimension that brings immeasurable joy and peace. We CAN re-establish, although not perfectly, that Father-son relationship.

Furthermore, we can live in dialogue with our Creator no matter what we are doing. Prayer was not intended to be restricted to church activities, or to formal, memorized phrases. It is available to the busiest of professional men at the peak of their career.

To understand what prayer is meant to be like we just need to look at the Gospels, and I urge you to read the New Testament every day, even if for just 10 minutes. You'll see that most of Jesus' encounters are wonderful one on one dialogues - You have Nicodemus, the cripple by the pool, the leper, the Syro-Phoenician woman, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman at the well, and many, many others. Those encounters are personal, not corporate; intimate, not formal; individual, not public; practical, not abstract. **That is the kind of relationship, the kind of prayer he wants with you.**

And note once again, the delicious parallel between faith and fatherhood: What God wants with you is exactly

what you want with your own children! So let us, soon, knock softly on God's door, and whisper "Dad, can we talk?"

As for the mechanics of prayer: I suggest sitting alone and starting that conversation with God, every day, for at least 15 minutes. Twice a day is even better. Any less than 15 minutes and you are not likely to develop a sense of relationship. A relationship with your creator is like any relationship between persons - you have to put time and effort in before there is much reward or growth.

What do you pray about? St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, put it this way "To pray is to talk with God. About what? About him, about yourself: joys, sorrows, successes and failures, great ambitions, daily worries - even your weaknesses! And acts of thanksgiving, and petitions...In short, to get to know him and to get to know yourself -"to get acquainted."

So there are really two parts to prayer - the quiet time alone with our Father, and an ongoing conversation as we go about our busy day.

If we do this, we are rebuilding the first and foundational breach in the relationship between God and Man. The best way to set a Christian example as a father is not stepping into the political or social fray against an intensely secular culture that is toxic to the values of our

faith and family. We will not save our society with activism, but only with interior renewal. We must work to repair that internal breach, namely the loss of communion between ourselves and our loving Father, a communion that was intended to be the crowning glory of this created universe. I hope that makes you feel special. It should.

Be a better son to your heavenly Father, and you can be 100% sure that you will be a much better father to **your** own sons and daughters.