

*Homily, 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, year C, June 17th, 2007, Father's Day JMJ/PJPII+ Fr. Nathan Reesman, St. Mary's Visitation Parish, Elm Grove, Wisconsin.*

Some of you know that for two of my five years in the seminary I made weekly visits to the Milwaukee County Jail to pray and spend time with the inmates there. All of my time was spent visiting the men's sections, so you could say it was the male inmate perspective that I got to know best.

Now this is a generalization, and there were exceptions, but I found a couple of troubling realities to be prevalent there. One is that most of these guys, even the very young ones, were fathers to children they rarely saw, and often with more than one woman. I also picked up the idea that both inside the jail and certainly outside of jail, in order to be a true man, you had to be able to fight back, to do vengeance, to protect your name. That meant you couldn't be tied down or burdened with a routine or with a family- so you neglect, abandon, or even abuse the people who get in the way of your self-preservation. And, for some of these guys, religion and church was something that the women did. They had no time for something so soft.

So, in light of all that, it's no surprise that fatherhood as a spiritual, cultural and social reality is in serious trouble in the inner city and among the urban poor, not just in Milwaukee, but also across America.

Really though, the situation in the inner city is very much the situation in America in general, only magnified to its most disastrous proportions. Think for a moment about the images that often bombard us about what it means to be a real man: tough, rugged, independent, self sufficient, free roaming, large and in-charge.

I think the impulse to live life by those descriptions is often lurking just below the surface for most guys- that's how we are built and wired. Which means that the spiritual and social commitment of fatherhood can seem rather dull, confining, and unappealing at several points in life.

And I also sense that when it comes to church and religion, there is a very common and reasonable assumption that it's for women and children only. Christianity is, by cultural male standards, a pursuit for a bunch of wimps. It's gooey and mushy, and it's about rejecting war and violence, and it's about helping those who can't help themselves, and it's about mercy- blah blah blah blah. Sort of like Rambo watching Oprah re-runs- doesn't quite fit, does it?

Men: who of you wants to come to Mass and listen to that stuff preached after you've slaved at work all week long, and you want some peace and quiet from your wife and children, and when on a Sunday morning, rather than sitting here, you could either kill something out in the north woods or watch someone kill something on TV, or watch football which is, let's face it, aggression contained by referees. So, lots of guys aren't interested in church. Which is why, looking around the pews in many churches, mothers appear far more often than fathers, and why the vast majority of our professional parish staff, and even a great deal of our liturgical and catechetical ministers, are not men but women. Faith and church have become quite feminized, for better or for worse.

So, it's not just in jail or in the inner city that we encounter the idea that manhood runs counter to faith and fatherhood. Frankly, and I'm not the only one who's said it lately, the American male is facing an identity crisis everywhere.

I've said on several occasions that women have a particular and intuitive gift for faith and discipleship, and that this is linked to their defining attribute of motherhood. Motherhood saves, and I mean that either in the biological sense, or in the adoptive and spiritual sense.

So, I say today, on Father's Day, that what saves men is Fatherhood. But for us it's a little trickier. Motherhood, even as a merely biological phenomenon, is profoundly self-sacrificial and commitment oriented- it's a stabilizer of sorts. For men, mere biological fatherhood is almost the opposite.

Any fool can biologically father a child. Even Michael Jackson is unfortunate proof of that scientific fact. But only a true man, one who is rooted in spirituality and in fidelity and in commitment can be a true father. Fatherhood is far more than a biological notion. And along with that, Christianity is not merely for women and children and wimps. Neither is the Church. The Church and the world desperately need fatherhood. And, men need fatherhood- not merely in the biological sense, but more fully in the adoptive and spiritual sense.

But as my experience at the Jail demonstrated, even if in an extreme sense, what men can all too easily opt for is the lure and thrill of self-gratification at the expense of commitment, fidelity, responsibility and sacrifice. To put it another way, fatherhood without true parenthood.

To tease this out a bit, it's helpful to go back to the Garden of Eden. Consider the figure of Adam. Adam unfortunately fell short of what it meant to be a man and a father. His fundamental responsibility was to image for the rest of creation the love that God the Father has for us his creatures. God always protects his creation. God always respects the freedom and dignity of his creation. God stands by us, God walks with us, God does not give up or give in. This is the measure of all fatherhood, and Adam was supposed to love in that same manner.

Instead, he allowed Satan to enter into conversation with his wife; and he gave into the glamour of mis-directed freedom; and then he hid himself from God; and then he blamed his wife for his own tragic mistake; and then he brought children into the world he had ruined by his violence against nature, God, and Eve; and one of his children grew up to become the first murderer. And the cycle of violence began.

This sounds a lot like the situations of the men I met at the Milwaukee County Jail. Like Adam, they thought they were exercising their freedom. They thought following God's law was for wimps. They thought they would be happier breaking commitments. They failed to protect and care for the women in their lives. They blamed the women for their problems. And they raised up a group of bandits who followed them right into prison because they were sons in a world without fathers. And the cycle of violence continues.

Now, this is all very depressing. The good news is this: we have a new Adam- one who would not give up on his bride the Church, one who set the standard for fidelity, commitment and compassion. One who challenges all of us to greatness, and gives us the grace to follow after him. Christ Jesus is

the true man, and the true image of the Father in heaven. And he invites every one of us, men and women both, to love as he loves.

That is not a task for wimps. For women it involves the pain, courage, and sacrifice of nurturing new life in a hostile world. And for men it involves fatherhood. And by fatherhood I mean more than simply marital fatherhood- every man is a father to the extent that he mentors, cares for, and images the love of God the Father to the world.

Men: very much like Adam, we always face the choice of how to use our freedom. What we discover in fatherhood is the truth that we are the most truly free, the most fully courageous, tough, and bold when we are committed to our children and families. Any guy can drift through life without responsibility and without having to endure the tedium of family life or job, etc, etc. But only a true man, and I dare say a man of faith, can be strong enough to bind himself, with love, to a family through thick and thin- just like God binds himself to us.

Fatherhood saves us men because it gives us a purpose for our freedom. It's a means to temper our often wild desires. Without it, we would become self-obsessed, self-absorbed, self-gratifying, neglectful irresponsible wasted creatures. Like Adam.

There is a line in the second reading for this Sunday that is crucial to this. St. Paul tells the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live is no longer mine, but Christ who lives in me."

To be a father means to be crucified with Christ- it means death to self. There is no more courageous and heroic path for a man to follow than that because that is really tough.

How do fathers do that? How are they courageous? How do they die to self? True fathers work long hours, and when they come home tired they don't take their day out on their families. When the same old house with the same old job and the same old wife and kids begins to chafe at you and you would just love to find some exciting diversion- you tuck your children into bed and help clean the kitchen, giving thanks to God that he's blessed you with a family. When your wife is sick and can't take care of herself, you quietly attend to her, even when that goes on for years. You change diapers, shuttle kids to soccer games, drag them through high school, interrogate your daughter's boyfriends- and a lot of the time life is pretty ordinary.

That's what it means to be crucified with Christ, and to be a true father. The alternative is to follow the path of Adam- the easy path, the un-manly, wimpy path. That means walking out, turning to pornography, resorting to neglect or manipulation, making excuses for grabbing what you think you deserve because your family sucks the life out of you. And the cycle of violence continues.

You fathers who are here- and by that I mean every man who acts as a mentor or guide in any way. Not mere biology- spiritual fatherhood, adoptive fatherhood, priestly fatherhood, married fatherhood- all fathers: You are heroes, and you are needed. Your children need your example. Our society needs your witness. Young men desperately need male role models- we have so, so few today. The Church needs your fatherhood- we need to see that Christianity is not simply for the women and children- it takes real men to be Christian and to stare Satan in the face and to keep him from shredding your families.

I thank you for your courageous dedication, generosity, commitment and sacrifice. I thank you for allowing yourselves to be crucified with Christ so that he can live in you.

Yes, there is a lot that is troubling in the world- the jail, the inner city, the suburbs. The cycle of violence that began with Adam's rejection of manhood and fatherhood continues. But, it is you, fathers- it is fatherhood, that God uses to rescue us men from our own tendencies to fall. And it is fatherhood that God uses to rescue the world from itself- only true fatherhood- spiritual, cultural, self-sacrificial, courageous fatherhood can stop the cycle of violence, and lead us to the house of the Father in heaven.