

“If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Lk 9:23) When I read that verse in preparing for this homily, coming as it did shortly after the ordination last Saturday of four new priests, it took me back to my own ordination 13 years ago. That was the scripture I chose for my holy card – the card priests include in the invitations they send out to their ordinations. The verse one chooses is supposed to be a kind of motto to live by. For this Father’s Day weekend I was thinking about the extent to which I, as a spiritual father, was or was not fulfilling that ideal. But I mention this because today I want to preach about all Fatherhood, biological as well as spiritual fatherhood, in relation to Luke 9:23.

There is a crisis of Fatherhood in the West today. In the Church this is very obvious. The sexual abuse crisis is all about a failure of fatherhood. How can a true spiritual father abuse the children God has given into his care? And how could bishops not protect their flock? We as Catholic priests are called “Father.” We have not been good fathers in many ways – we haven’t fed, protected, loved our children well enough these past years.

But the problem is not only within the priesthood. There is also a grave crisis within marriages and families. We pretend that the “kids are alright.” But they’re really not. Children in the West may be materially comfortable. But they are often lost and damaged. I look at the broken homes and hearts and I know there is a lack of good fathering. Many in society today, including some fathers, think fatherhood is optional – nice to have, but we can live without it. We’re kidding ourselves. Today I want to speak to all fathers, and encourage all of us to live out the challenge Christ gives us in Luke 9:23.

I want to suggest four qualities I think go into being a good father. The first is that we be men who keep our word. We fathers have taken vows and made promises before almighty God and His people. Those of you who are married probably vowed something like this to your wife on your wedding day: “I take you to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”

How’s that going? “I’ll be true to you.” You married an individual woman. I and those other priests have married the Church. Both priests and husbands promise to be chaste. Have we been? We promised to care for the sick. I promised to come to their bedside when the sick called me. You promised to take care of your wife when she got sick. Have we shown up? “In good times and in bad.” Are we at our best when times are good? Or do we stick things out? “I’ll . . . honor you all the days of my life.” Are we men of honor? This marriage is for life.

But you made some other promises if you have baptized your children. Do you remember the priest saying to you: “You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him or her in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring him or her up to keep God’s commandments.” We have made promises to God to care for our children spiritually. It is our DUTY. Are we spiritual and biological fathers feeding our children – teaching them the truth? One of the best predictors of whether teenagers will persevere in the faith is if their father goes to mass with the family. So, are we fathers men of our word, or not?

A second quality of a good father is loyalty. Loyalty to one's family – I've already spoken about that. But also loyalty to Jesus Christ. What do I mean by that? I'm not sure the language we use about Jesus always works for men. Spiritual writers and saints often speak of Jesus as the "Beloved." What does that mean for men?

I've once preached about Jesus, not so much as Lover, but as "Captain." There was a parishioner I had up in Port Angeles. I'll call him Mike. Mike was a Captain in the Coast Guard. And he was the Skipper of the Coast Guard cutter stationed in Port Angeles. I saw a lot of coast guard officers come through PA. It's a Coast Guard town. But Mike was different. He was a natural leader of men - charismatic. Everyone felt it. His men admitted it. They wanted his approval. They wanted to be around him. They would go where he told them to go and do what he told them to do. They loved him. And they were loyal.

I don't know if you have known a man like that, but if Jesus Christ is not that for you, then you don't yet know Jesus. (That only comes with prayer – another need for all fathers). Are we loyal to Jesus and for His Church? Do we stand up for Him? Go where he leads, do what He asks? Do we stand up for our wives and families – in the difficult times as well as the easy times?

That takes courage: a third quality of a good father. There are times when it's tough to make the right decisions for our families. We must face down our inevitable fears so we can do what is right. The highest medal for the U. S. military is the Medal of Honor. The tradition is that someone in uniform has to salute a Medal of Honor winner no matter what their respective rank. A general salutes a private who has won this greatest honor, because courage knows no rank, and is honored by all. Such courage is possible and necessary for all of us – you and me. We can't be good fathers without it: again, a reason to pray. (Do you see why I ask you for 20 minutes of prayer a day?)

But most Medals of Honor in U. S. history have been awarded posthumously. It usually means death. Jesus knows that. He tells us to take up our daily cross on the road to Jerusalem. And we know what awaits Him in Jerusalem, don't we? Jesus is going to die for those He loves. We fathers are to do the same. This death of ours won't win medals or make headlines. We will have to die to ourselves in a thousand small, hidden ways so that others may live life fully.

And that leads to the Fourth quality of fatherhood – love. "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." It still comes down to that after 13 years, or however many it's years you've been a father. Brothers, our fatherhood means taking up our cross daily for our entire lives. It means being true to our word, being loyal and courageous enough to die to ourselves. That is what love looks like. Being a good father isn't about being Macho. Macho is all about ME and my wants. Being a father means being a man – being someone who uses his strength to lift others up, especially the wives and children God has given to each of us. That is what Fatherhood – biological or spiritual – fatherhood is all about. And the world, our families, the Church, and Jesus Christ all need us to live out our fatherhood well. Let's us be about our business.