



Message for Father's Day 2024
His Grace Most Reverend Francis Leo
Metropolitan Archbishop of Toronto

16 June 2024

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I wish to extend my warmest best wishes and God's abundant blessings upon all the Fathers in the Archdiocese of Toronto, with a resounding "Happy Father's Day," and to thank you for your faithfulness to such an incredible vocation in the Church.

From the earliest verse in Sacred Scripture, we read about God's plan for man as husband and father (Gn. 2:18, 23). Together with their wives, husbands form the basic unit of society, the family, seeking to mirror the divine love found in the Holy Trinity in their families. St. Paul paralleled the mystery of the Church to marriage and the family, encouraging husbands and wives to imitate the self-sacrificing love of Christ for the Church (Eph. 5:31-32). The importance of the family cannot be overstated. The Catechism reminds us that families are "a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it [the family] reflects the Father's work of creation" (CCC 2205).

There are well over a thousand references to the word "father," in the Holy Scriptures, and even more when one considers the broader term "fatherhood" and its variants. I will focus my reflection first on Our Heavenly Father, and second on St. Joseph, Jesus' foster father.

Most of Jesus' preaching focused on Our Heavenly Father, and the Kingdom of God, both of which provided insight into the Father's love for us. The pinnacle of Jesus' revelation concerning God the Father was precisely his "fatherhood," an insight into the inner life of God which is love.¹ God the Father's love is the basis of one of the most famous and central scriptural passages: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn.3:16). Later in the same Gospel we read, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (Jn. 15:9). The introduction to Our Heavenly Father's love early in the Gospel of John and the invitation to abide in the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit near the end (at the Last Supper) provide a context for fatherhood; namely, a love that seeks union or communion. How is our union with Our Heavenly Father accomplished?

¹ Pope St. John Paul II, *General Audience*, 23 October 1985, 3. His Holiness continues: "Who is the Father? In light of the definitive testimony which we have received through the Son, Jesus Christ, we have the full awareness of faith that God's fatherhood pertains above all to the fundamental mystery of God's inner life, to the Trinitarian mystery" (ibid 4).



The Father's intention to reconcile the world to Himself was first made known in the Garden of Eden (Gn. 3:15) and was accomplished in Jesus Christ. The perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is Our Lord's ultimate act of self-donation, the act of love that we live out each time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Participation in the love of the Trinity is accomplished most perfectly through Our Eucharistic Lord;² it is not a coincidence that Jesus invites us to abide in his love at the Last Supper. The vocation of all fathers is not only to abide in the love of Our Lord, but to foster that communion in their families, including faithfully and devoutly participating as a family in Sunday Mass, and by extension the world.

As a remarkable father, St. Joseph, the hardworking carpenter from Nazareth, provides powerful witness to all fathers on how best to imitate God's love described above and foster that unity so very necessary for the life of the family. When we speak about St. Joseph it is always within the context of a relationship—his relationship with God who communicates with him in dreams and guides his path, to Our Blessed Mother whose most chaste spouse he is and to Jesus, his adopted son whom he raised and for whom he was an excellent role model of manhood. Even before St. Joseph was the earthly/foster father of Jesus, he was a faithful husband to Our Lady whom he took care of throughout her pregnancy and Jesus' birth. Pope Francis points to the profound relationship of St. Joseph with Our Lord writing, "Joseph had the courage to become the legal father of Jesus, to whom he gave the name revealed by the angel (Mt. 1:21). As we know, for ancient peoples, to give a name to a person or to a thing, as Adam did in the account in the Book of Genesis (cf. 2:19-20), was to establish a relationship."³ St. Joseph took an active role in the family God gave to him, the Holy Family; he was not a by-stander, but an active protagonist in the divine drama unfolding before his eyes allowing himself to be acutely involved in the extraordinary events that marked the life of his family, indeed salvation history in the making.

St. Joseph, the just man, husband and father, teaches us many things about fatherhood, but perhaps the most profound lesson is that happiness as a father is found not in mere self-sacrifice but in self-gift.⁴ In this context, self-sacrifice refers to a partial giving up for the sake of another, whereas self-gift is the complete and total self-donation of oneself to another. The total gift of self is really the "spousal" gift of self that is a permanent, exclusive relationship whereby one belongs entirely to another.⁵ Marriage is the primordial "place" given to us by God for such a spousal gift of self. The specific self-donation involved with fatherhood according to God's plan points back to the divine dynamic of relationships found within the blessed Trinity as characterized by a radical, reciprocal openness to the gift of the other that is total, perfect, or complete.⁶

² St. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, VIII, 15-19.

³ Pope Francis, *Patris Corde*, 8 December 2020, Introduction.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Patris Corde*, 8 December 2020, 7.

⁵ Pope St. John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane*, 2 February 1994, 11.

⁶ Pope St. John Paul II, *General Audience*, 6 February 1980.



Dear Fathers, on this special day I want to encourage you in the complete gift of your life for the good of your marriage and family. How great it is to father a child; and yet becoming a loving, responsible and reliable dad takes great heart, patience, intentionality and courage. You play such a vital and irreplaceable role in your child's life and in the stability of the family unit. The impact of your contribution on the daily life of your family members is immense. Your presence, affection, discipline and personal faith journey are necessary to educate and raise your child into the adult the Lord is calling him/her to be and to help them fulfill their God-given calling in their own lives. Together with your spouse, you are the true pillars in the development of your child's spiritual, human, physical, emotional and social life as they instinctively look to you so that you may teach them words of wisdom, boundaries to be respected and rules to be obeyed. Furthermore, the way your child will relate to others will depend largely on the behaviour you yourself set, along with the values you possess and choices made daily, especially in your relationship with your spouse. You are that provider, protector, guide, leader and consoler that children need to have in their lives so that they may fulfill their calling and live the abundant life. You give them support and security, a link to their past, and you open up for them a horizon and opportunities for their future in the world before them. When you are involved in their lives and take your place in family life, children flourish, they come to know their worth and relish in self-confidence and in the knowledge of their unique giftedness.

Finally, let us call to mind and pray for the fathers who have passed on to eternity. We likewise pray for those family situations and circumstances where fathers are not present, where tragedy has hit, where homes are broken and facing hardships of many kinds. Let us never lose hope but rather come to the Lord in faith and prayer as He is the source of all hope and new life. I thank you, dear Fathers, for your commitment and your love for your family, for God and for the Church. I assure you of my fervent prayers that you may always be pleasing to the Lord in the way you raise your family. I congratulate you in your efforts to fulfill your vocation as an incredible gift of self-giving in fidelity, love and devotion.

Sincerely Yours in Jesus with Mary,

Most Rev. Francis Leo
Metropolitan Archbishop of Toronto