

St Joseph – Dads Make a Difference

Pope Francis wrote a beautiful Apostolic letter *Patris Corde*, to mark the opening of the 'Year of Saint Joseph'. *Patris Corde*, which translate 'with a fathers heart' is full of beautiful insights from the life of silent but faithful father, Joseph. There are lessons to be learnt and for Catholic men, reflecting on the life of St Joseph is a great starting point.

In our lives, we need many different forms of accreditation or qualifications to prove our competence, knowledge or professionalism but nothing prepares men for fatherhood. God called Joseph, a mere carpenter from Nazareth to be the earthly father of Jesus. Joseph had no experience of Fatherhood yet he was given this great responsibility because he was a righteous and virtuous man with great faith and humility. As we contemplate the life of St Joseph, we cannot underestimate the importance of children having a faithful and loving father to journey with them.

In *Patris Corde*, Pope Francis highlights that '*Fathers are not born, but made. A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person*' (PC 7). St Augustine said that one of the functions of marriage was to make men take responsibility for the children they fathered. Sadly, for many men, the concept of 'fatherhood' is linked to the fact that men are biologically responsible for bringing a child into the world rather than the responsibility that goes with it. We seem to be living in a 'fatherless' generation with men silent and side-lined but there is a solution and being a good father makes a difference.

How do dads make a difference?

There is a significant body of research, highlighting the importance of having a dad actively involved in the lives of their children.

- Young people are less likely to be caught up in substance misuse and more likely to be better adapted to adult life, lower criminality and having fewer mental health issues by having a dad around.
- Children are less likely to be educationally underachieve or be unemployed.



The author and his wife Paula

- The old Irish proverb 'Mol An Óige Agus Tiocfaidh Sí' (Praise The young And They Will Flourish) is a truism as Dads can build their child's self-esteem and therefore strengthen their relationships with their peers, increased sense of self worth and this leads to good relationships in adult life.
- Having a dad actively involved in their children's faith means that they are 90% more likely to be participating in church life as young adults. Increasing vocations and good marriages.

Pope Francis laments that 'Children today often seem orphans lacking fathers, but the church too, needs fathers'. So what can we do? How can we encourage and challenge the men and fathers around us in our families, friendship groups and church? How do we as a church support Catholic men? *Patris Corde* is not as an antidote to the problems we face but if we are to emulate Saint Joseph, we must begin to reflect and act. Here are four principles for Catholic Fathers:

Man Up - God is love

The term 'Man Up' is often used to imply a lack of something, a male quality, often attributed to a stereotypical; toughness, resilience, bravery and what the current culture sees as a 'Man's Man!' However, I want to give another perspective on it; What if, to 'Man up', means that as men, we need to assess our relationship with the 'Man Up-stairs'. In a nutshell, how is our relationship with God? Do we know that he loves us unconditionally, willed us and give us a unique purpose and mission in the world? That is exciting when you think about it! The fact that 'God is love' is the underlying message in our Catholic faith, yet many men think of love as fluffy and cute but not tough, sacrificial and eternal. St John Bosco beautifully noted that 'young people should not only be loved but realise that they are loved'.² The magnitude of God's love should force Catholic dads into action and realise our primary vocation, to get our families to Heaven. Pope Benedict XVI eloquently put it, '*We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life.*

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.³ As Catholic fathers, if we believe and accept God's love, our life inadvertently takes a new direction.

Be a role model

During our marriage preparation, the facilitator asked a challenging question, 'Reflecting on what your parents modelled to you, What do you want to model into your marriage and what would you leave behind? This question still resonates with me today and I often think about how my children would answer that question. What would they take on and what would they leave behind? As a father, would my children appreciate what I modelled to them. Reflecting on my own father and what was being modelled to me, there were things I didn't like or I felt uncomfortable with but also things that stuck with me such as his commitment, hardworking nature, faith and joy. If it wasn't for my parents introducing me to Cursillo & Catholic Charismatic Renewal, I wouldn't have a strong relationship with Jesus and his Church or see the importance of placing Christ at the centre of family life. Pope Francis often says, 'Please, thank you and I'm sorry', are the three words he would love to write on the door of every family home. As a father, simple things like this make sense! Before every mealtime with the kids we bless ourselves and give thanks for the food, each night I say a Hail Mary with the children and my son, Lorcan who has Autism and loves swords occasionally demands a very dynamic rendition of the St Michael the Archangel prayer. Simple traditions are important for us, in our family, Mass ends with coffee & donuts with the Parish Priest and beautiful Sunday dinner and walk in the park. I also celebrate birthdays, encourage them and attempt an examen with them reflecting on the day that has past. I try to practice what I preach but I am still learning, occasionally I mess up, I get impatient, angry or spend too much time on my phone and I say sorry to my wife and kids when I do. I am not St Joseph but I need to seek his intercession in times of weakness and remember my vocation.

Become a creatively courageous father

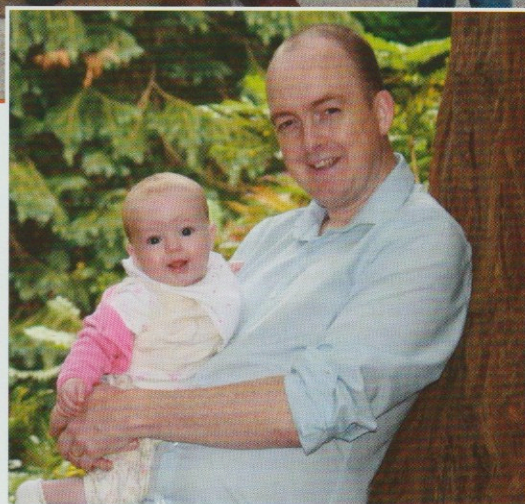
In *Patris Corde*, Pope Francis concludes, 'if at times, God seems not to help us, surely this does not mean that we have been



Above: Joe and Paula and their children Anna and Lorcan

Right: Joe and Lorcan

abandoned, but instead are being trusted to plan, to be creative, and to find solutions ourselves' (PC5). At the height of lockdown, I felt a sense of hopelessness, disconnection from reality and a yearning for God. During this time, I stepped out in faith in my own Parish helping to establish 'car park masses', running an online study group reading the '33-day 'consecration to St Joseph' by Fr Don Calloway⁴ (which is a must read for all Catholics) and got creative by putting together a Catholic Podcast for dads called 'The Holy Joes Podcast'⁵ in which Catholic dads share their life stories with tips on living, loving, forgiving and enjoying life. To be a 'creatively courageous father' also means I have to stand up for my faith and defend it when it is being attacked and to do bold things like forgiving your enemies, something my father did after my grandad was murdered in the troubles. We must go to Saint Joseph in all that we do and know that if we are courageous like him, we will point others towards Christ.



NOTES

¹ On the 150th Anniversary of the proclamation of St Joseph as the Patron of the Universal church, Pope Francis opened the Year of St Joseph, on 8 December 2020.

² <http://infed.org/mobi/an-exhortation-to-educators/>

³ (Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1)

⁴ <https://www.consecrationtostjoseph.org/>

⁵ <https://theholyjoespodcast.buzzsprout.com/>

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