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27 November 2022 + First Sunday of Advent

My priest fraternity group that meets every month for fraternal support and prayer is reading a book by Fr. Jacques Philippe entitled, *Priest Fatherhood: Treasure in Earthen Vessels*. In the introduction, Fr. Philippe says: "Through this little book, I would like to encourage my brother priests, who often have pressing need for encouragement, and to help them believe in the fruitfulness - the fertility - and the beauty of their vocation. Even if it's a difficult, demanding reality, fatherhood is also a source of great joy. There is nothing more beautiful than to give life, and so much more so when this life is eternal life, the very life of God."

This book has given we priests, young and old, a wonderful look at the heart of the Catholic priesthood, and the very reason why we, more than any ordained minister, are called "Father." For me it speaks to the heart of my own experience of priesthood and serving as a pastor of a specific parish family. Fr. Philippe observes: "We are in a world of orphans, and so many people are disoriented and suffering because they haven't had the chance of meeting someone in their lives who was a true father." One of the most striking observations he makes in his book is that "motherhood" is a given for a child because the child grows and is nurtured from the very beginning by the mother. Fatherhood, however, is different. There comes a time in a man's life when he must choose to be a father. This is a moment in a man's life when he matures and finds himself and the person God has created him to be.

If we look at our culture today, it is obvious that one of the reasons the right for a woman to have an abortion is so strong is not rooted in some fundamental right, but a lack of confidence that the man who impregnated the woman will fully accept and give himself to being a true father. Think about how many single-parent families are out there, and generally not headed by a father, but a mother who bears the weight of raising the children. The father is often just a "visitor" to the house, or the place where children visit. Fatherhood requires maturity; refusing to embrace fatherhood is, in many ways, a failure of the man to "grow up." While this may be appealing to a young man, being free to play and do what he wants, it has devastating effects on children and women.

I can relate very well to all of this. In my early years of priesthood, I treated it more like being an "ordained bachelor." Yes, I did all of my priestly duties, but never really invested myself in those the Church gave me to love and lead. It was not until some years into my first pastorate did I realize I was not just a priest, but a Father! I then discovered the absolute joy of watching the children I baptized grow and mature, to watch them make their First Holy Communion, their Confirmation, and even witness their marriage. I know they saw me as their spiritual father, and I truly felt they were my spiritual children. Protestant ministers seldom experience this because most already have their own family. It is not that way for a Catholic priest. I think that is the true grace of a celibate priesthood. Those priests who have harmed their spiritual children and family are like many men who simply refused to grow up!

Fatherhood is not just a biological definition, it is a deeply spiritual vocation that is essential to marriage and family life. This little book by Fr. Philippe has emboldened me to challenge men, young and old, to take their proper place in the divine plan of God. I truly believe that much of the instability and confusion in our children today, is a direct result of men who have failed in their duty as fathers.

*Why am I writing about this now? I am thinking of Christmas and how that will be celebrated not only in our parish, but in our homes. I think about St. Joseph, my dearest patron, who once thought it might be best for him to leave Mary, but who said yes to God through an angel to accept fatherhood, to take Mary as his wife, to protect and guard Jesus on behalf of his Father who is in heaven. What a courageous man! But what about fathers who never bring their children to church, to pray with them, to guide them in their Christian life, and to protect them against all of the things in this world that destroy their innocence and their spiritual and moral life?*

*I challenge our men, my brothers, to use these next four weeks of Advent to think and pray about their role in God's divine plan for marriage and family life. Your home can become holy, and so your family, if you embrace the responsibilities God asks of you. If you do so, I can assure you that you will find a happiness and fulfillment you could never imagine.*

*Blessings and best wishes,*