

Today is Father's Day, and while we're certainly thankful for the life and nurturing our dads give, part of what separates fathers from mothers is that we look to them to protect. In a word, we want dad to be *courageous*. Today St. Paul says that the Christian man is "always courageous." And why is he courageous? Because he's a tough son of gun? Maybe. Because he's bold and stupid? Little bit. But Paul says the real reason is this: they are always courageous because they "walk by faith, not by sight."

Faith and **prayer**, our readings tell us, are the mark of a father's courage. I don't doubt any in my parish aren't dutiful – Woody Allen said that ninety percent of life is showing up – and you do. But call it a *Missouruh Trait* to not tend toward the spiritual realm. Our state motto is "Show Me," and indeed we have to see it to believe it. We *show up* to *show me*, but then, get back to work: what's real in real life. I'll be on the tractor, Padre, because you can't eat an Alleluia....

For Christ, however, the best images for the life of faith and prayer were agrarian metaphors: sowing, growing, reaping. Faith wasn't some spooky thing up in the clouds, but very down to earth – or rather *in* the earth – on which we walk firmly.

What does the Lord say about the life of prayer and faith? He compares it to a farmer who gets up and does his duty: he works hard planting seed. But then, watering and fertilizing consistently, he trusts the land to yield growth. The farmer realizes much is out of his hands. Indeed, Jesus says for the sower regarding the mechanics of germination, "he knows not how." The farmer, though, is patient and the land is bountiful. So too the man of courageous faith does not need an answer to prayer right now, but trusts God will attend to it in time. So the man of courageous faith trusts that if

he goes to Mass and feels nothing – no worries, God is doing the most work deep in the soil of his heart. Then suddenly, the growth bursts forth!

[*The Christian father is courageous because he walks by faith.* This idea of waiting for God’s growth tells us something about the Fatherhood of God. When Jesus was laid in the tomb on Holy Saturday it seemed like nothing was happening, when in fact, He was hard at work destroying death and rescuing the just shut out of heaven. As God the Father sent His Son into the world to show us divine love, so now the Son emulates His Father. Children are scared of the dark, and Christ our father takes our hand. He does this so that in the Resurrection we will know forever that whenever we feel abandoned, whenever God seems silent, that’s when He’s in dark places to grow our prayer and faith.]

The Christian father is courageous because he walks by faith. Pretty much every study done on the influence of parents on children’s religious practice points to the importance of the father. I’ve heard it said a mother raises children in the faith but a father raises adult Catholics. Statically, whether or not a mom goes to Mass or participates makes little difference on adult practice. (Now, that’s not to say you’re irrelevant, ladies – my cousin who’s a priest and I agree our holy moms and grandmas are half the reason we answered the call.) But a father who participates at Mass, prays, and talks about religion predicts whether his children will be adult Catholics – something like a thirty percent *greater* chance. That’s huge, considering I just spent four years at MU in the classroom dressed like Pope Darth Vader II, hearing undergrads use the expression, “I went to twelve years of Catholic school,” the subtext being: *they’re not Catholic now.*

What you do, fathers, is observed by the young. What you care little about they will hate; yet they will also love what you love!

The Christian father is courageous because he walks by faith. Now, you might say, “Father, I show up. I try to be a good person. I pray...sometimes....” That’s good. That’s the minimum, and it might be enough for your salvation but what about your children? God scolds Israel in our first reading because they were supposed to be the tree under which God gathered all people to know and serve Him. But they took God’s love for granted and they failed to attract others to the Father of All. *A father of courageous faith must do more.*

Where do you start? I have no children – um, duh... but I am a spiritual father and I worked in a kind of parental role in our seminary. I was a chaplain, living in the dorm with the seminarians in charge of discipline – making sure the freshmen got to prayer, didn’t destroy the place, etc. – but also acted in a mentoring role, meeting with each individually to work on human development. And like any father you’ve gotta’ have faith to see the far off reward. In the beginning when I got inevitable teenage blowback I’d just react. Of course that never went well, and I’d spend more time trying to reclaim ground because I lost my temper. And I also realized: why am I letting eighteen-year-olds manipulate my emotions?!

So with experience you learn. That is, until you get some kid who pushes your buttons. In my fourth year I had a seminarian who was talented, smart, hardworking – a great candidate – but he was really struggling in his new and he vented his frustration on me. Yet I learned from the past, smiled through clenched teeth and offered encouraging words. Even when every meeting was, "I hate this place! I hate you!" I kept smiling.

Christ's agrarian metaphors came back: "Unless a grain wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies" - if I die to self - "it produces much fruit" - fruit for him. And here's what I want to say to dads about where to start with prayer and faith. Every time it went wrong with the seminarians it was because I thought it depended on what I could do. I didn't pray. But before I met with this young man, I'd sit in the chair of my office in which he would sit, and positioned from his vantage I prayed for him. And I know not how it changed him or me, but all I can say is this: the meetings always went better.

Fathers, and all my brothers and sisters, "We are always courageous, for we walk by faith, not by sight." Our faith and prayer may be sufficient for our salvation, but Christ tells us to be perfect as His heavenly Father is perfect. We're called to be courageous, to want more: to be the reason for many children getting to heaven.