

## **The Fourth Sunday of Easter**

### **April 25, 2021**

Traditionally, the Fourth Sunday of Easter has been called “Good Shepherd Sunday” because the readings focus on Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It has also been a time to talk about vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Today, I’d like us to focus on another vocation. One that is larger than the priesthood and religious life but that still encompasses it. I’d like us to focus on the vocation of fatherhood.

The image of the shepherd speaks to what every father is called to do. As a shepherd cares for his flock, so a father must care for his family. He feeds them and protects them from danger. He provides for the needs of his family as a shepherd provides for the needs of his flock. So Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is a model for fathers at all stages of their lives.

It is also fitting for us to celebrate the vocation of fatherhood today because Pope Francis has declared this year to be The Year of Saint Joseph. Saint Joseph is a model for all fathers because he so totally embraced the call to love, care for, and protect the most important family of all - the Holy Family of Nazareth. And he did so in the most difficult of circumstances. In the letter that he wrote to announce the Year of Saint Joseph, Pope Francis wrote, “With a father’s heart: that is how Joseph loved Jesus”. Saint Joseph teaches all of us what it means to be a father and how to live out this vocation.

We have heard a lot about the shortage of priests. But there is also a vocation crisis in fatherhood. Not enough men have been living up to this call. I’m sure there may be many reasons for this. But there is no denying the suffering it has caused for women who must pick up the slack and children who have to grow up without the presence of a strong, loving father in their home. So this Year of Saint Joseph is an important time for us to celebrate those fathers who give their all to their wives and children and to pray to God to strengthen fathers who are struggling and falling short in their duties.

So, inspired by Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and under the prayerful protection of Saint Joseph, let us look at today’s gospel and see what it teaches us about the vocation of fatherhood.

When Jesus calls Himself, “The Good Shepherd”, He is saying that He is the model for all shepherds. The man who would be a good father, then, must look to Jesus. A father draws his strength from a vibrant relationship with Jesus. Taking time to pray, then, is vital for fathers. Sitting at the feet of Jesus by reading the Bible is crucial.

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One of the greatest temptations that fathers face is to lose themselves in their work. It can become an excuse to shirk their other duties. When a father takes time for silent prayer, it helps him to see the big picture, to keep work in perspective, and to understand that he does not have a family to support his work but that he works to support his family. Through prayer, men realize that their relationships - especially with their wives and children - are more important than anything they can produce or achieve. The father who is successful in his vocation, then, is a man of prayer who is always looking to Jesus for inspiration and strength.

Jesus goes on to tell us that “a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Like Jesus, the good father sacrifices for his family. Sometimes it is a sacrifice of sleep, having to stay up with a sick child and still going to work the next day. Sometimes it is a sacrifice of time, playing with his children when he just wants to sit down and relax. Good fathers also sacrifice by taking time to listen to their wives without judging them, by trying to understand their feelings, and by putting their wives’ needs ahead of their own. They go without new cars or other “toys” they might like to have to make sure their families have what they need. Like Saint Joseph, good fathers might have to sacrifice many of their dreams. A good father’s love, like the love of Jesus, is sacrificial. Men can draw strength and inspiration by looking at the cross. That is what fathers are called to. As Saint Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

The Good Shepherd protects the sheep from the wolves who would scatter and kill them. So, the good father protects his family from anyone who might seek to harm them. There are many wolves in the world today seeking to destroy the family. It is getting harder and harder to keep them out because they have found a way into the home through the television and the internet. We all know what they are. So, a good father is aware of what his children are watching. He monitors what they are accessing on the internet. When children do stumble onto offensive material, the father talks to them about it and teaches them why such content is harmful to them. A good father protects his family also by providing alternative programming for them to watch - movies and programs that are wholesome, that teach good values, and that will help them to grow into solid adults.

God calls fathers to an important role of providing for and protecting the most vulnerable members of society - their families. Men cannot do it in today’s world without God’s help. Fathers can also count on Saint Joseph for strength and inspiration. Any man who wants to be a good father can bring all his cares and fears to the foster-father of Jesus and be assured of his help.

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Because men are human, they will occasionally fail as husbands and fathers. The devil tries to convince us that it is too late to undo the harm we've caused and that we should just give up. But that is not God's way. As long as we're alive, it is never too late to be a good father or a good husband. It might take time for a man to win back the trust of his wife and the affection of his children, but it is never impossible if we imitate the sacrificial love of Jesus and put their needs before our own.

As we gather here today, let us pray for the men who are fathers or who are about to be fathers that God may strengthen them. Let us also pray for women who have to raise their families without fathers, that God will be a Father to them and their children. Let us also pray for our spiritual fathers - for bishops, priests, deacons, and other religious - that they protect the flock that God has entrusted to their care. Finally, let us ask Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to lead us all through this life into the green pastures of heaven.