

Presentation
Men's Conference
Saturday, March 23

Only ten days ago, Pope Francis was introduced to the world stage. Because of his transparent personality he was immediately received not only by Catholics and Christians but by people of all faiths, indeed all people of goodwill. His simplicity, his openness, struck a chord that resonates with the human heart.

In the homily of his installation Mass, he identified Joseph, husband of Mary and foster-father of Jesus as a model. Joseph's role which the Holy Father highlighted was that of custos, that of protector.

As we conclude this Men's Conference we ask how do we carry forward what has been experienced this day. What is it that caught my attention? What is it that I want to change? How must I grow to become fully the man God wants me to be?

I suggest that the model of Joseph Pope Francis proposes is one that enables us to put things together, to realize how God wants me to organize my days. The theme of "protector" touches every facet of my life. How I can fulfill my responsibilities in a proactive manner?

Along with the Pope, we ask what quality of character particularly defines Joseph's role as protector? The Holy Father responds, "Joseph is a "protector" because he is able to hear God's voice and be guided by his will, and for this reason he is all the more sensitive to the persons entrusted to his safekeeping."

Sustaining each of our roles as protector, therefore, is the relationship that we have with God. For it is God's voice and God's inspiration which enables us to accomplish our vocation. This means that we need to protect our relationship with Christ.

On the positive side, we are called to prayer, discerning God's direction through reflection on scriptures. The Gospel holds the key to the mind and heart of God and this Sacred Word speaks to you and to me today.

The Eucharist nourishes us and engages us at an ever deeper level in our life giving relationship with Jesus, Father and Spirit. May we be unfailing in our commitment to the Sunday celebration of Mass. Let it not be a matter of routine, but may we strive to bring the entirety of our attention and an openness to let God's Word penetrate and ease his entry into us and through the bread of life electrify our friendship with the divine.

In this healthy self-protection of the Christ in our lives the Pope is very realistic. He clearly states, "But to be "protectors" we also have to keep watch over ourselves! Let us not forget that hatred, envy, and pride defile our lives! Being protectors, then, also means keeping watch over our emotions, over our hearts, because they are the seat of good and evil intentions, intentions that build up and tear down."

What this signals for our lives is the application of the sports saying: "the best offense is a good defense." We need to regularly analyze and evaluate the motivations and reasons for our behavior. This requires radical honesty, a willingness to change. What the Church provides for us to confront evil is confession, the sacrament of reconciliation. Properly received, it requires accountability, honesty and forthright admission of our life situation. The response on God's part is forgiveness, healing and a new day, in which after going to confession integrity and balance are integrated into our lives. We feel good, we are relieved and open to growth and change.

The focus on maintaining and strengthening the relationship with Christ hugely impacts the primary role we are called to in protecting our wives. That protection begins with a reverence for our life partner – a realization that she is our equal. Moreover, the physical, emotional and spiritual unity with her reflects the very unity that the three persons of God share internally in the life of the Trinity and the relationship that Jesus has with the Church, the community of believers.

It is vitally important to nurture a spiritual bonding between you and your wife. Do you pray together? Do you share your beliefs and unbeliefs? Are you able to communicate feelings and touch the inner core of each other's personal identity?

One contemporary scourge which constitutes an evil as would be identified by Pope Francis is that of pornography. Pornography wreaks havoc with the intimacy so central to the marriage relationship. It is insidious insofar as it robs sexuality of its closeness and its mutuality. It turns the pornographic practitioner in upon himself intent only on personal pleasure. It is addictive which means ordinarily it requires help to break its grip on our lives. Protection means addressing and rejecting forces such as pornography that separate us from the central relationship of our lives, our beloved wives.

Connected with marriage is the man's role with his children. As fathers and grandfathers, the male takes on an enormously influential and lasting presence in the lives of these they have generated.

Often it is heard that anyone can sexually give life to a child. But to be a father and even a grandfather, who sacrifices love and life and nurtures a child as parent is the real measure of a man. In our society, we easily recognize the positive effects of fatherhood when present and the vacuum and lack of direction when absent.

The value of direction, exercise of healthy discipline and especially presence and solid modeling of what it means to be a man are invaluable gifts to children especially to sons and grandsons. We might ask as "protector," do I spend quality time and being present with my children, those whom I have generated, God's unique gift to me?

Pope Francis cites one quality which he regards as important in exercising our role of protector and which is consequently applicable to being father and parent. That quality is tenderness. The Holy Father exhorts us: "We must not be afraid of goodness, of tenderness."

A privileged friend of mine is an Italian gentleman who is the father of 11 children. My first encounter with him was not a pleasant one. Seeking financial assistance for seminary ministry in the Twin Cities he virtually threw me out of his office for my being so bold to make the ask.

Over time, we have had the opportunity to come to know one another. He is extraordinarily direct, very brash and explicit in all his relationships. Especially is this so with his wife and children. What I have become privy to over the years through our friendship is that his wife and children are able to bypass Carlo's intimidating exterior and penetrate his heart. The Italian custom of kissing on the cheeks when they encounter each other symbolizes the love and tenderness that his 250 to 300 pound sons and their 87- year old father have for one another.

It is vital that fathers and grandfathers be able to communicate tenderness and love to children and grandchildren. This expression sews the ground for the children to be in touch with God's love, to appreciate their own value and in turn to initiate and express their God-given capacity to love. The Pope, citing Joseph as a model, provides ample encouragement: "In the Gospels, Saint Joseph appears as a strong and courageous man, a working man, yet in his heart we see great tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love. We must not be afraid of goodness, of tenderness." In the lingo of our day, we might conclude it is the macho thing to do.

The man is called then to move from the closeness of family in order to exercise male characteristics in the protection of the broader community. We could easily describe this dynamic in the expanding concentric circles of relationships.

In our day and age, when secular values oftentimes seem to carry the day with material values predominating and self-indulgence in individuals held up as worthy of pursuit, the Christian man is called first to protect his Church, the community of believers which preserves lasting and classical values and truths. Because the Church consists of those

with feet of clay, it has its problems and ongoing defects. But Christ loves the Church. It is the vehicle of his presence in the world. Our role of “protector” calls for lasting fidelity, being engaged fervently with its mission and forever committed to its reform and pursuit of authenticity.

Among the great treasures we enjoy as humans is that of friendship. In our neighborhoods, clubs, interest groups and wide-ranging activities, may we seize the opportunities to express support and the love associated with friendship to build up the world in a way that reflects God’s care and initiative.

Think of how much time you spend or have spent at work. In this endeavor we are especially called to be protectors of those values which lend dignity to every person. Our example in the workplace can provide impetus to pursue an ethic that is other centered and which fosters a sense of justice. Do we see God’s hand somehow involved in what we do? Does our work provide service? Does it seem to be in God’s overall plan for his children – all of us created in his image and likeness? Because human nature is designed for work, for the building up of human society, it evokes a source of justifiable pride, of lasting satisfaction for each of us. Probing more deeply, we can see that we become co-creators with God in accomplishing his plan through our work.

The final concentric circle in which we exercise the role of protector is with society – our city, our nation, our world. Modern communication has shrunk the world into a neighborhood. By insisting on social justice originating in the Gospel and related to us through the teachings of the Church, we protect the life and dignity of all God’s children, our brothers and sisters in the world.

Pope Francis, invoking the values of his namesake, Francis of Assisi, calls for us to be protectors of creation and the environment. In so doing, we generate gratitude for the handiwork of God, come in contact with divine love and have insight into the responsibility entrusted to us. This highlights the remarkable gift that God has given to each of us so that we can freely love in response to all he has done for us.

Once again, it is very important that each of us asks ourself: what has this day meant to me? What do I take home from it? What difference at all is it going to mean to me? I suggest Pope Francis in his description of Joseph as protector is applicable to all of us and helps answer these questions. It sets a framework for the relationships of our lives. It helps to distill all we have heard, to organize it and to make a difference in the concrete realities of our life. It helps us to live better, to be more attuned to what really counts and is of lasting value.

Like you, I have had friends who have faced the news of cancer in their lives. At first, it's very sobering and depressing. Earthly existence is contracted to a very limited scope.

But then, through the marvel of medicine and the determination that comes from will power, the cancer is contained or eliminated at least for a time, and once again the broader horizon and vision of life return. The renewed approach to life, though, is nearly always purified. The person becomes attentive to what is truly expressive of God – living values that have eternal significance.

Our day together could be compared to this dynamic. We all have come with many limitations, a constricted view, a certain type of moral cancer if you will.

Given today's opportunity, we have applied the medicine that comes from communication with God and once again have been in touch with our inner self, with our determination to return and be faithful to our relationship with God. Hopefully we have focused our vision in a way that establishes healthy priorities. The light of God enables us to grow evermore into that very person who has been in God's eye for all eternity.

We owe an enormous gratitude to Deacon Tom Bradley and all of his generous associates who have organized and presented this day. They have invested so very much in their role as "protectors" of us to make this day remarkably valuable and beneficial for all of us. Heartfelt thanks to you, Tom, and your team. Muchas, muchas gracias.

