

By Tom Bengtson

## Best way to be a father? Love God and your wife

The two most important things a man can do to be a good father is to love God and to love his wife. I learned this watching my dad and now that I am attempting to live the lesson, I am convinced it is true.

One of my favorite ways to love God is through prayer. A father should make time to pray privately, with his spouse and with his family.

When I committed to starting each day with prayer, I was making a commitment to bring a little more order to my life. Getting up 15 minutes earlier so I can have personal prayer time means I have to pay attention to when I go to bed. Getting sufficient sleep is important, especially if I want to have a meaningful early-morning conversation with God. Getting to bed on time so I can start my day with prayer is good for me and it sets a great example for my kids.

I particularly like prayers of gratitude. It is so much more productive to focus on what I have rather than on the things I don't have. Of course, a bombardment of advertisements is constantly reminding us of the things we don't have. It is easy to dwell on what we want, but I have found that only fuels a temptation toward envy and greed. We all want things, but it is better to think mostly about what we have and to take a moment or two at the start of each day to let God know we appreciate those blessings.

Dr. Greg Popcak, who frequently contributes to this magazine, has often suggested that couples pray together. This is very good advice, as awkward as praying with someone else may feel on initial attempts. Any disagreement you may have had with your wife in the last few hours typically disappears when you kneel down next to her and

begin to pray. Again, I like the gratitude form of prayer and like to start by thanking God for my wife. The Rosary offers a great format for couples' prayers, with each spouse taking turns on every decade or even each bead if there's only time for a single decade.

At the end of the day, we are all typically tired but I have found it really is worth it to muster the energy for family prayer. For Susan and me, this means rounding up the four kids, who are likely scattered about the house involved in separate pursuits such as homework, playing, or watching something. The kids may express a certain measure of reluctance, but they actually appreciate the routine. I lead the family through a few prayers; we give thanks for the days' little victories and we pray for those with particular needs. The kids chime in with petitions about schoolmates, friends and teachers.

It is good for the kids, ages 7 through 14, to see Dad on his knees, praying to someone greater than himself. A father is priest of his domestic church but it is important for kids to understand that Dad would have no authority at all if he didn't acknowledge God, high priest of the universal Church.

There, also, are many ways to love your wife. Just ask her, and I bet she can give you all kinds of suggestions!

Pope John Paul II told us that the opposite of loving someone is to use them, so when I think about loving my wife, I first verify that I am not using her in any way. Over the years, we have written many times in *Family Foundations* how contraception reduces the dignity of a spouse by turning her into an object; objects are something we use. So one of the most important ways to love your wife is to practice natural family planning. NFP helps a man up-

hold the dignity of his wife.

Healthy relationships with God and wife put a father in a good place to love his children. As easy as it is for a man to use his wife, it is also easy for him to use his children. Some fathers, attempting to relive their youth, direct their unwilling kids into sports or other activities. They rob their kids of their youth by trying to recapture their own. If a man works to uphold the dignity of his wife, however, I think it is fair to assume he will be more attuned to potential attacks on the dignity of his children.

Christian fathers want all kinds of things for their children, but ultimately they want their kids to grow into saints. And we work hard over many years providing the direction, love, encouragement, discipline and help for them to do that. But I have found that God plays a funny little trick on us Christian fathers. While we are working to grow our kids into saints, God is working to grow us into saints. Fatherhood inevitably tests our patience, courage and fortitude. It can be frustrating and discouraging. But these are the tools God is using to build up our character.

Most of us came into marriage with selfish habits built up over decades of single living. Marriage and fatherhood help us break free of those habits. At first, I was only grudgingly willing to let go of my old ways. I resisted the increased responsibility that came with each child. But as the family grew, my heart softened. I found myself devoting more time to family and I didn't mind. In fact, I like it. God has completely changed me. I am sure that is why he made me a father in the first place. ■

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