

Last Saturday I concelebrated the ordination mass for now Fr. Simon Stehr. I've never missed the ordination mass as long as I've been ordained (except for the Covid year, when nobody could go). I never schedule anything for that day because when I celebrate the ordination of new priests, I remember my own ordination – 29 years ago now, and I'm renewed in my priesthood.

With the ordination last week, and next week being Father's Day Weekend, these two celebrations seem closely connected to me. A father is one who loves his family and proves it by providing for their needs. This isn't all he does, of course. He is meant to nurture, guide, teach, protect, and love.

But, in addition to all these other areas where our fathers have influenced us, I still think that it is in being the "provider" that a father takes a special pride. That is why it is so devastating to a man when he is out of work and can't provide for his family. Not that mothers don't also work and provide. But I think for fathers there is an especially deep emotional connection to this.

People sometimes ask me what I like most about being a priest. I could name many things because I love being a priest. But first and foremost, as a priest I am one who celebrates the Eucharist, the mass. I am not alone in this judgment. Ask priests what they enjoy most about the priesthood and most of them will tell you the same thing. To offer mass is the center of our lives. Why?

First, I think it is a matter of who we priests become at our ordination. We heard in today's gospel, that Jesus' heart was "moved with pity for the crowds because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd." Then, after He said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few," He summoned his twelve Apostles and appointed them to care for His sheep. In the Upper Room on the night before Christ died, He ordained the same Apostles to do as He did – to feed the spiritually hungry, to offer the sacrifice that Christ was offering the Father the next day on the Cross -- Himself. As priests we literally offer that very same sacrifice. That is our identity.

But when priests celebrate the Eucharist, we are also acting as fathers providing for our families. There is a reason Catholics have

traditionally called their priests “Father.” We provide our spiritual families with the Body and Blood of Christ, the food and drink necessary to survive and flourish spiritually. The Eucharist is our greatest good and our soul’s food, Jesus Himself under the appearance of bread and wine.

There is an old saying among priests. “Offer every mass as if it were your first mass, your last mass, your only mass!” I still remember my own first mass after my ordination. It was right here at St. Monica’s, at 11:00 AM on June 8, 1997. It’s a magical time, those first days after ordination. But through long use and our over-familiarity with sacred things we priests can take this greatest of gifts for granted. I pray that Fr. Stehr resists that trap.

But it is not only priests who are the answer to the needs of the harvest-master -- or who can take the Mass for granted. Today I ask you to remember that great reality and call ourselves back to a proper appreciation of it. I am especially speaking to you fathers today. I know that you want to care for the families God has given to you. I know that you have many worries and concerns for them. But today I want to ask

you to think and pray about how you provide for your families spiritually. That is your number one responsibility as a father – even more important than your work and providing for their material welfare – first you must ensure the spiritual health, and protect the eternal life, of your wife and kids.

That's your job: encouraging family prayer, setting the right priorities, protecting your children from spiritual dangers, seeing that your family gets to mass for their spiritual nourishment. In our first reading from Ezekiel, God describes Himself as Shepherd, and what that means: "As a shepherd tends his flock . . . so will I tend my sheep, I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark."

You are such shepherds! I think in our society we tend to assume that religion is primarily the wife and mother's job. Well, of course they have a big role to play too. But we underestimate the importance of fathers' participation in a family's spiritual life. In fact, our society does not appreciate the role of fathers enough. Maybe that's because so many children today do not live with their fathers, and we don't want to make

them feel bad. But we must reinforce the vital importance of fathers for our families, and society, or things will just get worse.

I will be at Sacred Heart next week for Father's Day, so I want to take this opportunity to say: Thank you, fathers, for being at mass today and leading by example. I know that the strongest families spiritually are those where the father and mother are both equally committed. Please continue to be such leaders. You would never let your family starve to death. Don't let their souls go hungry, bring them to the Eucharist.

As a Catholic priest I am traditionally called "Father," and around Father's Day I often get gifts and cards. But the best Father's Day gift you can ever give me, or any priest, is to enjoy and appreciate what he "works for" and provides for you, His family: the Eucharist -- the Bread of Life that unites and sustains us as God's family.