

Pulled Quote: “Every man is a beloved son of our eternal Father. There’s nothing sentimental about that statement; in fact, it’s a stiff dose of realism.” –Bishop John Folda

Headline: Beloved sons of the Father

In recent years, the Diocese of Fargo has sponsored conferences to foster the unique contributions that men and women make in their own families and in the Church. Men and women have distinct gifts and needs, and it has been a joy to see Catholic men and Catholic women gather in prayer, solidarity, and celebration of our faith. This month we will hold another Catholic men’s conference, and it seems that the time is right.

There’s a notion in some quarters that religion is for women, that prayer and devotion, or even going to church, are not manly activities, things that men just don’t do. Of course, a vast number of faith-filled men would disagree, but men do face real challenges in living out their faith and their relationship with God. Contrary to what many might think, there is nothing more manly than becoming a friend and companion of Jesus, becoming his disciple and joining one’s life to his. There was nothing unmanly about Jesus of Nazareth, who fasted and walked alone through deserts and willingly touched lepers, who faced down the most powerful men in Jerusalem, and who gave his life for those he loved rather than take an easier way. If we’re looking for an image of manliness, we need look no further than Jesus himself.

Some say that there is a crisis of faith among men, and many men do indeed struggle with faith, wondering if Catholic Christianity is for them. However, just as the Gospel of Christ was suited to the men of his time, including many who died for that faith, so does our Christian faith have just as much relevance in the lives of men today as it ever did. Faith in Christ is not a passive experience, but demands our engagement on every level of our lives. C.S. Lewis described Christianity as a “fighting religion.” He meant that living the Gospel involves striving and struggle against evil and for the good. As Archbishop Charles Chaput said, “Men need a challenge... Men are most alive when they’re giving themselves to some purpose higher than their own comfort.”

Whether they are husbands, fathers, or single, men are called to a vigorous life of virtue and heroism. Taking their lead from Christ and the saints, their battle weapons are mercy, patience, generosity, forgiveness, a strong personal witness of faith, and speaking the truth with love. In a culture that is indifferent or even hostile to faith, men need courage to live lives of justice and to be the heroic disciples that Jesus invites them to be. Our culture needs strong, Catholic men to protect, to build up, and to lead, and if they don’t, then others with less wholesome motives will take their place. Husbands have a unique calling to love and support their wives, cherishing the one who will accompany them through this life, helping her to become holy, and traveling with her to the eternal joy of heaven. The virtues of fidelity, generosity, and self-sacrifice are always in season, but in our narcissistic times they are needed especially now by husbands.

No one questions the important role of a mother in the faith life of a family, but studies of religious practice show that the role of the father is just as necessary or even more so. If a father actively practices his faith, the likelihood that his children will also practice the faith as adults grows substantially. If he doesn’t, then it becomes much more likely that his children will also give up the practice of the faith. It stands to reason that a father who has the eternal well-being of his children at heart will take an active part in living and sharing the faith with them. Just as he would want to assure their security, health, education, and happiness on this earth, even more should he want to assure their eternal happiness with God in heaven. Every father is called by God to be a faith leader in his own family, which is the domestic church, the church of the home. Every father has an indispensable part to play in the eternal salvation of his children, a part that no one else can play.

Single men have a unique ability to live lives of generosity and sacrifice. Without the responsibility of a spouse or children, they can give of themselves and reach out to many others who are looking for friendship, or who need the strength of a companion on the journey. Rather than turning in on himself, the single man can be a model of goodness in the image of Christ, and a brother to those he meets, a friend to those in need, and a man of prayer.

Every man is a beloved son of our eternal Father. There's nothing sentimental about that statement; in fact, it's a stiff dose of realism. We don't have to make ourselves into something artificial, because God has already made us for authentic greatness, and yes, for holiness. We have only to accept our unique call to Catholic manhood and cooperate with the grace of God that comes with that call. Our world and our Church need faithful Catholic men, men who have a hunger to be great, to be saints. The Church may face some challenges in the years to come, and the men of the Church need to stand up and lead by the witness of their lives at home, in their parish, and in the public square. If we're looking for examples, we can find them in abundance: St. Peter, St. Thomas More, St. John Paul II, Blessed Stanley Rother, and many others.

I invite all the men of our diocese to this year's Redeemed Conference for Men: "Beloved Sons of the Father." The conference will take place on Saturday, March 30, and will give us an opportunity to gather as brothers in the Lord, beloved sons of God our Father. There will be some talks, time for prayer, Confession, Mass, and fraternity with other Catholic men. All are welcome, young or old, married, widowed, or single, fervent or searching. This conference would be an excellent spiritual exercise for Lent that will resonate in our lives long past the celebration of Easter, and I hope to see an enormous crowd of you there. And, in case you're wondering, the next Redeemed Conference for Women will be in 2020!