

With the fourth Commandment, we are taught to honor our father and mother. Exodus 20:12 explains: “Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land the LORD your God is giving you.” The Hebrew term for honor calls for great respect. We recognize the importance of our parents with practical acts of kindness, affection, and care. The commandment may be easier to follow when one grows up in a healthy and balanced environment. The fourth Commandment however “does not speak of parents’ goodness; it does not ask that fathers and mothers be perfect.”ⁱ

Even with imperfect parents, children are still called to be thankful for the gift of life and to offer proper recognition to those who have brought us into the world. Years ago, I recall reading the story of a woman who had a very difficult childhood because her father was not a good man and did many things that she could have justifiably held against him for a lifetime. In his old age, the father was feeble and needed a lot of family care. Rather than respond with an eye for an eye for the painful memories of her childhood, she responded with love. She responded as Christ did in offering his life on the cross for our salvation. She saw past her own hurt and cared for her father with the compassion of Jesus.

Regardless of the merits of our own parents, we have a Father in heaven that we are called to honor. And let us not forget that on the cross Jesus offered us his Mother as a Mother for humanity. “The enigma of our lives is illuminated when we discover that God has always prepared for us a life as his children, where every act is a mission received from him.”ⁱⁱ With God as our Father, or the Immaculate Mary as our own mother, our own failings and imperfections are all the more glaring.

Let us recall the words of the Angel Gabriel to a confused Mary who wondered how she could possibly be the mother of Jesus. With God, all things are possible (Lk 1:37). Our wounds become strengths as we allow God to heal the pain of imperfect parents. The harm we have caused through our own imperfection, is forgiven as we forgive others. Jesus rose from the dead to give us new life. With our cooperation and commitment, God has the power to overturn any injustice, to right any wrong, to heal any brokenness. We honor our parents with the freedom of adult children and with the merciful acceptance of their limitations.ⁱⁱⁱ

Pope Francis held a general audience on the fourth Commandment several years ago and he encouraged reconciliation between children and their parents:

Honor parents: they gave us life! If you are distant from your parents, make an effort and return, go back to them; perhaps they are elderly.... They gave you life. Then, there is a habit among us to say bad things, even to curse.... Please, never, never ever insult other people’s parents. Never! One should never insult a mother, never insult a father. Never! Never! Take this interior decision yourselves: from now on I will never insult anyone’s mother or father. They gave life!^{iv}

Life is a gift. Thank your parents. Even with all of their imperfections, we can learn and grow from their experiences and the way they have tried to shape our lives.

Born again in the waters of Baptism, we truly have only one Father, the one in heaven. As Saint Paul teaches us:

“Live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:1-6).

ⁱ Pope Francis, General Audience, September 19, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.