

Fatherhood, a Call to Heroism

Heroes rise to the occasion under many circumstances, but fatherhood itself is a call to heroism, say Bishop Thomas Olmsted, Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers and leaders of Catholic men's ministries.



Fathers are called to guide their children to holiness. (photo: Shutterstock)

During the horror of yet another school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, last month, there arose a stark contrast. A troubled young man raised without a father ended many lives while a husband and father rushed into the school ahead of police to save lives. Off duty, Border Patrol agent Jacob Albarado was in the neighborhood at the barber shop when his wife, who is a teacher at the school, texted: "There's an active shooter. Help. I love you." Their daughter was also in the school.

Albarado, armed with the barber's shotgun, entered the building and began clearing classrooms. "I wasn't just trying to save my child. I was trying to get as many people out of there as I could," he later recalled.

Universal Call

Heroes rise to the occasion under many circumstances, but fatherhood itself is a call to heroism. "Fatherhood changes history, and all men are called to heroic fatherhood in some way," retiring Bishop Thomas Olmsted of the Phoenix Diocese told the Register. "Living your vocation to fatherhood, whether in marriage, the priesthood or religious life, is essential for living in the fullness of the meaning God has for your life."

Bishop Olmsted wrote "Into the Breach" in 2015 as an apostolic exhortation to Catholic men. "Men, do not hesitate to engage in the battle that is raging around you, the battle that is wounding our children and families, the battle that is distorting the dignity of both women and men," he wrote. Bishop Olmsted challenged men to "step into the breach" to fill the gap that leaves families vulnerable to attack if they are not there to defend them.

"My Catholic sons and brothers, we can only build a certain foundation for masculinity on the rock, Jesus Christ," Bishop Olmsted wrote. "We look to our Savior to be transformed in him, to be the men we are called to be and to let others see him in us."

To fulfill this mission, he told men to pray, read the Bible, examine their conscience daily, attend Mass weekly and go to confession weekly, and to build a fraternity with Catholic men for support and growth in faith.

Male Fellowship in Christ

Taking Bishop Olmsted's exhortation to heart, the Knights of Columbus developed a 12-week parish video series called *Into the Breach* covering issues including masculinity, fatherhood, spiritual warfare and the sacramental life. The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Bismarck, North Dakota, offered the series to men three years ago and then continued the weekly men's fellowship with videos and articles to spur discussions.

Collin Engelhardt, the father of four who heads up the group, explained that the goal is to grow in a relationship with Jesus Christ while offering fraternity to men.

“A lot of men may not have other dads to bounce things off of,” he said. “This fraternity is a great resource to build each other up in our relationship with Christ and support one another in the call to get our families to heaven.”

The family stands at the center of the struggle of good and evil, according to Mark Hartfiel, vice president of Paradisus Dei, a ministry nurturing strong marriages and families. “We want to help men understand their role as husband, father and leader,” he said. “They lead by laying their life down for their family.” That kind of heroism, Hartfiel explained, is exemplified in their *That Man Is You!* leadership program, calling men to the blessing of serving their families.

We Need Fathers

Studies consistently show that homes without fathers suffer increased emotional, mental, economic and spiritual problems, Hartfiel noted. However, he said that men need to do more than simply live under the same roof; they must be present to their families.

“My mind goes back to Adam and Eve,” he said. “Where is Adam when Even is being tempted? Many theologians believe he was on the sidelines doing nothing.” Instead, he said, men can look to St. Joseph as an example of a man of action, always responding to God’s call to protect his family.

“It is a crisis that 24 million children live without their biological father in the home,” Hartfiel noted. “If it was classified as a disease, the lack of fatherhood would be pandemic.”

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, author of *Behold the Man: A Catholic Vision of Male Spirituality*, pointed out that the responsibility of fatherhood is shown in the Book of Genesis when Adam was entrusted with everything in the Garden of Eden. Likewise, he said, fathers are entrusted to care for and protect their families following the example of Jesus. “Jesus said, ‘I have not come to be served but to serve,’ and ‘The greatest among you will be the servants of all,’” Deacon Burke-Sivers said. “I see it as my job to help children understand their place in the world and foster [a] deep, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and get to heaven.”

Deacon Burke-Sivers shared examples of ways he spends time with his four children such as a guys' night out and taking his girls out to dinner, thereby creating opportunities for communication. "I want to foster an environment where we can have conversations about what is going on in the culture to help them navigate that with a strong foundation in the Catholic faith."

He cited the Marvel movies and others in that genre doing so well at the box-office, suggesting that people are yearning for heroes. "In [*Avengers:*] *Infinity War*, Ironman sacrificed his life so other people could live, willingly, just like Christ. Even though it's fiction, it's so attractive because people admire those same values in very manly roles, protecting and serving."

"What makes me heroic is not tremendous deeds of strength, but cooperating with Christ," Deacon Burke-Sivers explained. "My power comes from Christ and the grace of the sacraments. Success is how much we give to others and pass that onto our children: That is how I can be a hero."

Men lacking good relationships with their own fathers can still be good fathers themselves, he said. "A deep and rich relationship with Jesus Christ is where we find our fullest self and identity, not in the past."

A strong focus on fatherhood is part of Exodus 90, a 90-day spiritual exercise for men based on three pillars: prayer, asceticism and fraternity. James Baxter, the co-founder and CEO, referencing fathers, said, "It's not a stretch to say that the future of the Church depends upon them. It's about building up the future of the Church by influencing men to greater intimacy with God and for that to reverberate into his marriage and family life."

Heroism can seem unattainable for regular guys, he said. "But when I look at my life, I'm struck by the men that have proved themselves to be heroes over time. It's the men like my father and father-in-law who love unconditionally, who are consistent, and who I can count on even if only just to be there when times are tough. It's not the ones who talk the big game, but the ones who image the Father God without even knowing or understanding the significance that their presence has upon me."

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