

The Image of “Church as Mother”

As we celebrate Mother’s Day, I’d like to come back to a theme that Pope Francis often refers to: “Church as mother.”

Pope Francis says, “I like this image a lot, as it seems to me that it tells us not only how the Church is, but also shows us the face of the Church, this Church of ours, should increasingly show” (Wednesday General Audience, September 18, 2013).

The Pope starts by reminding us what a mother does for her children. First of all, the Holy Fathers says, “she teaches us how to proceed in life... she orientates us, she always tries to show us the right path in life in order to grow and become adults. And she does this with tenderness, with affection, with love, always – even when she tries to correct our path because we lose our way a little or take routes that might lead us to a fall.”

My mother, Olga – God bless her, taught me as a young boy about God, about love, and the importance of family and friends. She taught me about caring for neighbours. For example, an elderly lady in her eighties lived not far from our home in Lavoy. Each day someone in our family was called upon to check in on “babunia” or great-grandmother, though we weren’t related. Babunia lived in a small house without electricity, heat or running water. When I was old enough, my turn came to bring babunia groceries, wood, coal, water, whatever she needed. It was quite the honour, even though I confess at times I would rather be playing with my friends. My mom also taught me my daily prayers – the Our Father, the Hail Mary, how to make the sign of the Cross, and the Ten Commandments – in Ukrainian I might add, and before I attended my first-ever summer Catechism program with the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate at the age of 5 (mom didn’t want the Sisters to think that she neglected her duty as a mother in passing down the faith to her children!).

Like a mother, like my mother, the Church does likewise. Pope Francis says, the Church “orientates our lives, she offers us instruction on how to walk in the right path.” Take the Ten Commandments: “they concern our way of behaving towards God, towards ourselves and toward others, just as a mother teaches us how to live well.”

Secondly, the Holy Father says, “when a child grows and becomes an adult... and assumes his or her responsibilities... they do what they want, and at times, they may happen to stray away from the path... A mother always, in every situation, has the patience to continue to accompany her children. She is animated by the strength of love... and even when her children make mistakes, she always finds a way of understanding them... to help them.”

Right after high school, my brother and sisters left home to look for work and start lives of their own. Mom, and dad, always expressed an interest in how things were going. They shared in our joys and successes, and they offered a shoulder to cry upon when things weren’t going so well. Even today, when my brother and sisters speak among ourselves, when we ask, “Are you going home for the weekend,” “home” always means mom and dad’s, where we grew up together, and learned to love and to cry together.

“The Church is the same,” says Pope Francis, “she is a merciful mother who understands, who always tries to help, to give encouragement even when her children have made mistakes or continue to do so. She never closes the doors of her house to them: she does not judge, but rather

offers God's forgiveness, she offers her love to invite her children to return to the right path and even when they have fallen into the deepest abyss, the Church is not afraid to enter into their darkest night with them in order to give them hope."

Finally, the pope says, "a mother also knows how to ask, to knock on every door for her children, without calculation but with love. And I think of how mothers know, most of all, how to knock on God's door! Mothers pray a lot for their children, especially for those... most in need."

My dad doesn't hear well. He lost his hearing in a near-death car accident when I was a young boy. I'm grateful to God that he's still with us, approaching his 89th birthday! It was mom who laid awake in her bed each night, listening, awaiting the safe return of her children from volleyball or basketball practice or a game, a night out with friends, or an all-night "drive-in movie." She kept constant vigilance in prayer. And even when we moved away from home, in search of adventure and excitement, mom's prayers carried and sustained us over the years.

Pope Francis says, "The Church does likewise: through prayer, she places the lives of all her children in the hand of the Lord...."

The Holy Father concludes, and so "we see in the Church a good mother who shows us the path to walk in life, who is always patient, merciful and understanding, and knows how to place us in God's hands."

As we celebrate Mother's Day, we offer a word of prayer and thanksgiving to God for all moms who have showed us love and raised us to be who we are today.

Happy Mother's Day to all moms!

And to my mom, Happy 88th birthday! I love you!

Bishop David