

Reflection on fatherhood - Charles Clinton
Weekend of June 20-21, 2020
All Saints Church

When Fr. Fred asked me to do a reflection on fatherhood, I was honored to have been considered. It is overwhelming to know where to begin when there is so much that could be said about being a father. At the same time, it is humbling because there are so many who could say much more than me. I will do my best to express my thoughts in 10 short reflections:

1. Please close your eyes. Imagine you're holding a newborn baby. What are your hopes for that baby? What are your concerns? You may open your eyes.

A few years before I was a father, I remember holding my newborn cousin, Malachy, in the hospital. Recently married, I recognized that I could soon be holding a child of my own some day. I recall thinking, "This child has so much to learn! He is so dependent on others! And, he has much to offer the world!" Having a child would be such a great opportunity and also such a tremendous responsibility.

2. A mother has a unique bond with a baby, having experienced him or her growing within her for 9 months, but being a new father, at least for me, was both mysterious and magical! I remember thinking when Sophie was born, "Here is this baby for whom I am partly responsible! I have been talking to her and singing to her for months, but now she has arrived! She had a rough delivery so while we can see her, we cannot yet hold her. She is beautiful! She has come with no instructions, but there are certainly many who can help me figure out what to do. I barely know how to be an adult, let alone be a parent." I tried to remind myself that God does not give us more responsibility than we can handle.
3. I have found that being a father gets better at each stage. We can think back with nostalgia to the earlier stages of our children's lives, but I have found that the best thing is to love and enjoy our children for the people they are at this moment. A wise colleague once told me: you'll save yourself a lot of frustration if instead of trying to get your kids to get excited about *your* activities, you get excited about *their* activities. Another wise person pointed out that you need to love your children for who they are, not who you *want* them to be.
4. Being a father has made me want to be a better version of myself, modeling, demonstrating consistency, capitalizing upon teachable moments, sacrificing time, energy and resources for the betterment of others, seeking to love unconditionally as our

heavenly Father loves us. I am reminded of Fr. Anthony DeMello's quote: "Look at God looking at you and smiling."

5. Being a father requires on-the-job training and learning from our mistakes. I am reminded of the summer when my son, John, was 6 years old. We were at a park playing catch with a tennis ball when the ball fell into a pond. I stood on some rocks on the water's edge, but I could not quite reach the ball. The pond had a thick green layer of scum on its surface, but I was determined to retrieve the ball and resume our game. Since my arms weren't long enough to reach down to the ball, my thought was to hold 6-year old John by the ankles so that he could grab the ball--I think you can see how this could end badly! Well, I lost my footing on an unsteady rock and we both plunged into the pond's green slime, me up to my waist while John, with his ankles held high above his head, bore the brunt of it and met the slime head first. He was completely covered in green!

With brilliant ideas like my ball-retrieval plan, it's a wonder that God allows some of us to continue to be unsupervised around our kids, and even more amazing that my son did not disown me. But, God is forgiving and children are resilient!

6. As a father, I am constantly drawing upon the influences of others. First, my own amazing parents and all the lessons they taught me that I didn't appreciate at the time. Of course, I am constantly learning from my incredible wife and life partner, Katie, as well as members of my family and community, and my three wonderful kids. But when I reflect on being a father, I think particularly about my own father and all that he taught me by his quiet example: patience, thoughtfulness, deferred gratification, appreciation of nature, gratitude, how to seek wisdom through prayer and self-reflection, how to treat others with respect, how to never complain or focus attention on himself, how to find the best in everyone and how to be a gentleman.
7. For me, some of the distinct joys of being a father include hiking and camping in the Adirondacks with my son, John; when we're on a family walk and my daughter, Molly, takes my hand; when my daughter, Sophie, engages me in a thoughtful conversation about social justice or shares a video that makes both of us laugh out loud. As people always want to point out, the years seem to go by faster and faster. Before you know it, you have a high school graduate! But, I believe, if you take time to enjoy each day with your kids and reflect on the blessing that they are in your life, you will have nothing to regret.

8. I read recently that a parent should make 100% of the decisions for a newborn, yet 0% of the decisions for an 18-year old. Sophie is about to turn 18 at the end of the summer, so based on that scale, we should be making less than 1% of the decisions for her. That's easier said than done! At this point, it is about trusting that we have done the best we can as parents, knowing that she will make mistakes, but confident that her guardian angel will always accompany her.

When Katie and I don't know how to handle a particular parenting situation, we lift it up. We try to let go and let God. I am certain that being a father has increased my faith since there is so much that I cannot control. I need to trust that if I focus on loving my children, God will guide me and will take care of the rest.

9. Every father wants the best for his children, but it should not be seen as a zero-sum game. When we see all children in our local community as well as our global community as "our children" we grow in grace as we begin to see them as God sees them. Each child is a gift to our community and, especially as fathers, we must embrace the opportunity to mentor, model, teach and coach. The expression "it takes a village" has become cliché, but it's true. And, we must do more than simply pay lip-service to this idea. We *all* must be invested in the success of *all* of our children.
10. While society may limit Father's Day to men who have children of their own, I have come to adopt the broader, more inclusive definitions of fatherhood and motherhood celebrated at All Saints. So, today let's pray for our fathers, but also let's acknowledge those who mentor and guide our youth as father-figures, our mothers--without whom there can be no fathers, all those who are estranged from their fathers, those who have lost their fathers or who never knew their fathers. Let us pray that all of us who share this tremendous opportunity, this awesome responsibility of being a father may embrace this role as our primary occupation. Let's pray that God will continue to bless us and guide us. I thank God--and my children--for the joy that being a father has given me! Happy Father's Day! Amen.