

## “OUR FIRST AND BEST TEACHERS” HONORING OUR MOTHERS

“Does your mother work or is she a homemaker?” “Yes,” came my terse reply. Even as a teenager, I instinctively knew that I rejected the premise of the question. I rejected it because it created a false dichotomy. I recall the 1983 film “Mr. Mom” starring Michael Keaton. His character Jack Butler unexpectedly loses his job as an engineer at an auto manufacturing plant. After struggling to find another job, his wife (portrayed marvelously by Terri Garr) lands a high paying position at an advertising agency. Their roles are suddenly reversed. As she leaves work for the first day, he tries to impress his wife’s new boss by suggesting... “Honey, if you call and I’m not here, I’ll be at the gym or at the gun club.” To say he was in for a rude awakening was a gross understatement. Soon he is pleading– “Kenny, don’t paint your sister!” Though I chuckled at that comedy as a college seminarian, I gained respect for the tremendously challenging role of homemakers and instantly felt a deeper call to celibacy!

Did my mother work (i.e. outside the home) or not? While I acknowledge the legitimacy of the question, it remained fundamentally flawed. However unintentionally, it missed the reality of the complicated and multifaceted lives of mothers. Fast forward 35 years, and consider the plight of busy moms today. According to the **Bureau of Labor Statistics**, in 2017, 33.6 million families included children under age 18, representing about 41.0 percent of all families. Among married-couple families with children, 96.9 percent had at least one employed parent, and 61.9 percent had both parents employed. But the 61.9% figure is absolutely staggering to me! I am continually amazed at how mothers can do it.

As a secular holiday, Mother’s Day has existed for 110 years. Observed on the second Sunday of May, it was formally recognized as a national holiday by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914. A woman by the name of **Anna Jarvis** of Grafton, West Virginia began promoting a day for all mothers several years before. As it turns out, it soon became so commercialized, that the very woman who did more than any other to promote the day, later regretted it. Yet fittingly, a day to honor mothers takes place in many countries throughout the world. Motherhood is an indispensable component of every family and of a truly healthy society.

I still tear up if I see a particular scene from the film, *The Passion of the Christ*. While watching Jesus carry his Cross to Calvary, Mary has flashbacks, depicting her reaching out to assist Jesus when he fell. It was the most moving scene in the entire film for me, and I doubt I am alone. As time marches on, more of my friends have experienced the loss of their mothers, and I am left to imagine the pain they must experience. I treasure the time I am able to spend with members of my family, including of course, my own parents. Blessed with good health, I am grateful for the joy that I continue to experience through them. My mother suffered a nasty fall last week, one that is requiring some rehab as well as discussions about the future with respect to their home of 52 years in St. Paul. It is one of those “life moments” as a dear friend shared with me, and we’ll make the necessary adjustments, whatever it may entail. But I’m not going to lie– it’s plain hard on her and us.

My favorite paintings of the Blessed Mother have always been those that include the infant Jesus in her arms (e.g. Salvi, Sassoferatto, and Raphael). In the case of Marian sculptures, I am particularly drawn to the image of the *Pieta*, showing Mary holding the lifeless body of her Son following His deposition from the Cross. We are so blessed with a replica in the Founder’s Chapel here. Michelangelo’s *Pieta* is unique as the only work of art he ever signed, carving his name into the sash running across Mary’s chest: MICHAELA[N]GELUS BONAROTUS FLORENTIN[US] FACIEBA[T] (Michelangelo Buonarroti, Florentine, made this). Images of the *Pieta* poignantly reflect the immense love, reflective of mothers of every era in human history. Today is an important opportunity to recognize the many sacrifices that our mothers have made to our own spiritual and moral development. Motherhood is arguably the most vital vocation in the world.

In his 1995 Apostolic Letter “On the Dignity of Women,” St. Pope John Paul II elaborated on Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* writing: “...man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (no.7). Man and woman were created by God out of love and were created with the capacity to love and be loved and, in loving, to find their ultimate fulfillment. We cannot

understand the dignity and **vocation** of women if we depart from this reality: she was created to love. “The dignity of women can only be measured by the order of love” (cf. *MD*, 29). Mary gave her “Yes,” her *fiat* and renewed her commitment time and again. We offer profound gratitude to our mothers today. For me (and I suspect for so many of us), our mothers have been our first and best teachers in the faith. May God abundantly bless our mothers today and always.

- Speaking of holidays– the St. Paul Public School Board is primed to drop a policy that discouraged school “programs and festivities arranged to celebrate holidays and other special days, and shall strive to eliminate them, except where such observances are required by law.” This was under the guise of preserving a “culture of tolerance and respect for all.” Perhaps they realized that in so doing, they actually were intolerant of all except blatant secularists.
- A recent issue of **Architectural Digest** contained an article entitled “The Most Iconic Building in Every State in America.” Guess which building was selected for Minnesota? Bingo– we were! Other states winners include: Iowa (State Capitol); Wisconsin (Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin in Spring Green), New York (Empire State Building) and Kentucky (Churchill Downs). See [architecturaldigest.com](http://architecturaldigest.com) and click the Architecture +Design link.
- The disagreement among German bishops over whether to permit Protestant spouses to receive Holy Communion at Catholic weddings is showing no signs of dissipating. I hope and pray for clarity; our faith is strongest when we speak with one voice on key issues.
- The recent **New York Met Costume Gala** centered upon the theme of “Fashion and the Catholic Imagination.” Regardless of whether the Church had foreknowledge of specific costumes, the image of Rihanna in her papal “ensemble” topped with a jewel encrusted Mitre was plastered on the front page. The museum exhibit is quite different from the Gala that precedes it and I seek no “retreat” from the world. But neither am I naïve about the price we pay when tacitly allowing the appropriation of Catholic symbols in the secular sphere. One person’s “fascination” with Catholic symbolism easily appears as sacrilege to others.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector