Both the first reading and the gospel use the image of parents to draw us closer to God. Isaiah uses the image of a mother, while Jesus uses the father image. What both are saying by using these images is that knowing what good parents are like helps us to know what God is like, since God is the source of all good things – the greatest parent of them all. And knowing this should deepen our trust that God truly is with us and for us always.

These past few weeks as the college basketball season is coming to a climax I have found myself thinking quite often of Pat Summit, the legendary coach of the Tennessee Lady Vols, who passed away this year after a courageous battle with early onset Alzheimers. I remember reading in her memoir, *Sum It Up*, about her parents. So in light of today’s readings, I went back and read some of it again. She had quite a bit to say about her parents, their parenting and the great influence they had on her life. Her father was a strict disciplinarian who worked his children hard on their farm, pushed them to do well in school, and was quick to punish quite severely any misbehavior. Pat’s mom, on the other hand, was quiet, hard-working, and more of the nurturing type.

Pat wrote a lot about how hard it was at times growing up as their daughter. But she also spoke about how blessed she was to grow up as their daughter, because there was never one minute when she doubted that her parents loved her, that they were with her and for her all the way, and that whatever they did – even the painful stuff -- they did for her good. Her growing up in their household makes for fascinating reading, and I recommend it to you.

Parents do come in all shapes and sizes, personalities and temperaments. Some are strict and some are lenient; some push hard and some are more easy-going; some are always on the go and some prefer to stay at home; some are comic and some are more serious; some talk a lot and some hardly talk at all. But the one thing that all good parents have in common is that their concern is always for their children’s good -- and their children know it. I am blessed to have had such parents, as are many of you. Also, like many of you, while I didn’t always like their way of parenting me, there was never a moment that I doubted their love for me, and their willingness to do all they could to promote my well-being.

So we can understand why Isaiah and Jesus would use the images of mother and father to move us Godward. Isaiah speaking for God says, “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget you, I will never forget you.” Now I, for one, could never imagine my mother being without tenderness for me, or ever forgetting me. To her dying breath, I was as certain as I could be about anything, that she loved me with a great love. But then, that’s just Isaiah’s point. To speak of such loving mothers was his way of speaking of the immensity of God’s love for us. He could have said it this way instead, “You know how much your mother loves you? Well, God loves you even more.” Isaiah saw all loving mothers as a reflection of the love that brought us into being -- a love that will never abandon or forsake us.

Jesus uses the father image in a similar way. What he is saying in today’s gospel is that if you trust that your father will do everything he can to see to it that you have all you need to be whole and healthy, God can be trusted to do even more. For God is the Father of all fathers. And knowing this, we can be freed from always worrying about whether we have enough of this or that, because God always has more than enough to provide for our needs, and in ways that he knows better than us.

The mother and father images, as they are used by Isaiah and Jesus, definitely do promote the movement of our lives Godward. They create in us a desire to share life with God, to live in unbroken communion with him always. But, sadly, we know that these images don’t work for everybody because their mothers or fathers have abandoned or mistreated them in some way. And because of this, saying that God is like a mother or father, doesn’t necessarily have a positive impact on them because it raises so many negative memories and feelings.

I definitely experienced this often during my time on the South Side of Columbus. I remember quite vividly a day when the weather was so bad that school was cancelled. Two young girls rang the
doorbell at St. Ladislas. Kathy, our administrative assistant, and I brought them into the office and asked how we could help them. They said that they wanted to use our phone so they could call a relative to come and get them. When we asked them why, they said that their father no longer lived with them and their mother hadn’t been home for the past four days. An older brother was there who was treating them badly. And there was hardly any food in the house. Clearly, using the parent image would not have helped these girls come to a fuller embracing of the God who loves them. And there are many children in similar situations. In fact, in a conversation I had with the program coordinator of the Boys and Girls Club of Columbus, who had just established a program in that area, he told me that ninety-three percent of those who came to their gathering place came from one parent families. And while many of those parents were working hard to care of their children, many were not.

So what can we do to help these children know that there is a God who loves them greatly? Well, the encounter with those two young girls helped Kathy and me learn a little something about this. Of course, we did everything we could to make them feel welcome and to show them that we cared. We spent some time with them, found out a little bit more about them, listened intently as they told us about their life, and helped them try to make some family contacts. Kathy asked if it would be okay to speak with their school counselor about their situation. And they said yes. She offered them some refreshments. And before long, one of the girls started asking about the church and about being baptized. What had moved her in this direction is that someone from the church obviously cared about her. And this had moved her Godward.

It seems to me that this is one thing we Christians can do to help people to at least consider the possibility that there is a God who loves them, who is with them and for them to help them along life’s way. For starters, we can treat people with kindness. We can greet those we encounter throughout the day with a smile. We can speak a word of encouragement to those who seem to be struggling. We can take a few minutes to actually listen to someone. We can show some patience for those whose life’s difficulties and stresses have pushed them to be inconsiderate, short-tempered, or distracted. And we can remind ourselves often enough of God’s love and care for us that we will radiate a good bit of joy and peace as we go about our day’s activities, and in the process perhaps touch the life of someone who could really use a little dose of that joy and peace just to make it through their day.

We do this in hopes that when those who are not blessed with loving parents hear someone say that their heavenly Father loves them, they will know something of what that love is like and how good it is, because they will have caught a glimpse of it in us. And how wonderful it would be if in treating others well, kindly and lovingly, we could help even one to begin moving Godward.

Fr. Rod Damico
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