

Memorial of Sts. Timothy and Titus
January 26, 2011
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2 Timothy 1:1-8

Psalm 96

Mark 4:1-20

I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart! I've got that joy, joy, down in my heart, down in my heart to stay.

After celebrating the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul yesterday, today in our Mass we remember two of his spiritual sons: Timothy and Titus. Today's memorial and the readings for it give us some important insights on spiritual parenthood.

Today is one of those rare days when the Church gives us alternatives for which reading to use as our first reading. In each case, it is a letter from Paul to a spiritual son: one to Timothy; one to Titus. In both cases, Paul is writing them likely near the end of his life, to pass along wisdom and to give them encouragement on how to carry forward their important missions as leaders of the church, in Ephesus and Crete, respectively, and on how to be good Christian men as they do so.

The fact that there are two letters, and that the letters are quite different, is an important reminder for those who are parents, whether natural or spiritual, although I guess most of us are spiritual parents, that no two children are alike, and therefore, that each one must be encouraged according to his or her own qualities, their own unique abilities, according to their unique circumstances.

For today's Mass I selected the letter to Timothy as it seemed particularly insightful for this special Mass, giving at least 3 insights on the relationship between spiritual parents and their spiritual children.

The first insight is that spiritual parents should provide for their children primarily by prayer. We hear Paul opening the letter by saying that he is constantly praying for Timothy. While they too should pray for their children, natural parents provide for their children by taking care of the material needs of their family. Every time I stay with my sister and her family, like I am doing this week, I am reminded just how much is involved in materially supporting a family; and I become ever more cognizant of the great sacrifices that natural parents make for their children... and the great dignity of their vocation. I also become ever more grateful to my own parents and all they have done for me. The primary role of the spiritual parent is not to support the spiritual child materially, but spiritually. While the spiritual support can take on different roles, including education and serving as a good example, there is none better or more important support than prayer.

Secondly, spiritual parents often don't have the up front seat on the lives of their children that natural parents do. Many of the sisters who have served as teachers know this quite well. They might have had a big impact on the lives of some of their students, but they may never learn about their impact. At the least, they usually don't get to see their spiritual children flower in the way that natural parents do. Being a spiritual parent, and a teacher in particular, involves a certain trust, that if we are faithful to our duties, if we are faithful to our vocation of planting seeds of truth, God will use our efforts in ways we can't predict to help the truth grow into faith. But often, this will occur in ways we will not have the privilege of seeing come to fruition. You

may recall that in one of the antiphons in the Liturgy of the Hours for yesterday's feast, Paul is quoted as saying: I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but it was God who gave the increase.

The third insight is the importance of natural and spiritual parents working in conjunction, in cooperation with one another in nurturing the faith in their shared children. In today's first reading, we hear Paul praising the faith of Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois. In this case, Paul's role as spiritual father was not to initially convert Timothy, but to help him grow; to encourage him to continue in the example that was set for him by previous generations. In the post-Vatican II Church, we explicitly recognize that natural parents are the primary educators of their children in the faith. Yet, despite that primary responsibility, we still have nuns and priests who dedicate our lives to be the spiritual parents who support the natural parents in the raising of children in the faith, and to the ongoing care of souls once the natural parents have passed on to eternity. That being said, what is described in the first reading is an ideal. Even the best natural parents are not perfect, and sometimes natural parents have not instructed their children in the faith because they do not themselves believe it. In such cases, the children are not doomed, nor is it impossible for them to be good Christians. But it does probably mean that the spiritual parent, and others brothers and sisters in Christ, are likely to have to take an even more active role in educating and encouraging the new Christian, the spiritual child, in the faith.

When I first read today's readings back in December, as I was starting my preparations for this homily, I developed a big smile: how fitting to have such readings on a day when I come here to Baltic, to celebrate my ordination with someone who played an important role in my development as a Christian. Someone who was like a Paul in my life; someone whose efforts was the catalyst for the first step on my path to the priesthood. Way back in first grade I was St. Joseph in the class Nativity play. After it was over, I used to play Mass using the great St. Joseph costume, which did not look all that different than your habits, that my mom made for me. In fact, as I sang the song at the start of the homily, which I believe I learned in first grade, I was tempted to change the question related to "I've got that joy, joy, joy," from "Where?" into "Why?" Because it is the answer to why that brings me to celebrate this Mass of Thanksgiving today.

In my case, that joy, joy, joy in my heart that lead to the love of Jesus being down in my heart is the result of having had people point me toward Jesus when I was young, like the Apostle Paul did for Timothy and Titus; like Timothy's grandmother and mother had done for him. First and foremost, it is the result of my parents Jerry and Mary Ann: of how they taught me the faith and have lived it out with remarkable fidelity over the years. But in addition to my parents who taught the faith in word and deed, there have been other spiritual parents in my life; one of the first of which, and one of the most important of which, was my first grade teach Mother Ruth.

At this Mass of Thanksgiving, as I make an offering of thanks to God for my vocation in a special way, I include a special thank you for and to Mother Ruth, for the way you were a spiritual mother working in conjunction with my natural parents in my earliest years of formation. Thank you, as well, to Sr. Bernadette for being such a teammate to Mother Ruth and for the positive impact you had on my sister's life. And thanks to all of you sisters for the sacrifices you have made in your lives to plant the seeds of truth in the lives of children which has allowed God to grow them into faith.

Let us all leave here today, whether we are natural parents or not, whether we are religious or not, with a strengthened resolve to be good parents to all people who God entrusts to

us in a special way: whether it be a calling to spiritual or natural parenthood. We do so recognizing that some of the seeds we plant will take years to bear fruit – perhaps 3 ½ decades as in the case we particularly recognize today – and sometimes our efforts will never be rewarded by the chance to see the results in this life; although we trust that in heaven we will be able to see all the fruit that was borne through our efforts. As we seek to fulfill our vocations, let us recognize that spiritual and natural parents are intended by God to work in cooperation with each other. And let us live our lives so that someday, we can be the catalyst for others being able to sing:

I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart! I've got that joy, joy, down in my heart, down in my heart to stay.