

Tonight I'll visit the Western Missouri Correctional Center to celebrate a Christmas mass with a few of the Catholic inmates. Most of the guys I see are sorry for the actions that put them there. They realize that being in prison they are hurting the people who mean the most to them, their family. During the prayer of the faithful at mass, I usually ask the men what they would like to pray for. The petition I probably hear the most is for their kids. All inmates wear a badge giving their name and number, and – in case you couldn't tell by the grey outfit they wear – their badge also carries in bold letters the word "offender". But many of them have a different identity written on their heart beneath the badge. That word is "father".

A similar thing is probably true of a very different group of people, the men and women serving in our armed forces in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Their uniform tells what rank they hold, but if they have a kid at home, the rank that means the most to them is father or mother.

Some parents face extraordinary challenges. I cannot comprehend the challenges that two regional fathers face – one in Skidmore, Missouri, the other in Melvern, Kansas. One mother murdered another, and the fathers are caught in a nightmare neither one of them ever predicted.

In the bible St. Joseph is the foster father of Jesus, and he too faced exceptional circumstances. His bride-to-be was found with child before they married. He was visited in dreams by an angel. He took his family on arduous journeys. He saw Mary give birth in a rough dwelling. He learned that the king wanted to murder the newborn baby. And when Jesus was 12, Joseph lost him in Jerusalem, thinking Mary was looking out for the child. Throughout all this, the bible never records a single word that Joseph spoke, but his actions show how ordinary people become extraordinary parents. They do it out of love.

Today there are too many deadbeat dads, fathers who helped create children but then stepped completely out of the picture – just because a kid was born. They make us appreciate the good parents who stick with it and face all the challenges in the life of their kids.

The book of Sirach says of children, "If you honor your father, you atone for sins. When you pray, you are heard. If you revere your mother, you store up riches. If you revere your father, you will live a long life, and if you obey your father, you bring comfort to your mother." Sirach continues, "Take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten."

On Holy Family Sunday we remember the love of the holy family, but we also stand in admiration of those fathers and mothers who carry out their responsibilities against all odds. And as children grow, we receive the challenge to care for those who cared for us.