

The Gift of Mothers

By Bishop Victor Galeone

As we approach another Mother's Day, I want to invite you to come back with me to Mother's Day 1970.

I had just sat down to have a light supper with my widowed mother before returning to the rectory. My mother was grieving because in less than a month she would be losing her "bambino." You see, my archbishop had given me permission to serve as a missionary in Peru for five years, and I would be leaving within a month.

The fact that I was 35 years old and a priest for ten years was trumped by my imminent departure for the Peruvian Andes, where I might meet with an untimely end - or so my mother imagined.

While having our soup, mother continued her complaining to the point that I blurted out an unkind remark. She started to cry.

"Mom, I'm sorry. I don't know what possessed me. Please forgive me." - "Oh, I'm not crying about that." - "Well, why are you crying?"

She continued: "I'm going to tell you something that I've told no one except your father. It was during the Depression years. The social worker came by to see how things were going. I told her that everything was fine except that I had missed two of my periods in a row.

" 'Oh that's very bad news, Signora Rita! I'll come back on Thursday afternoon and take you to see this doctor, and he will make your period come.' "

"I told her that I could never do that...that I would rather die first.

" 'What! You won't cooperate! Where's your husband?' - He's out looking for work. - 'Over two years without a steady job, and you won't cooperate! Three young mouths to feed already and you won't cooperate! When your husband returns, talk this over with him. If you don't cooperate, we just might take those two cards away from you. I'll see you on Thursday!' "

Two comments: Being the fourth child in the lineup, I was that "period." And the two cards referred to by the social worker were the one that entitled the family to receive a large bag of dried beans every two weeks, and the other was for an occasional delivery of coal during the winter.

My mother continued: "Two hours later, your father came home all frostbitten. As I helped him off with his coat, I told him that the social worker had stopped by. - "What did she want?" - I told her that I was expecting. She became very upset. She said that she'd be back on Thursday to take me to this doctor, who would make my period come. If I refuse to go, they might take our benefit cards away.

"Your father stood there for the longest while without saying a word. Finally, he spoke: 'Very well, let them! Let them have their cards back! The Lord will provide.' "

At that point, my mother got to her feet and knelt down beside me. "Mom," I insisted, "would you please stop this!" - "No, Let me finish!

"O Jesus, forgive me! I didn't want him then because of all our problems. And now I'm afraid of losing him? Forgive me, Jesus, please forgive me! You take him for your poor people in Peru. Thank you, Jesus! Thank you!"

On two occasions of my life, I stayed awake all night long. One was a case of food poisoning in Peru. The other was Mother's Day 1970. I tried to fall asleep, but to no avail. For the first time in my life - on learning how close I had come to not seeing the light of day - I fully realized what a precious gift life is.

Throughout the night, scenes from my boyhood intermingled with images of the heroine I had for a mother: "Hey, Victor, your Mom sure talks funny. I could hardly understand her." Gee, I wonder why my Mom can't talk nice English like all the other mothers can. "No, I could never do that! I would rather die first!" And she only went as far as the third grade in a backward school in Southern Italy. "Is that your grandmother?" No, that's my Mom. Her hair turned snow white when she was 30. She had me when she was 35. "At two months, all the major organs are formed and functioning. All that is required for birth is time and nourishment." - "No, I could never do that! I would rather die first."

I would like to close with the inspiring words that Cardinal József Mindzenty penned many years ago about motherhood:

"A Christian mother cannot claim the honor of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral - a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby's body. The angels have not been blessed with such a grace...God joins forces with mothers in performing this act of creation. What on God's good earth is more glorious than this - to be a mother?"