

"With a large family, we'll never be alone"

Daniel Plazek is a sales engineer from Pittsburgh, PA. He and his wife Luisa have 7 children, one of whom, Kathryn, is a numerary in Opus Dei. Daniel shares his perspective on marriage, fatherhood, and also offers some practical advice for young parents.

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Tell us a little about yourself and your family.

I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA. I am the middle of seven children. I was raised by my parents in the Church and lived a simple life... our big vacation was going to visit Grandma & Grandpa in Milwaukee.

That seemed exotic and far way! By God's providence, I met Luisa, my wife-to-be (from a family of ten) while studying at the University of Pittsburgh. She was majoring in electrical engineering, and was a year or two short of graduating when we got married. She made the courageous decision to leave her engineering studies behind and get a PhD in being a full-time mom. We have been happily married for 31 years and have seven children ranging from 12 to 27 years old (three wonderful daughters and four talented sons). We have been truly blessed with the opportunity to allow Luisa to stay at home and raise our

children. I witness the fruits of her labors in the growth of our children every day.

What do you do professionally and how do you combine that with being a dad?

For the last 16 years, I have been a sales engineer for a company that designs and manufactures test and simulation equipment for the aerospace and other industries. This job has required me to travel a lot and often be away from my family. This has been hard. However, I feel confident that God's vocation for me is to be provider and protector of my family. Bottom line: My marriage and experience as a father has strengthened me and made me better at what I do in my job. I know too many people who define themselves by their "career." I used to also. Now, I am defined by my true

vocation as husband and father... and I have a job too.

Pope Francis is asking us to pray a lot for the family right now. What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the family today?

We are in the world, but are called not to be of the world. We don't always like to think of how Satan is active in the world and revels in our sins and failures. There is no greater satisfaction he can gain than by pulling holy men and women, young and old, away from our Lord. You can see him on TV, at the movies, on the streets, in the gossip at work and even in children's books. We need to be vigilant! The Holy Father is right! We need to pray for good holy families to be protected, to grow in faith, hope and charity, to continue to be the foundational building block of society and to demonstrate to the world the joys of family blessings.

A family with 7 children is well-above the national average these days. Is it hard to be a father to 7 children? Are your children happy?

I have heard it takes about 2.3 children per family to just maintain a population. In the western world, most countries do not meet that criteria and so from a practical stand point, it is necessary to have children. But more importantly, living your marriage in cooperation with Natural Law rather than against it brings many blessings, including children. And what a blessing they are! Yes, there are challenges. It is hard work, it can be tiring and it costs money to feed, clothe, house and school them. But with God, all things are possible. With commitment to my marriage, the love of wife and mother and having the good Lord in my corner...seven doesn't seem so big.

I think my children all realize the advantages of coming from a large family and how they benefit and enjoy their siblings (well, most of the time). Even though they outnumber Mom and Dad, they never wanted for attention, support or help. We were and are always grateful for the opportunity to nurture and love our children (even as adults).

With a large family, we will never be deserted. We will never suffer alone. We will never be without support of one kind or another...and we will never forget how much God truly loves us as we see His love revealed in the love found on our family.

How do you see your role as father to your children?

Over the years, there were times I felt more like a chauffeur for my children than a father. I'd come home from being out of town and spend my evenings and weekends

driving my kids to and fro. But in hind sight, I can see that our little car chats driving to and from soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, basketball, play practices etc. were all opportunities to teach, love, understand and help my children.

I pray most of all, that I set an example to my children of how we all should live out the Gospel, to support and love the Catholic Church and live in obedience to God's plan for us. Being imperfect, I do rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit and the loving support and patience of my wife to help me strive to be a better father and husband.

Your two eldest daughters are now no longer at home: Erin recently got married while Kathryn has discovered a calling in the spirit of Opus Dei, which seeks to spread the sanctification of work, and is

living abroad. How have these changes affected your family?

Kathryn's calling to Opus Dei is nothing short of a great blessing to her and our family. I have always known her to be a bright, creative, and loving person. But her life as a numerary is manifested in the complete joy and abandonment to her calling. As I like to say, "when I grow up, I want to be just like my daughter!" We can see the love she has for God through the Work every time we talk, read her letters, Skype or on the great occasions of visiting her. As parents, to see your children grow up to be so happy, fulfilled, joyful and so committed to their Faith...well, isn't that the outcome for which we hope, work and pray?

My second daughter, Erin, was married to a fine young man last May. I could not be happier for them. The actual wedding was really

something. It was a milestone, not only for our immediate family but for both of our extended families, as this was the first marriage in this generation. It was a big family event. My biggest worry was not about how much it would cost, or where the reception would be or other logistics. It was the worry of whether I would cry like a baby as I escorted my daughter down the aisle. I managed to keep my composure for that.

A simple message: The wedding is but a day, the marriage is for a life time.

Luisa and I are blessed to have them live down the street from us and so in a very day-to-day way, we continue to see our daughter and new son-in-law grow in their new family life. We pray for them and trust their lives together will be filled with as many blessings as Luisa and I

have had as husband & wife and parents.

After almost 30 years of experience, what kind of advice can you offer to young parents?

After 30 years of a blessed marriage, I am still making mistakes and learning from them. But in the big picture, I offer these points of advice:

- 1) Keep God as the center of your life; in your marriage, your family, and your daily work.
- 2) He gave you a Church: use it, participate in it, benefit from it.
- 3) Embrace the Sacraments. All the graces that flow from them fortify you.
- 4) Pray together as a family. (Even a small blessing heading out the door on a busy day is a good and wholesome thing.)

5) Live out your wedding vows every day; to love and cherish each other. It is not always easy and fun. There will be times when you are hurt by or hurt the one you love. When that happens...see #1, 2, 3 and 4.

6) Learn your Faith, read about the lives of the Saints and teach it to your children at home and at Catholic school if possible. They ask: How do we feed a million starving children?... One child at a time. How do we convert the world?... One family at a time...and start at home.

7) All the troubles, trials and tribulations that this world will throw at you are manageable with His action in your life.

8) Finally on a practical note, more than not living above your means, live BELOW them. You'd be surprised how much you can do without and how blessed you will be from not only from having a little more in the

bank but also from having the ability to be more charitable.

What is your favorite part about being a dad?

I'm not sure I can say there is a favorite part of being a father. I've piled up so many experiences and memories as my kids grow: holding your new born, falling asleep while reading bedtime stories, all the birthday parties Mom magically pulled together, the Baptisms, simple family hikes in the woods, enjoying eating dinner together as a family, laughing hysterically while playing board games, the first Holy Communions, the first day of school, sled riding, teaching them how to drive, coaching their teams and even the trips to the emergency room. While each child is a unique blessing, sometimes it seems like I have one big baby memory where all the memories of the different children

merge together into one jubilant family remembrance.

I guess it is the totality of fatherhood that is the best part. It helps me be a better servant, a better husband, a better Christian, a better person.

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