

Father's Day – A Holiday or Holy Day?

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Father – The one who has the honor of offering the seed of new life; and hopefully he has the wisdom and love to guide that seed to its fruition. The value of a father cannot be overestimated.

“When a father gives to his son, both laugh; when a son gives to his father, both cry.” – William Shakespeare

Nourisher of the Lord

I'm always curious about the origin of celebrations and holidays. Who decided this day was going to be special and why? How was it originally celebrated, and how did it become popular enough to spread? A quick search on Father's Day gave me quite a surprise.

Dating back to at least the Middle Ages, in the Catholic traditions of Europe, it began as the *Feast Day of St. Joseph*. He being the putative father of Jesus, is also called the *Nourisher of the Lord*. The Franciscan order of the Catholic Church is attributed to celebrating St. Joseph's Day as far back as the 14th or 15th century. However, the Coptic Church, supposedly established by St. Mark in Egypt, is noted to have celebrated St. Joseph's Day as far back as the 5th century.

Wow! So this Holy Day started in celebration of a man who assumed the “role” of father, as opposed to being a celebration of biological fatherhood. Score one for taking responsibility!

Good Mothers Beget Good Fathers

These religious celebrations were brought to the Americas by the Spanish and Portuguese, however it was not officially recognized in the USA until recent history. Which makes me wonder if we would have even thought to invent such a day if it weren't for religious people. Reading on might make you wonder too.

Outside of Catholic traditions, Father's Day went a long course to be recognized. First came the establishment of Mother's Day in 1908, by Anna Jarvis – a Sunday School teacher, public school teacher and businesswoman, who wanted to pay tribute to all mothers because of her deep gratitude for her own mother. The first celebration was held at the St. Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, W. Virginia.



Recognizing the Sacrifice of Fathers

Not long after and not far away, someone decided that fathers deserved equal billing. The first observed “Father's Day” was held on July 5, 1908, in Fairmont, West Virginia, in the Williams Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church South, now known as Central United Methodist Church. This was in recognition of 361 local men who were killed in a mining disaster, two thirds of them being fathers. This was a one shot deal though, a small event not promoted outside the town.

In 1910, Sonora Dodd proposed a Father's Day event at her church in Spokane, Washington. She read the 1908 Mother's Day sermon and felt inspired to honor her father who was a single parent with 6 kids. Other local pastors joined in with the idea and a day to honor fathers was officially organized in Spokane for June 19th. Dodd held her event at the local YMCA, while the other pastors gave Father's Day sermons at their own churches.

Fatherhood Struggles for Recognition

In 1911 there was a proposal for a city-wide Father's Day event to be held in Chicago, but it didn't happen. Then in 1912, a Methodist minister in Vancouver, Washington, proposed such an event with success. But once again, it did not become mainstream. A few years later in 1915, a Lion's Club member named Harry Meek began to promote the 3rd Sunday in June as Father's Day. He made a lot of effort, but it still did not become an accepted or official holiday.

Although a bill to recognize the holiday was introduced to Congress in 1913, and Woodrow Wilson supported it in 1916, there was serious resistance to its commercialization. Other presidents continued to support the idea for decades, while the media scandalized it with cynical and sarcastic attacks. It took four decades of investment by retailers, local and national councils, church goers and lobbyists to achieve the same degree of commercial success as Mother's Day. Finally, in 1972, Richard Nixon signed the holiday into law.



A Long Standing Tradition

Meanwhile, Catholics continued to honor fatherhood through the *Feast Day of St. Joseph*. Religious people throughout the world have a long tradition of expressing gratitude and paying respect through celebrations and ceremonies. The heart to honor another for their investment, sacrifice, and good deeds is part of our original divine nature.

Although we don't need the support of presidents and commercial industries to express love and gratitude to our parents, creating a nationally and

internationally recognized tradition benefits society by contributing to the common good. Now, people of all faiths, and nonreligious people, celebrate the value of father's together. Father's Day, Mother's Day, and Parent's Day are holidays and Holy Days, because they sprang from the original heart of children to honor parental love.