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Faith Today

One father's story

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

How does a father raise children by himself? What support is there? What help is at hand?

I had a talk with a friend on this very subject a few months ago after a wedding.

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I find that the priest's role at a wedding is very enjoyable but it's also a workout. So when I arrive at the reception I usually take my ritual glass of champagne and look for a quiet corner with a comfortable chair.

At a wedding last fall I went looking for such a corner and found it already occupied by a man I've known for 10 years, since he was a widower with three boys.

"Well, you're looking relaxed," I said as he motioned me into the chair next to him.

"I'm not just relaxed," he said, "I'm celebrating." He went on to explain that earlier that morning he had helped his youngest son, just entering college, move from the family home into his dorm.

Then, speaking almost in disbelief, the father said, "I've actually done it. I raised all three of them.

There were times when I never thought I would make it. But I did, and they all look like they're going to turn out OK."

My friend was obviously relieved and proud that he had managed to raise his three boys by himself. Ten years previously, when the boys were 8, 11 and 13, a terrible accident had left him a widower. Now on this warm September Saturday he had helped the youngest follow his brothers into college life.

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I knew that reaching this day had not been easy. There was, of course, the terrible and bewildering fog of the first few months 10 years back. It began with a call from the police at the emergency room. Those first days and weeks and months seemed like an eternity.

I knew that he was a man with a real faith and his faith was important to him. It gave him purpose and direction. But even so there was the daily need to accomplish by himself the tasks that he and his wife had once divided between them.

One Saturday morning a number

of years back I ran into him in the supermarket. He was trying to complete the week's shopping before going home to the laundry and then planning menus and scheduling trips to the orthodontist and parent-teacher conferences.

That day he was feeling frazzled.

"I've realized that I never learned how to live alone," he said. "I lived at home until I got married. I've never lived without another adult in the house and, questions of loneliness aside, I just don't know how to do it."

Now, on this Saturday when we were celebrating a wedding, those worries were behind him.

"How did you do it?" I asked. "In addition to your friends, what helped?"

He thought for a moment, then said: "Having structures to lean on. Like the church, with its weekly routines and holidays.

"The first Christmas was hard. If I had had to plan out a Christmas celebration I know I couldn't have done it.

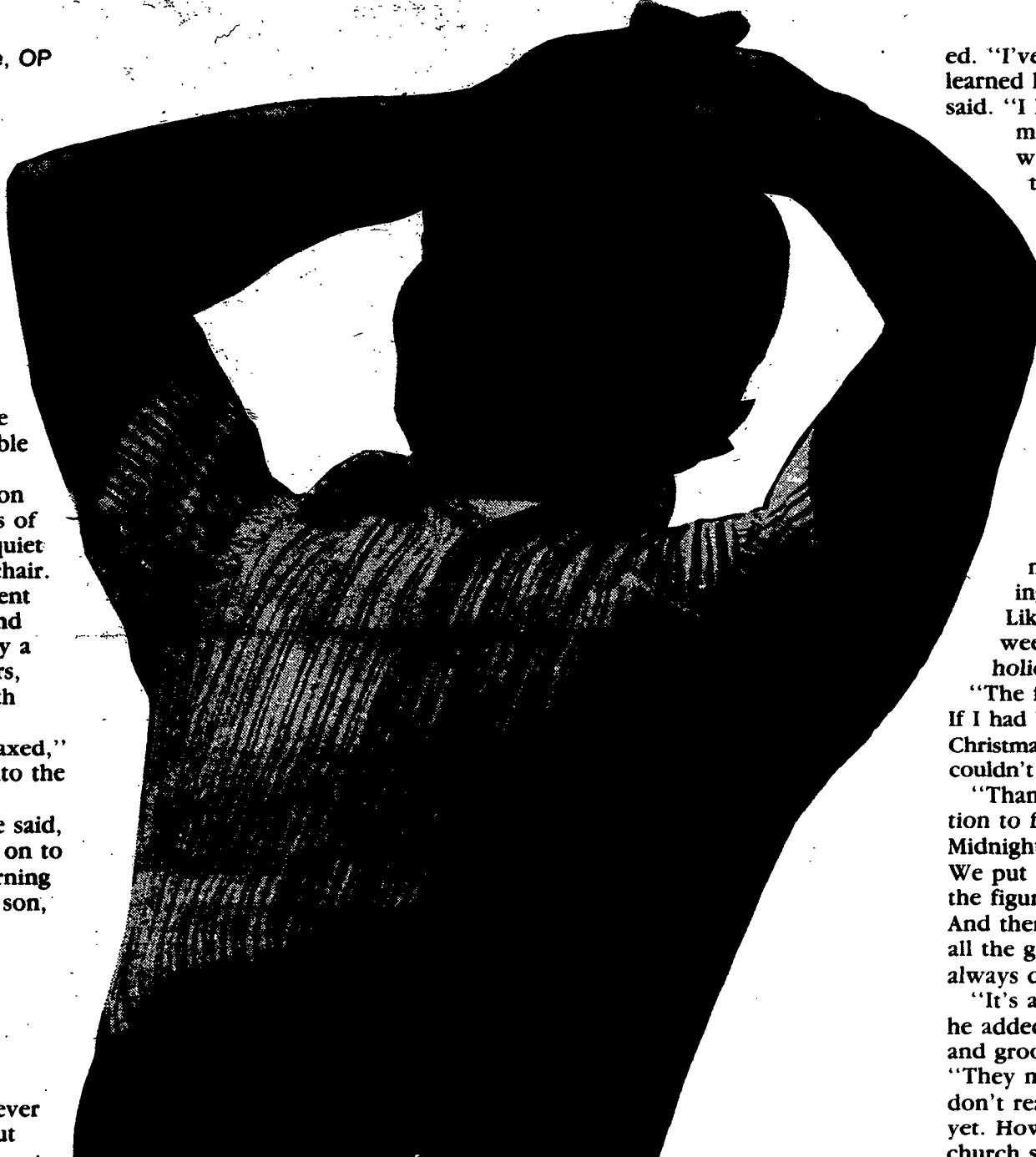
"Thank God, there was a tradition to fall back on. We went to Midnight Mass like we always do. We put the tree and the crib and the figures in their usual places. And then we had a big dinner for all the grandparents like we always do."

"It's a lot like this wedding," he added, pointing to the bride and groom now dancing together. "They may both be 23 but they don't really understand marriage yet. How could they? But the church says they should go through its public marriage ceremonies. So they trust the church and they do it. The church says it's possible to make it and they believe it."

"We need these structures," he said. "At least, I did. I needed them to rely on because there were times when I couldn't rely on myself. I've made it," he said. "But I don't know how I would have made it without them and without the community's support."

Then, laughing and looking relaxed, he raised a now empty champagne glass a little and looked around. "Waiter!" he called, "Now where'd he go?"

(Father O'Rourke is associate director of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)



FAMILY

How can a single parent possibly cope with the monumental task of raising children alone? Father David O'Rourke tells about a friend who did just that. Now, his children raised, the man reflects on what to some may seem an impossible task.