

The Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph: The Family, the Heart of the Domestic Church

On the Sunday after the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, Christmas, we consider the family. Now when we hear the title of the celebration, the Feast of the Holy Family, we are inclined to just dismiss the possibility that our families can be like the Holy Family. We forget that Jesus' family was holy because they lived united to God.

Still, many of you may be thinking that your own families are far from the ideal. Well, join the crowd. Every family is far from the ideal because every family is made of unique individuals with their positive qualities and their negative quirks. Or, to put it simply, if you think your family is strange, you're right. You have crazy Uncle Fred whose behavior has to be interpreted to the younger children. And then there is nasty old Aunt Martha, who you would have sat next to Msgr. Joe at your daughter's wedding reception, but he was smart enough to decline the invitation. My family is strange too. I have a 30 year old cousin who after graduating college is still looking for work to use her special talent--she's a fire eater and flame thrower. Good old, cousin Patty, the Dragon Lady. Hey, at least she comes in handy at the family re-unions. She's in charge of lighting the charcoal.

So, your family is strange, but so are you. And my family is strange, and so am I. All families have their positive and negative aspects. The fact is that the very negatives become the opportunities of grace leading the rest of the family to God. This is what St. Paul is referring to in the second reading when he tells the Colossians and us to "put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection." The compassion that we have for the weakest member of the family, whether that be physically weak, psychologically weak, or morally weak, becomes our means to grow in union with God. The efforts that we make to accept each other's quirks are themselves acts of virtue.

I am so proud of you for living your faith. If I am proud of you for living your faith, how must God be elated with you? He knows about the diaper that needed changing right after the older kids got into the car. He knows the Teens who avoided a party where there would be stuff and people they had best avoid. He also knows how seriously you are all taking your responsibility to be Christians, to create a Christian home.

Sometimes parents get down on themselves for not being the best parents possible. Being the best parent possible is an ideal you strive for, not a reality you will reach. Same with me, being the best priest possible is an ideal I strive for, not a reality I will ever reach. We all need to trust in God. We do our best and let Him do the rest. He fixes at night the mistakes we make during the day.

For you parents with children still at home, there is nothing more difficult than raising a holy child. Nothing is more rewarding either. The tremendous effort you are making instilling the faith into your children, allowing them to reach out towards their own spiritual ideals, is one of the ways that you reverence God. Each child is your child, yes. But each child is also His child. Keep working hard to allow His child to be a holy child. And, please don't give up on yourselves, even when you make a mistake. Even Mary and Joseph left their child behind in the Temple, and they only had one to worry about. Never, ever give up plugging away to lead your children to be good Christian men and women.

For those of you who have grown children, or who never had children, remember that your way to the Lord is through your spouse. Many of you picked 1 *Corinthians 13* for your wedding celebration: Love is patient, love is kind. What comes before the "is" is syrupy and sentimental. What comes after the "is" is the reality of marriage: being patient and kind, not being jealous or arrogant or rude, not insisting on one's own way or being irritable or resentful, bearing all things, hoping for all things, believing all things. Basically, you sacrifice yourselves to such an extent that you accept the human limitations of your spouse as you pray that he or she accept your human limitations. That is your way to God, your way to being a Holy Family.

It does not get easier over the years of marriage. Our seniors know that taking care of a husband or wife, often means being patient with the impatient, and understanding with the quarrelsome. But they are being perfected in honoring Christ's presence in their marriages.

A word to those of you who are young and hoping to form your own families someday. What are you looking for in a future spouse? Do you hope your spouse will be rich? Are you looking for extreme beauty or serious manliness? You deserve more than all that. You want to find the right guy, the right girl? Pray to God to help you, and then look for a man or woman with whom you are comfortable praying. If you can pray with him or her, really pray not just recite prayers but share your presence of Jesus, then there you have the qualities you need to form a Christian home. Ask God to help you find that person who has spiritual richness, spiritual beauty, spiritual strength. When you find that person, then, come to the Church and ask for the sacramental presence of Christ in your relationship in the sacrament of matrimony. Yes, getting married on the beach, or in the Grand Canyon, or underwater, or Sky diving, might seem significant, but a real marriage is a union of husband and wife to Jesus Christ in the sacrament of matrimony. Don't deprive yourselves of the real presence of the Lord uniting His Love to your love.

On Christmas, we formed a community of prayer and celebrated the presence of the Lord at Mass. Throughout the day, we continued the celebration in our families. We did this by exchanging gifts, enjoying a meal together, basically just being together. It was good, all good. Perhaps, on Christmas Day more than most other days we sense the Presence of the Lord in our families. Perhaps, on Christmas Day more than most other days we realize that we have been given the gift of being a Holy Family.

Perhaps, on Christmas Day more than most other days we realize that the center of the Holy Family is Jesus Christ, whether that Holy Family was Mary and Joseph's, or whether that Holy Family is our family.