

## The Feast of the Holy Family: Being a Holy Family

We Americans are a competitive people. We have this drive to always want to be better than someone else. As a result we spend a lot of energy comparing ourselves, or our situations with those with whom we work, live near, etc. In many ways this is healthy. I want a doctor who does everything she or he can to be better than every other doctor. The same can be applied to every service orientated position, or even to any person we work with or for.

However, we would be wrong if we were to apply this natural competitive attitude to our families. It is neither just nor wise for us to compare our families to our neighbors. Yet, so many of us do this. "I wish my marriage was as happy as theirs. I wish my children got along as well as theirs. I wish our family was as strong as theirs." This is wrong because, first, every family is a unique relationship of singular individuals. It is impossible for two families to be identical. Second, every family has challenges which usually are not apparent to the eye of the envious neighbors.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. In our natural competitive attitude, we are tempted to look at the Holy Family as an ideal we cannot realize in our families. But, Jesus, Mary and Joseph had their share of struggles. The trust which is fundamental to a marriage was challenged by the pregnancy. Joseph must have felt terrible when he had to bring his wife to a stable to have the child. Living in a foreign land, Egypt, away from family and traditions, was far from ideal. Still, the Holy Family made it through the difficulties of their family life for one reason only: they had great faith. Joseph had faith in the angel of his dreams and treated the pregnant Mary in an honorable way. He had faith that God would help him protect the child, and he moved the family to Egypt. Mary had faith both in the angel and in God's working through Joseph. Jesus, having emptied himself of his divinity, had faith in his parents to care for him. Some of the pious Christian works of the second and third centuries didn't understand this. The apocryphal gospels, which have never even remotely been considered Sacred Scripture, would present the child Jesus performing miracles to help his family even in everyday chores, like changing rocks to bread so Mary would not have to bake. (By the way the apocryphal gospels also had Jesus doing distinctly unchristian actions like beating up the local village bullies.) The child Jesus didn't need to perform miracles. He had all the miracles he needed in parents who cared for him.

The Holy Family conquered their struggles through their faith-life. This must be the primary concern of our families. For example, so many single parents waste energy wishing that their marriage had worked out and their children could be with both their parents. It does no good to long for that which is not probable. Instead, the single parent should focus on establishing a strong Christian home. Or so many parents wish they had the financial resources of their neighbors to be able to provide so much more for their children. What children need is a Christian home, not the things that the neighbor's kids have.

The readings for this Sunday present some aspects of a Christian home. The first

reading from *Sirach* says that children need to respect their parents. At first it refers to young children as it notes that mothers and fathers have their authority from God. Then it refers to older children when it says that children should take care of their parents when they age. Little children learn respect for their parents from the respect they see their parents giving each other and the respect their parents have for their grandparents. I have always believed that the way you treat your parents will be the way your children will treat you. If your relations with your parents are motivated by respect and love, and are evident in your kindness to them, your children will have learned this aspect of Christianity and will treat you the same way as your years mount.

The second reading deals with the interrelationships of the family. Paul tells the Colossians and us to deal with each other out of kindness, to be patient with each other, to forgive each other continually, not to let our pride determine what we say and do to each other. If we strive to live this way, then as a family we can pray together not just in Church, but in every aspect of our lives. "Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord." Paul goes on to mention the roles of a family in his epoch. At that time the equality of women was not recognized. In the Roman empire women were seen as property that needed to be protected by their fathers or their husbands. The respect given to a woman was different from that given to a man. That's why we have the phrase, wives be submissive to your husbands. Closely followed by husbands love your wives. The heart of this reading is that husbands and wives must respect each other. This same line of thought continues with children being told to respect their parents, and parents being told not to nag, to continually find fault, with their children.

A few years ago one of the finest men I have ever met died of a massive heart attack on Christmas day. One day about ten years before this, he spoke to me about his daughters who were in their early twenties at the time. He said to me, "My girls are really good kids. Yeah, they both made mistakes and had babies before they married, but that doesn't change the fact that they are both good kids." Those are the words of a father who was disappointed, true, but not to the degree that it changed the deep respect he had for his children. My thought is that the reason why the girls were such good kids and why they both went on to be good mothers and wives, was because they were treated with respect by their father, and mother for that matter, and they returned this with respect and deep love. By the way, the gentleman passed away after opening up a gift that the families of the two girls gave him on Christmas Day. God bless him and God bless all parents who never let anything diminish their respect for their children. And God bless children who receive and return their parents' love. That is what *Colossians*, the second reading is about.

Today's Gospel is acted out almost every Sunday in every parish. Mary and Joseph went to the temple holding Jesus. Simeon and Anna made a fuss. This happens in our parishes also. Couples come in to the church holding their newborn child. Their joy is indescribable. "Look who we have with us," they say before they ever open their mouths. Most priests, like me, make believe they are surprised even though they may have seen the expectant Mom every week. I love seeing the babies, and I

enjoy making a fuss. And I love seeing the huge change in the parents who present their first child. One young couple told me something that I know all of you realized when he came home from the hospital with that first child. They said, "You know, we can't come and go and do the things we did before we had the baby, but we have so much more now. Life was great before, but much better now."

Parents, we all love seeing how much you love your children. We love the fact that you all are determined to provide the best for your children. Please remember: to be the best parents you can be, remain grounded in the Lord. Make prayer a part of your home life. Pray with your children at bedtime and pray for them after they fall asleep. Teach your children respect. Let them witness your respect for them, for each other, and for others and demand that they respect others, including you.

Do your best, and trust God to do the rest.

May all our families be Holy Families.