

## **The Feast of the Holy Family - Being a Holy Family**

December 31, 2023

People in general are competitive. We have a 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 others. In many ways this is healthy. I want a better doctor, better job, better company to work for and better people to work with. 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 neighbours'. 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 every family is a unique relationship of singular individuals. It is impossible for two families to be identical. And, every family has challenges which usually are not apparent to the eye of the envious neighbours.

This Sunday, 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 loving Christian home. Or so many parents wish they had the financial resources of their neighbours to be able to provide so much more for their children. What children need is a Christian home founded on love, not the things that the neighbour's kids have.

The readings for this Sunday present some aspects of a Christian home. The first reading from Sirach (3:2-6, 12-14) 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. Attitudes of love, harmony and mutual respect are the basic ingredients of a happy family and will have a deep and lasting influence if encouraged in the earliest days of the children's life. The second reading deals with the interrelationships of the family. Paul tells the Colossians (3:12-21) and us to deal with each other out of kindness, to be patient with each other, to forgive each other continually, not to let 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 because kindness to parents is precious

in the eyes of God, and parents being told not to nag nor continually finding fault with their children because we must always put the emphasis on peace within the family circle. Families must keep prayer and spiritual concerns in mind in order to avoid all kinds of troubles.

A teenage asked his grandfather, "Grandpa, how did you live in the past without technology...without computers, drones, TVs, air conditioners, cars, mobile phones?" Grandpa answered: "We, the people born between the years 1930-1980, are the blessed ones. Our lives, like the Holy Family, are simple and holy. While playing and riding a bike, we did not have to wear a helmet. After school we did our homework ourselves and we always played outside until sunset. We played with real friends, not virtual friends. If we were thirsty, we would drink from the fountain, from the waterfalls, faucet water, not mineral or filtered water We never gained weight by eating bread and pasta every day. Nothing happened to our feet despite walking barefoot. We never used food supplements to stay healthy. We used to make our own toys and play with them. Our parents were not rich. They gave us love, not material gifts. We never had a cell phone, DVD, game console, Xbox, video games, PC, laptop, internet chat . . . but we had true friends. We visited our friends without being invited and shared and enjoyed the food with their family. Parents lived nearby to take advantage of family time. We may have had black and white photos, but with colourful memories. We are a unique and the most understanding generation, because we are the last generation that listened to their parents. And we are also the first ones who were forced to listen to their children. We are the limited edition...Take advantage of us. Learn from us. We are a treasure destined to disappear soon." Indeed the family is as old as humankind and has survived because it is built on the strong foundation of love. We may not be able to change many things in the world but our influence does extend over our own home and our own family.

This Sunday's Gospel reading (Luke 2:22-46) 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 into the church holding their new baby. Their joy is indescribable. "Look who we have with us," they say before they even open their mouths. Most of them 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 are all determined to provide the best for your children. Please remember to be the best parents you can be and 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. We ask Mary and Joseph to make our families pleasing to God, to be the heart and centre of every home throughout the world and to put a new spirit into this basic unit of all society. May all our families be Holy Families.

***Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love; to you we turn with trust. Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches. Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division; may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing. Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer. Amen.***