

Feast of the Holy Family December 31, 2017

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Colossians 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The feast of the Holy Family is the natural continuation of the Christmas Season. All the scripture readings of today reflect on aspects of family including the duties and blessings that come about as a result of the faithful living of family life. In the creation narrative of the Bible we read that God created man in his image and likeness and placed him in a family. To understand what a family is we must come to know the life of God in the Trinity which is a family. Again God expresses his relationship with human persons in terms of covenants which are family bonds. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became man, in order to save us from our sins and that we might become Children of God. He came into the world and was born in a family. He lived at Nazareth with his parents to give us an understanding of a true family life. Here God himself becomes a model for us so that we may truly come to know the real family life. Today we hold the family of Nazareth as an example to all Christians how a family life should be and thus truly relate ourselves to God who is a family. In the Gospel we have the protective role of Joseph as he takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt. In the first reading we have the formula of a wise teacher for a strong family: honour and respect. Paul in the second reading encourages all families to practice every kind of virtue.

On this feast day the Church presents the Holy Family to us as a model for our own family life. Joseph was the head of the Holy Family and provided for Mary and Jesus with the work of his hands. He was obedient to the angel who told him to take Mary as his wife, what name the child should be given and again he was told to flee to Egypt with the family when there was a threat on their life. He taught Jesus the family trade and what it was to be a man in the society in which they lived. Mary took care of her family in the home at Nazareth. It was she who would have taught Jesus the Scriptures and prayers of their people when he was very young. It was through her example of managing the home that Jesus would formulate many of the examples he would later use in his teaching. Jesus saw work sanctified through the example of his earthly parents, who did all things well in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. The Feast of the Holy Family is dedicated to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, commemorating their life together in Nazareth and calling us to focus on Catholic family life. Today, in celebrating the Holy Family, we ask God's blessings on our own families.

Devotion to the Holy Family is a recent development, but one that naturally grew out of a love for Jesus and his family. The cult of the Holy Family grew in popularity in the 17th century, and several religious congregations had been founded under this title. The Holy Family also became portrayed in popular art of the period. Pope Leo XIII promoted the feast as a way to counter the breakdown of the family unit. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of twentieth, prompted the popes, especially the far-sighted Leo XIII, to promote the observance of this feast with the hope that it might instill into Christian families something of the faithful love and the devoted attachment that characterize the family of Nazareth. The primary purpose of the Church in instituting and promoting this feast is to present the Holy Family as the model and exemplar of all Christian families. In 1921 the Congregation of Rites under Pope Benedict XV inserted the Feast of the Holy Family into the Latin Rite general calendar. Today's readings of the feast of the Holy Family proclaim that God does not intend individuals, especially people in a family, to live in a world of violence, disharmony and intimidation. Rather, God desires all to flourish in families in which love of God and love of the other guides every action and thought.

The first reading from the book of Sirach tells of the privileged place parents and family have in the eyes of God. The parents are gifted by God to bring into the world others in the image and likeness of God. The author calls children to exhibit honour, reverence, compassion, and kindness toward their parents. It says that Obedience and respect to parents is tantamount to obedience to God. Sirach urges sons and daughters to hold mother and father in high esteem. As agents of life their parents enjoy a gift only God could give. Great blessings await those who obey their father and bring comfort to their mother. They will have good relationship with God and their prayers to God will be heard. Their devotion and kindness to their parents will be regarded by God as a sacrifice offered in the Temple. Saint Paul writing to the Colossians encourages the Christian community to practice every virtue. They are especially to clothe themselves with love. He reminds them that Christ forgave and likewise they have to forgive one another. The individual family is built up of loving relationships. So he tells that parents should not nag their children and children should honour and respect their parents. He tells husbands to respect their wives and that wives should be subordinate to their husbands. Again Paul admonishes 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.

Today's Gospel shows us that not even the Holy Family was spared the trials and sufferings of every family. Joseph is the principal character in this narrative and like Joseph the Patriarch, God communicates to him through dreams. The baby's life is threatened and they are forced to flee into Egypt to avoid the evil intent of Herod. As a result the Holy Family became displaced persons in a foreign country. They had to be the victims of political vengeance and go and hide into a foreign land for their own safety and of that of their child. Though such tribulations Joseph shows himself a true Israelite, obedient to God and ready to do his will at any cost. He already showed himself a courageous man of honour who wanted to protect the reputation of Mary because God wanted him to. Later when Jesus is lost in the Temple and they find him, the child says he was at his Father's business, giving the idea to Joseph who his real Father was and he accepts it. The trip to Egypt would have been a nightmare for the Holy family but they accept it in obedience. They would have walked alone at night or gone with the caravan but they had to move with all uncertainty in a foreign land. When Herod was dead Joseph has another dream telling him to return to the land of Israel. Since things were not as safe as expected Joseph is told in a dream to go to Nazareth because of Archelaus son of Herod who was also a cruel person, and the Holy Family lived a normal quiet life.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus model for us the life of the Holy Family. Joseph exhibited great trust in God and demonstrated intense devotion and love in caring for Mary and Jesus. Scripture does not quote a single word of Joseph, and yet his actions speak volumes of a strong man devoted to God and family. Mary, too, showed tremendous faith in God and trusted in God's love for her. As wife, she helped Joseph in his quest for holiness. As mother, she cared for Jesus with great love and tenderness. Both Mary and Joseph created the environment which allowed Jesus to grow in wisdom and age and favour before God and man. Jesus, for his part, was obedient to Mary and Joseph and obviously loved them both very much. And, out of great love for his Father and for us, he was obedient to all that God asked of him, including death on a cross. This type of sacrificial love for the other defines a significant attribute of a holy family-- a love that allows all in the family to flourish in their quest for holiness.

What kept the Holy Family together was obedience. Christ knew that he had to be obedient to God his Father. That's why he was in the Temple. His obedience drew his parents to the Temple. But Jesus also knew he had to be obedient to Mary and Joseph. That's why he immediately went home with them. Obedience is the way in which a person can show respect to the

members of his family. To obey means to allow someone else to lead you and we value our freedom and independence. To obey means to sacrifice once freedom and will and do something demanded by others. Nobody likes to be told what to do. But here we called upon to learn a lesson from Jesus. He is the Son of God and he freely chooses to obey his mother and foster father. We have a God who obeys and as St Paul says that he was obedient thought his life even unto death. He obeyed not only his earthly parents but also his divine Father.

The Feast of the Holy Family is not just about the Holy Family, but about our own families too. The main purpose of the Feast is to present the Holy Family as the model for all Christian families. Our family life becomes sanctified when we live the life of the Church within our homes. This is called the “domestic church” or the “church in miniature.” St. John Chrysostom urged all Christians to make each home a “family church,” and in doing so, we sanctify the family unit. The best way is by making Christ and his Church the Centre of family and individual life. St. Paul gives some advice on family life in his letter to the Colossians, where he tells them to have compassion and practice all Christian virtues like compassion, kindness, patience, supporting each other and forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven them. And above all these they are to put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Then the peace of Christ will be in their hearts, to which they were called in the one body.

The feast of the Holy Family is a good time to remember the family unit and pray for our human and spiritual families. The mission of the family is identical to that of the whole Church: to give tangible witness to the vision of Christ for the world. We also take this feast to reflect on the value and sanctity of the family unit, and to evaluate our own family life. Finally, we can use this feast to ask ourselves what we are doing to promote the family within our own cultures, neighbourhoods, and communities. Pope Benedict XVI said during his pilgrimage to the Holy land that we must contemplate ever anew the silence and love of the Holy Family, the model of all Christian family life. Here, in the example of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, we come to appreciate even more fully the sacredness of the family, which in God’s plan is based on the lifelong fidelity of a man and a woman consecrated by the marriage covenant and accepting of God’s gift of new life. Here too, we think of Saint Joseph, the just man whom God wished to place over his household. From Joseph’s strong and fatherly example Jesus learned the virtues of a manly piety, fidelity to one’s word, integrity and hard work. In the carpenter of Nazareth he saw how authority placed at the service of love is infinitely more fruitful than the power which

seeks to dominate. Finally, we turn to the child Jesus, who in the home of Mary and Joseph grew in wisdom and understanding, until the day he began his public ministry. We pray for our families that we may be filled with love of the Holy Family. We see around us today the breakdown of families and the uncertainty and the anxiety of many. We pray to the Holy Family to inspire into our hearts the mutual love necessary to build a harmonious family.

Pope Francis in his homily on the Feast of Holy Family says that we often see pilgrims journeying to shrines and places dear to popular piety. These days, many of them are making their way to the Holy Door opened in all the cathedrals of the world and in many shrines. But the most beautiful thing which emerges from the word of God today is that the whole family goes on pilgrimage. Fathers, mothers and children together go to the house of the Lord, in order to sanctify the holy day with prayer. It is an important teaching, which is meant for our own families as well. Indeed, we could say that family life is a series of pilgrimages, both small and big. How important it is for our families to journey together towards a single goal! We know that we have a road to travel together; a road along which we encounter difficulties but also enjoy moments of joy and consolation. And on this pilgrimage of life we also share in moments of prayer. What can be more beautiful than for a father and mother to bless their children at the beginning and end of each day, to trace on their forehead the sign of the cross, as they did on the day of their baptism? Is this not the simplest prayer which parents can offer for their children? To bless them, that is, to entrust them to the Lord, just like Elkanah and Anna, Joseph and Mary, so that he can be their protection and support throughout the day.

Pope Francis says further that at the end of that pilgrimage, Jesus returned to Nazareth and was obedient to his parents (cf. Lk 2:51). This image also contains a beautiful teaching about our families. A pilgrimage does not end when we arrive at our destination, but when we return home and resume our everyday lives, putting into practice the spiritual fruits of our experience. We know what Jesus did on that occasion. Instead of returning home with his family, he stayed in Jerusalem, in the Temple, causing great distress to Mary and Joseph who were unable to find him. For this little “escapade”, Jesus probably had to beg forgiveness of his parents. The Gospel doesn’t say this, but I believe that we can presume it. Mary’s question, moreover, contains a certain reproach, revealing the concern and anguish which she and Joseph felt. Returning home, Jesus surely remained close to them, as a sign of his complete affection and obedience. Moments like these become part of the pilgrimage of

each family; the Lord transforms the moments into opportunities to grow, to ask for and to receive forgiveness, to show love and obedience.

A little boy greets his father as he returns from work with a question: "Daddy, how much do you make an hour?" The father is surprised and says: "Look, son, not even your mother knows. Don't bother me now, I'm tired." "But Daddy, just tell me please! How much do you make an hour?" the boy insists. The father finally gives up and replies: "Twenty dollars." "Okay, Daddy," the boy continues, "Could you loan me ten dollars?" The father yells at him: "So that was the reason you asked how much I earn, right? Now, go to sleep and don't bother me anymore!" At night the father thinks over what he said and starts feeling guilty. Maybe his son needed to buy something. Finally, he goes to his son's room. "Are you asleep, son?" asks the father. "No, Daddy. Why?" replies the boy. "Here's the money you asked for earlier," the father said. "Thanks, Daddy!" replies the boy and receives the money. Then he reaches under his pillow and brings out some more money. "Now I have enough! Now I have twenty dollars!" says the boy to his father, "Daddy, could you sell me one hour of your time?" Today's gospel has a message for this man and for all of us, and the message is that we need to invest more of our time in our family life.

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