

HOLY FAMILY (2018/19 - C)

Today, we celebrate this beautiful Feast of the Holy Family which usually comes on the Sunday within the Octave of Christmas. On this day, the Church holds up for us the Holy Family as a model and example for all families. We should all try to imitate the members of the Holy Family as we live out our own vocations.

In Saint Joseph, we have a witness to what a husband and father should be. Saint Joseph was faithful to his wife the Blessed Virgin Mary. He was dedicated in his work and in his efforts to provide for and care for his family. Most of all, he was faithful to his religious obligations, and he made sure that God was honored in his home and that all religious observances were kept.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is a witness of what a wife and mother should be. She was faithful to her husband, Saint Joseph. She cared for her divine Son and worked to make her home one that was filled with God's grace and peace.

Finally, the Child Jesus is a model for all children. Our Lord was obedient. He was subject to His mother, the Blessed Virgin and to His foster-father Saint Joseph. He was never disrespectful.

That said, it may be hard for us to hear about the Holy Family and to reflect on what we are supposed to be. That's because all families fall short of the example of the Holy Family, but that should be no surprise to us. After all, the Child in this family was Jesus Christ who is both God and man, and He was incapable of sin.

He did not suffer from Original Sin and its effects as do we. Nor did He have to deal with disordered passions as do we. So, even though the devil tempted Him, He was always able to evaluate these temptations in a calm and rational way. To Him, temptations always presented a clear choice between what was good and what was evil.

If that were true with us, we too would never fall for temptations. To do so would be like choosing between an empty box of candy and the candy or between sickness and health or between death and life or between hell and heaven. Given any of those choices, presented in stark contrast, temptations would be as easy for us to set aside as they were for Jesus.

However, it's because we do suffer from Original Sin that our emotions and our desires for instant gratification get in our way, and so, we often end up choosing vice rather than virtue and sin rather than grace.

That said, what child does not feel bad when comparing himself or herself to the Christ Child? Unlike us, He did not fight with other children. He did not talk back to His parents nor disobey them. He did not lie or cheat or steal or use bad words.

With regard to wives and mothers, it might be hard to hear about the Holy Family and to consider the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary. After all, in the Blessed Virgin, we have the Church's greatest saint. It's quite true what the English poet William Wordsworth wrote of her, **"Woman! above all women glorified, Our tainted nature's solitary boast."**

That said, what wife or mother when comparing herself to the Blessed Virgin -- who was also free from Original Sin by virtue of the prevenient grace she received in her Immaculate Conception -- what woman would not consider herself a poor example? Loosing patience with her children or snapping at her husband or just not doing what she should at times. Compared to Mary, her faults would be glaringly obvious.

With regard to husbands and fathers, it might be hard to hear about the Holy Family and to consider the example of Saint Joseph. He willingly obeyed God and took Mary as his wife even though He did not understand God's plans at the time. He dedicated his life to his wife and to the Christ Child. Saint Joseph protected and served both our Lady and the Christ Child. He took them to Egypt when King Herod threated the Christ Child with death. Later on, he worked at his trade as a carpenter, supporting and providing for his family.

On the other hand, what father is there who does not at times question God's plans for himself and his family? What father is there who doesn't become upset or angry or disheartened when his efforts go unappreciated or when his children stray from the path he taught them or when his children just turn out bad? What husband does not struggle to love his wife as Christ loved the Church? Then to have Saint Joseph held up as the model for him to follow could leave one feeling very unworthy of the name husband and father.

So, in truth, all husbands and wives, all fathers and mothers and all children fall very short of the members of the Holy Family. We could all feel very inadequate in comparison.

On top of that, there is this to consider. There are other real life experiences many of us have. For example, what about those cases where a parent is just a bad parent? Those who are drug addicts or drunks or who are abusive or who have abandoned their families?

Or what about those who do not have our own families for various reasons? Who have no spouse or have no children or who whose father or mother died when they were young? Or what about those couples who were never able to have children? Or what about priests for that matter?

A very old, holy priest once said to me, "There is nothing deader than a dead priest." By that he meant that priests leave behind no family. They have no children or grandchildren and they are soon forgotten by the living.

However, even those with families are forgotten in a generation or two. Recently, my brother and I were looking at some movies my grandfather had taken over 80 years ago. We had no idea who the people in them were, and all of the people who did know are now dead.

So, it's true that the Holy Family is an example for us here on Earth. It is a model for us to imitate and follow, but every single one of us and all earthly families are going to fall short in comparison.

That said, there is something else for us to consider here, something much more hopeful and joyous. By virtue of our baptism, we all belong to the family of God. We are all the sons and daughters of God, and that is why we call ourselves brothers and sisters in the Lord.

That means even if we have been abandoned by members of our Earthly family, we still have our heavenly family. Even if we have no children, we still have many sons and daughters.

Just think of our prayers at Mass. At the beginning of Mass, the priest says to you "Brothers and sisters, let us acknowledge our sins and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries." Later, at the offering of the gifts, the priest says to you, "Pray brothers and sisters that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father."

In the first Eucharistic prayer the priest says, "Lord we pray: graciously accept this oblation of our service, that of your whole family; order our days in your peace, and command that we be delivered from eternal damnation and counted among the flock of those you have chosen."

We all pray together, "Our Father." He is not just my Father or your Father. He is our Father which means we are all members of His family.

So, my point is that we are all members of the Holy Family of God. Even if a member of our Earthly family has abandoned us (or worse, forsaken God), we are still not alone.

Rather, we have our brothers and sisters in the Lord who by grace are closer to us than relatives who may live in darkness and sin. For that reason, the Church reminds us that when we are truly home and enter into eternal life, "every tear will be wiped away." That's because we shall see God as He is, and we shall be like Him for all the ages and praise Him without end.

So then, today as we celebrate this Feast of the Holy Family, let us do three things.

First, let us strive to imitate the members of the Holy Family in our own daily lives. If you are a husband and perhaps a father, imitate the virtues of Saint Joseph. Love your wife as Christ loved the Church and provide for the needs of your family. Also, defend your family from the evil one. Keep your home a sanctuary where God is honored and respected.

If you are a wife and perhaps a mother, imitate the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Be loving and kind to your husband. Guide your children in the ways of peace and harmony. Teach them to love God and neighbor by your words and example.

If you are a child, imitate Jesus who was respectful and obedient and kind.

Second, as members of God's family, let us always care for each other and strive to live like the Catholic Christians that we are. Let us help each other live as Jesus calls us to live.

Finally, let us never loose heart in this life and remember that we are never alone. Rather, we belong to God's heavenly family. So, don't forget that one day when we see God face to face, we will have the joy of meeting the rest of our brothers and sisters who are now with God in heaven and who have been praying for us and awaiting our arrival there. Amen.