

Holy Family “Choosing to be a holy family”

Fr. Frank Schuster

I think it makes intuitive sense to celebrate the feast of the Holy Family soon after Christmas. I hope we all had a good Christmas celebration this year with our families. However, as a pastor, I know that there are some here today whose experience of Christmas might have been a little rough. Why do I know this? Well, I hear a lot of confessions, and so I know. For instance, for some of our folks, Christmas dinner might as well be like going into a mine field, carefully navigating relationships without getting your legs blown off. For others, things are different this year because there was a tragedy that occurred during this holiday season, causing the family much sorrow in their time of real personal loss. And there are families that are also struggling with a very stressful problem in their lives right now and they are struggling to do the right thing, trying to prayerfully figure out what that is. We have many families in our community that have suffered the loss of a loved one this past year. I can only imagine that this Christmas is quite tender because of this loss. I think it is therefore timely that the Sunday following Christmas, we are invited to stay close to the Holy Family.

As you know, sometimes I hear the complaint that the Holy Family had it easy because they had the Son of God incarnate in their midst. Of course, we know that it wasn't easy. Matthew tells us that the Holy Family spent the first Christmas on the run, being chased by powerful people that wanted to kill them. Instead of returning to their home, the Holy Family spent the first Christmas running away to Egypt, forced to live in a strange land for several years. On the happy occasion of Jesus' presentation to the Temple in Luke, in this weekend's Gospel reading, Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce her heart, foreshadowing Jesus' crucifixion. In short, if we think we had a tough Christmas this year, it is consoling to know that the Holy Family had a tough Christmas too. Jesus, Mary and Joseph get it, so stay close to them.

The Christmas story, indeed the whole Gospel, says one thing loud and clear, having Jesus in your life doesn't necessarily make life easier. We all have crosses to carry and sometimes they are quite heavy. With Jesus, however, life can be more joyful despite the hardships, because we know in our hearts our journey doesn't end with the cross. Because of Jesus, our journey leads us to our heavenly home.

You also know that the second complaint I hear from time to time is that Mary and Joseph had it easy because they were saints. Our family cannot therefore identify with the Holy Family! When I hear this I scratch my head because, news flash, we are all called to be saints. How's that for a New Year resolution?! Ultimately in life, our vocation, as Christians, is to become saints. Of course, although being a saintly person is only possible by the grace of God, how often is being a saint also a choice of the heart, accepting the grace, reflective by the decisions we make? Joseph and Mary didn't have everything handed to them. They also made good decisions. I therefore think it is good to stay close to them this time of year.

And so, whether we had a joyful Christmas or a difficult Christmas this year, the feast of the Holy Family comes at a good time. We are invited to remember what a holy family looks like. For St. Paul, in our second reading, it looks like a family that is kind, humble, compassionate, gentle, bearing with one another and forgiving one another. Notice that Paul doesn't say that a holy family looks peaceful all the time. Families without frustrations do not exist. The Holy Family had their moments of frustration too. If you think families without frustrations exist, you have probably been drinking too much egg nog. For St. Paul, holy families look like families that, despite the frustrations, nevertheless choose (that is the operating word here, "choose") to be kind, humble, compassionate, gentle, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, over and over and over again! It looks like husbands, wives and children caring for each other more than they care about themselves. I think the Gospel demonstrates a Holy Family wonderfully, a family that trusts in God despite the dangers they face in life.

I believe we have a lot of holy families in our parish, I really do. I also believe we have a lot of families that are doing their best to become holy families. Ask a Catholic priest what helps a family become a holy family, this priest anyway would point to the Eucharist. One way of looking at things: The Holy Family wouldn't have been holy without the Christ's real presence in their lives. In the Eucharist we have the opportunity to allow Christ into our hearts, to allow Christ to become part of our family, to allow Christ to be our motivation in our relationships with others. We can't minimize the importance of coming to Mass as a family, of praying together daily as a family. We need to allow Christ to be a part of our families. When we do this, we have adopted Jesus into our families. In a remarkable way, we remember that through our baptism we have become adopted into the Holy Family as well with Jesus as our brother and Mary as our mother in faith. This is why I believe heaven will be the ultimate family gathering. Along those lines, for those of us who are grieving the empty chair at the dinner table, whenever we receive Jesus in the Eucharist we are also communing with everyone in heaven. This means, if we are hopeful that our departed loved ones are part of the Body of Christ, we are connected with our loved ones in heaven when we receive the Eucharist. I find that reality comforting. I hope that you do to.

This is why I believe that even when tragedy hits during the holiday season; a family can nevertheless be a holy family. Families in crises can be holy families in the way they allow Christ to be at the heart of their homes and at the center of the decision making during good times and bad, in sickness and in health. With faith in Christ, with kindness, humility, compassion, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, a family is a holy family.

And so, my friends, we can ask ourselves: what is one thing I can do today to help my family become a holier family? What are some of the decisions I need to make in my life that will bless my family as we make our journey through life? What is that one little thing that I can do today? In a parish such as ours, every family is important because our parish is making its pilgrim journey with other parishes in the communion of saints as one large Catholic family, called to live forever in the source of all families, in the life of our loving God, who is Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.