

Holy Family “Stay Close to the Holy Family”

Fr. Frank Schuster

I love hearing confessions soon after a holiday. Wives confess all the things their husbands are doing wrong. Husbands confess all the things their wives are doing wrong. And kids come into the confessional and confess everything their siblings are doing wrong. Of course, confessing other people’s sins isn’t exactly the idea when it comes to the sacrament of reconciliation. It happens a lot though. I remember years ago after a little girl confessed that she hit her brother, I playfully asked her, “Well, did he deserve it?” Without missing a beat, she said, “Oh yes, Father, you would not believe how much he deserved it.” That was priceless. It gets me thinking, instead of offering individual confessions, I wonder if the Church should just allow the whole family in at once...might be a lot quicker!

It makes intuitive sense to celebrate the feast of the Holy Family soon after Christmas. You see, I hope everyone here had a good Christmas! As a pastor though I know for some good people, Christmas time with family can be hard for a number of reasons. In either circumstance, I believe it is good medicine to stay close to the Holy Family this time of year.

Sometimes I hear the complaint that the Holy Family had it easy because they had Jesus in their midst. Of course maybe these people haven’t read the bible recently. Matthew tells us that the Holy Family spent the first Christmas on the run, being chased by powerful people that wanted to kill them. They ended up fleeing to Egypt, forced to live in a foreign land for several years. On the happy occasion of Jesus presentation to the Temple in Luke, Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce her heart. I don’t think this is news any parent would prefer to hear. In our Gospel today from Luke, Mary and Joseph were not happy that Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without telling them. It was like discovering that your kid was left behind in New York. Although Jesus was simply desiring to spend time at his Father’s house in the holy temple, I love that the Gospel tells us Jesus went back to Nazareth and grew up being obedient to his parents. Kids, take note. The Christmas story, indeed the whole Gospel, says one thing loud and clear, having Christ in your life does not automatically makes life easier. Sometimes in life, we have a cross to carry too.

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 immediately think of a press conference with Dorothy Day, the famous human rights activist. I think I have shared this story with you before. A reporter made the mistake of calling Dorothy a saint and Dorothy shot back, “you cannot dismiss me that easily”. We are all called to be saints. How’s that for a New Year resolution?! The famous Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, recalled in his book *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a time when a friend of his asked him the question, what do you want to be? Merton answered, “I want to be a good Catholic”. His friend shook his head in disapproval. “What you should say is that you want to be a saint”. This challenge haunted Merton for the rest of his life because his friend was right. Ultimately in life, our vocation, as Christians, is to become saints. The definition of someone who goes to heaven is “saint”. So who here wants to be a saint, raise your hand? Those who didn’t raise your hand, talk to me after mass.

In the time I have been at Saint Teresa of Calcutta, I have had the privilege and honor of ministering to families I think are incredibly holy, saintly people. What does a holy family look like? For St. Paul, 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. Families without frustrations do not exist. For St. Paul, holy families look like families that despite the frustrations nevertheless strive 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 believe we have a lot of holy families in our parish, I really do. I believe we have a lot of families that are doing their best to become holy families. Like I alluded to playfully in the beginning, I sincerely love seeing families come to the sacrament of reconciliation together. Very cool. Ask a Catholic priest what helps a family become a holy family? This priest anyway would point to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we have the opportunity to allow Christ into our hearts, to allow Christ to become part of the family, to allow Christ to be our motivation in our relationships with others.

With faith in Christ, with kindness, humility, compassion, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, a family is a holy family, even if there are quirks and idiosyncrasies. In the same way a holy family can also look like a parish family on its pilgrim journey with our Catholic family, one day joining the Holy Family, with the communion of saints and angels as one large family, living forever in the source of all families, in our one God, who is Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.