

Family as Religious Community

December 27, 2020, The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

Gospel of Luke 2:22-40

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How easy it is for us to turn old stories into legends and gradually exaggerate over time what really happened.

Perhaps we may think some of the stories told of Jesus in the New Testament are like these tall tales that turn ordinary people into superheroes. Sometimes these stories of superhuman feats have the effect of dehumanizing the person. And what I mean by that is that, we can lose our ability to relate to that person as a human being because we get it in our heads that they lived some kind of charmed other worldly life that we could never relate to. We project on them the idealised man or woman which we ourselves know we could never live up to. We need to remember that when we do that we are projecting the ideal onto a human being who in reality, is just as flawed as everyone else. You just have to look closely at the lives of the saints to discover the struggles many of them faced as they grappled with their relationship with God.

In the same way, we may perhaps see family in an idealized way. In the perfect world, our marriages would be strong and stable without all the labour pains, all our kids and grandkids would be mentally and physically healthy, successful and be going to church every Sunday as families. And our families would always be a source of support in terms of emotional intimacy – romance, warmth, like-mindedness, conflict free, and continual affirmation.

Though worthy goals, these are not what makes family. Because sadly, the reality is there is much dysfunction, trauma, addiction, mental and physical illness amidst family life with heavy consequences.

The love that sustains family draws from a place beyond the romantic ideal. It draws on a deeper recognition of a human person's relationship with God, complete with failures and dysfunction.

A couple in love, for example, is not created merely to focus all their attention on each other, and live out some self-interested ideal romance. Sooner or later, they must turn their attention beyond themselves, toward a life giving direction where they walk side by side, living in the same Spirit and facing the world and the people around them.

What makes family is the same as what makes church - - a gathering around the person of Jesus Christ and a common sharing of one Spirit of charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, long-suffering, fidelity, gentleness, faith and chastity.

The foundation of family is best nurtured and strengthened not merely by sexual and emotional intimacy but by **moral intimacy**. We are at home when we are with another person who shares our deepest values.

The Holy Family is a paradigm for all Christian family life. It was from within this divinely provided for context that Jesus was raised and formed in preparation for his earthly mission. He worked for a time in the world as the carpenter's son and then moved on to His life's mission when the time was right. We learn from this that the growth to maturity

of Jesus took place within a human family. We learn also that holiness permeates the very ordinary circumstances of our lives.

Here, God is letting us know that our human nature is good in its truest form but there is a distinction to be made between our fallen human nature and our redeemed human nature as infused by the Spirit of God through Jesus. We need guidance to be able to live more fully as human beings. And this health is only possible with Christ at the center.

When we look at Joseph and Mary, we see a couple with the purpose of raising a child, God's child, in a safe and healthy environment. They recognize their purpose in centering their lives on Jesus, and doing everything to protect their child and the mission given to them by God.

As followers of Christ we are called to do everything we can to protect Christ within us, the child of God within us. We learn about family through the Mary and Joseph story.

As we reflect on the role of the Holy Family in Jesus' life, it may occur to us that family life and church life are part of the same thing. In both, we participate in God's life. The family, like the church is called to holiness.

Ron Rolheiser puts it this way, "Every family is meant to be a religious community. It abides in family by sitting down with each other around the kitchen table, by sharing frustrations, of balancing the check book, by celebrating each others joys and sorrows, by offering each other consolation and correction and putting up with each other's strengths weaknesses and sins, carrying each other's burdens (pathologies, phobias, weaknesses). Real family is a forum whereby our lives break open beyond ourselves and God can enter."

May our Eucharistic gathering be a manifestation of our gathering around the child of God who guides, protects, and transforms us.