

Holy Family – A

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, who are of course the example for all families, the model of family life. This feast comes when it does because during the Christmas season it is very natural to focus on the Holy Family, since Jesus was born into this family and Mary and Joseph are more prominent in our readings right now. In the story of Jesus' birth and his early life, we hear how an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt because Herod was looking for Jesus and wanted to kill him. Joseph, ever obedient, listens to the angel and flees with his family to Egypt. Scripture doesn't give us any more details than this, but no doubt the reality of it was much more difficult than the Gospel conveys. For one thing, travel back then was not very easy. The artistic images of Joseph walking alongside Mary and the baby Jesus riding on a donkey are probably pretty accurate. And Egypt was not exactly close. I looked it up on Google Maps – it's over 300 miles. Imagine

an angel appearing to you and telling you to walk to Louisville. And then Joseph would have had to make a living there to support his family, starting from scratch. They stayed until Herod had died, so they probably were there for a couple years.

I think it's also fitting that we celebrate this feast of the Holy Family when we do because we generally have a lot of family time over the holidays. That can be great, and also maybe sometimes not so great. I am reminded of a Saturday Night Live skit from decades ago called "The Dysfunctional Family Christmas": a parody of a commercial for a Christmas album with song titles like, "Can't You Let It Drop, It's Christmas", "Let's Pretend We Like Each Other This Christmas", and "Someday I'll Get Christmas Right". Family is a wonderful thing: our closest relationships are often with our family, our strongest memories come from family, and so on. But let's face it, family can also be the source of some of the biggest challenges we experience. When family life is good it can be the source of the

greatest joy in life, but when it's not good it can be the source of the greatest sorrow.

The family is the most basic social unit of society. The first civilizations began with tribes: essentially, collections of extended families. We are all comprised of different ethnic groups and nationalities, and basically all of them started as tribes of people, extended families living together who developed a shared culture and language. God created us as social creatures, who live in community, and community is, like the family, a source of great happiness and satisfaction, but can also be the source of much strife and suffering. Human beings thrive in community; we become who we are as individuals by being a part of a community or communities – being influenced by our interactions with others, and likewise influencing others ourselves. By being in community with others, we are able to love and be loved. Without community,

we suffer from loneliness and isolation, and all kinds of social pathologies follow.

But we are also fallen creatures, affected by original sin, and so our experience of community, including family life, can also be negative. One of the negative aspects of community, a bad fruit of our fallen nature, is the us-vs.-them mentality that can develop between groups of people. Every group of people has some kind of shared culture or purpose – without those things, groups would just not form. We feel certain bonds or kinship with the people who are part of the groups of which we are ourselves are members. But a negative aspect of this is when we look at members of other groups with hostility, prejudice, and so on. We can perceive their differences as a threat to us. Examples of this are endless: think of sports fans, let's say Michigan vs. Ohio State fans. Essentially, they are very similar groups of people: both include people who attend, have attended, or otherwise have some affiliation or connection to

two large, Midwestern state universities. Or maybe it's just people who live in the same state as one of these schools. And yet, I have spoken to fans of both schools that literally despise fans of the other school, as in, they think that they are bad people.

Or look at generations. We live in an age in which we name and categorize members of different generations. We have heard of the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomers (now mostly just called "Boomers", Gen X (of which I am a member), the Millennials, and now Gen Z. Besides being born within a certain time frame, there is a tendency to make generalizations about people based on what generation they are a part of. Certainly, there can be some truth to these generalizations: after all, each generation grew up during a different era of history and share things in common with other members of that generation that other generations didn't grow up with and so can't really relate to. For example, the members of Gen Z (even many Millennials) who don't know how to use a rotary

phone. We share an affinity with members of our “generation”, but also sometimes make unfair generalizations of members of other generations, as though every single person born within a certain time frame all share the exact same negative qualities. (I could give examples, but then I run the risk of alienating an entire generation!)

Besides the us-vs.-them mentality that can arise between groups, community – including family – can also be a source of suffering when members of our families or communities hurt us in some way. The closer the relationship, the greater the pain we feel, or the greater the sense of betrayal, when someone hurts us. We can sometimes find ourselves alienated from those communities – including our families – that we should be closest to, with whom we should share the strongest bonds. Again, family can be the source of the greatest joy and happiness in life, but also sometimes the source of the greatest sorrows.

What does all this have to do with the Holy Family? They are of course the model for all families, the perfect example of family life. And naturally so, because Jesus was the Son of God himself, Mary herself was sinless, and Joseph was a just and righteous man, obedient, faithful to, and trusting of the Lord, even in the most difficult and challenging of situations. We can and should look to the Holy Family as the example to imitate, and also to ask them to help us live as they did, and love others as they did.

We are all members of different families, communities, and groups of people. But we are all also unique individuals. And we are all sinners, and we all make mistakes. None of us are always on our best behavior, and sometimes around family, it's easy to be on our worst behavior. We can treat family members carelessly, in ways we would not treat non-family members, because it can be easy to take family for granted. But we owe it to our families and to others to strive to be good, to live good lives, to avoid vice and practice virtue.

Doing this benefits not just ourselves but everyone else in whatever community of which we are a part. However, we can do everything in our power to lead good lives and be good people, but we cannot control how anyone else lives or acts, and that includes even people in our families. And so even if we are doing our best, if others are not, it will have a negative impact on us. So then what are supposed to do? All we can do is continue to try to do our best and so be a light to others in the darkness of a world in which not everyone strives for goodness. All sin – even personal sin – has a negative effect on others. Just one very proud, self-centered person can wreak a lot of havoc on a group of people or a community or a family. The Holy Family gives us the best way to respond to difficult people in whatever community or group or family of which we are a part. And that is two-fold: one, to strive to grow in virtue ourselves, regardless of how others act. And then to strive to forgive those who may have hurt us or sinned against us.

Growing in virtue, and forgiving those who have hurt us – neither of these is easy to do under the best of circumstances, and we cannot do them on our own. We need God’s grace – so let us ask the Lord to give us the grace we need. And let us ask for the intercession of Mary and Joseph for ourselves, our families, for whatever communities of which we are a part, indeed for all people. The more people who strive to imitate the Holy Family and pray for their intercession so that we might be able to forgive the failings and shortcomings of others, the better our families, our communities, and our world will be.

- **December 28, 2025 at St. Mary’s, Spring Lake**