

Holy Family Sunday

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

December 31, 2023

A merry 7th day of Christmas to all!!

Today is Holy Family Sunday, a day when we celebrate family, specifically the Holy Family of Nazareth—Jesus, Mary & Joseph—as a model for our families. While we refer to Jesus, Mary & Joseph as "The Holy Family," being holy doesn't mean that they didn't have difficulties. Just as every one of our families has struggles, so too did the Holy Family. They had problems, crosses to bear, trials and tribulations. Yet, they overcame those difficulties.

The problems, trials and tribulations of the Holy Family are well documented in the four Gospels:

- After the Annunciation, (when Mary had probably the most notable unplanned pregnancy in history) imagine how misunderstood both Mary and Joseph must have been when Jesus was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. Today, their story would be front-page tabloid material!
- Mary herself must have had it very rough early in her pregnancy when Joseph was originally intending to divorce her before the angel of the Lord intervened in a dream.
- When the time for Jesus' birth came about, it took place, not in the comfortable confines of home, but rather "in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."
- Then the family had to flee to Egypt as refugees because Jesus' life was in danger due to King Herod, in much the same way as refugees from war-torn countries are now flooding into the west.
- Mary and Joseph suffered the dreadful experience of losing Jesus for three days when he was twelve years old. How many of us have experienced, even for the briefest of moments, that panicked feeling when we couldn't find our child while shopping at the store?
- In the Gospels, we don't hear of Joseph any more after today's reading, so we presume that he died before Jesus began his public ministry. In this instance, the Holy Family suffered the greatest pain of all families, the pain of grief-stricken sorrow and separation through death.
- Jesus' public ministry surely took its toll on Mary. As we heard in today's Gospel, Simeon predicted that a sword of sorrow would pierce Mary's heart.
 - We can imagine one such occasion, as we will hear in Mark's Gospel later this year, when Jesus returned to Nazareth and his relatives came to take him by force convinced that he was out of his mind.
 - And there was the growing hostility toward Jesus by the Jewish authorities that must have caused great pain to Mary, especially as it became increasingly obvious that Jesus would have to pay for his mission with his life but...
 - The saddest moment of all came when Mary watched her son's passion and death on the cross.

Throughout all these trials and tribulations, you may ask: What kept the Holy Family together? The answer is: 'Love for each other and for God.' We see Jesus' love for his mother when he was dying on the cross. He was worried about leaving her behind, so he asked his disciple John to look after her, saying to Mary, 'Woman, behold, your son', and to John 'Behold, your mother' (John 19:26-27).

Love also holds our families together in times of trial. It doesn't hurt to add "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience," as St. Paul told us in the second reading.

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You may remember that I opened this homily with a greeting in which I wished you “a merry 7th day of Christmas.” That greeting reminds me of the popular song “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” But did you know that this song was initially composed in 18th century England when it was a crime to be Catholic and punishable by death? Legend has it that this song was a way that underground Catholics could secretly catechize their children about the Catholic faith. Specifically, this 7th day of Christmas—with the gift of seven swans a-swimming—surreptitiously represented to Catholics the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit—wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord; gifts that are quite fitting for every family on this Feast of the Holy Family, the 7th day of Christmas.

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But It's love—the “bond of perfection,” as St. Paul mentions in the second reading—which conquers all. Whenever our families are successful, it's because we live in a "dwelling of love."

But what is the greatest obstacle to a "dwelling of love?" In my opinion, it's simply because we don't spend enough time together. In the topsy-turvy world in which we live, we're so busy working, on our phones, playing video games, watching TV or monitoring social media that we have less and less time for each other; and that's a pity! Spending time together with the family is the best way of showing our family that we love them.

Mary and I are fortunate to have 3 wonderful children who are grown and married. As many of you well know, we are about to be blessed with our sixth grandchild. Our family is very close but everyone lives far apart: From New Mexico, to Florida (soon to be Alaska!) and France. Although we're not always successful, we try to get together at least once a year. The point is: We sincerely try to get together often.

To all you moms and dads out there, don't be like the father in the classic song by Harry Chapin "The Cat's in the Cradle," where the dad didn't make time for family while his son was young. Your loving presence, your time, is the greatest gift that you can present to your family!

Just as the Holy Family survived all its crises, let us pray together that our families will conquer our difficulties by loving God and each other.