

Sunday, Dec. 29, 2013

Holy Family (A)

Conventual Mass

The Holy Family, Model for Us

The feast we celebrate today is of recent origin, being little more than a hundred years old. Towards the end of the nineteenth century family life and morality entered a period of decline. It also was becoming apparent that many countries were losing their Christian identity. Papal teachings were aimed at curbing this development. Accordingly, in 1893, Pope Leo XIII instituted a feast of the Holy Family on the Third Sunday after Epiphany. Ultimately it was made a universal feast, and in accordance with the liturgical reform of Vatican II found its way to its present position on the Sunday after Christmas.¹ The crisis of the nineteenth century continued unabated into our own times until we now speak of a “post-Christian” culture.

Today, more than ever there are many people who no longer live in a close knit family structure, but are living in other forms of community or on their own. Even though the feast is directly aimed at preserving the basic family, in its teaching and in the Word of God proclaimed today, it speaks to each one of us, no matter our situation.

Our first reading from Sirach is specific to the feast and speaks of the duties of children towards their parents. “Honor your father and your mother” is the fourth commandment. The Old Testament often refers to it, giving examples and commenting on it. The New Testament also cites it. There is the example of Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees and Scribes who do not give their parents what is due them because hypocritically they have declared their property holy and so escape their obligation. St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians says that this commandment is “the first to carry a promise with it” which means that he considers it a commandment of first importance. The one who honors his father and mother walks in the way of the Lord. All those who walk in the way of the Lord are part of the Lord’s own family, the origin of all families.

In our second reading, St. Paul outlines for the Colossians certain principles of Christian morality. These are not simply an external way of behaving, but spring from an interior attitude. It is the attitude of a child who instinctively walks in the footsteps of its parent. The source of these principles is God himself. It is God’s way of acting. It is relational and flows out of love.

To honor one’s parents is to show them reverence, reverence not in word but in action. But this reverence is not to be confined to parents or relatives. The second great commandment explicitly tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. St Paul’s teaching makes concrete what this means: to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, forgiving, loving, peace filled, thankful. St. Benedict in his chapter on good zeal paraphrases St. Paul in this way: “They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another, not to pursue what he judges better for himself, but what he judges better for someone else” (RB 72L 4-7.

It is the way of God.

In today's gospel we turn from the mystery and poetry of Christmas to its reality. It is too easy to idealize the Holy Family and forget that for all the holiness there were real sufferings and anxieties.

Even before Jesus' birth there was the question of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph's misgivings, the 75 miles of travel by a pregnant woman over rough roads, and the birth itself in a poor stable. Yes, there were the adoration of angels, shepherds, and kings, but those joyful visits themselves attracted the envy of a ruthless tyrant. And now, at the command of God, the family was on the road again, fleeing from their homeland even as so many today have had to leave everything behind because of injustice and war and gone into exile.

St. Mathew tells us that the family's sojourn in Egypt fulfilled an ancient prophecy "Out of Egypt I called my son." But embodying a prophecy does not make life any easier. We only have to think of another prophecy, this time from Isaiah: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is 53:3). The Word made flesh did not assume flesh but took on completely our human nature with all its messiness.

There is a bronze statue in the crypt of the shrine. It is called "The Rest on the Flight into Egypt." It shows a very tired, a very human Holy Family sitting exhausted under the shade of a palm tree. Even the poor donkey looks exhausted. And that is the reality of their lives. Of course they trusted in God, of course they were obedient to God's will, but neither for them as for us was it easy. They suffered.

There are parallels with the story of Moses here. God told Jacob when he and his family moved to Egypt: "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt...Not only will I go down to Egypt with you, I will also bring you back here." And his descendants suffered terribly under the yoke of slavery until God sent them Moses, the liberator. And now another liberator would come out of Egypt, an even greater liberator, for he was to redeem the world from its slavery to Satan, death, and sin. There is another parallel to Moses here. When God told Moses to return to Egypt to deliver his people, God said to him: "Go back to Egypt, for the men who sought your life are dead." Mathew uses almost the same words: The angel of the Lord said to Joseph: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and set out for the land of Israel. Those who had designs on the life of the child are dead." Jesus is the new Moses. He is the instrument of that freedom initiated by God and of which Moses foreshadowed.³

Joseph went back. But note: He was afraid to go back to Judea because Archelaus was ruling over Judea. He was afraid. Of all of St. Joseph's great virtues, it seems to me that his ready obedience to God, no matter what it entailed is his greatest. It would also

characterize Jesus. But note: “He was afraid.” How human, how ordinary, how like us. It reminds me of a scene thirty-three years later, when Jesus knelt praying in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass me by, yet not my will but yours be done.”

This family in all its difficulties and joys remained faithful to God even as we are called to do. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was obedient to Joseph and Mary and grew in wisdom and strength. I am sure that in the process Joseph and Mary grew too, as we all must and will if like them we live in God.

We may not live in a family as we commonly think it. But there is the wider family of friends and community. Above all there is the family of the church, the whole family of the Mystical Body, living and dead. There are those who have gone before us now with Christ who like a cloud of witnesses urge us on to our final destiny: life in and with the ultimate family and for which we were created before all time – life in the family of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

End Notes

1 Days of the Lord, the Liturgical Year, v.1 (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1991)
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2 Days of the Lord, 223

3 Days of the Lord, 227