

## HOLY FAMILY

When I taught theology over here at Catholic University some years ago, one of my students later joined a group that some of you may have heard about. It's called "A Simple House," with its original location in Southeast D.C. and another house opened subsequently in Kansas City, Missouri. The members are all volunteers who, in addition to daily Mass, morning and evening prayer, and the study of scripture, spend much of their time visiting families in project neighborhoods and the homeless in their various camps. They call their work "friendship evangelization," and they do it with the aim of creating long-term friendships that benefit the poor and glorify God.

What I appreciate about the letters that they send out two or three times a year is the honest, humble admission that they often don't succeed in helping the poor and homeless make truly radical changes in their life. It is very much a "one step at a time" kind of evangelization, and something that one of them wrote in this year's Christmas letter cannot but sound poignant as we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family, for many of the people befriended by the volunteers from A Simple House never knew much of family life at all. Here is an excerpt from the most recent letter, written by a man who is married to one of the other volunteers and recounting conversations he held with some of the young men in the neighborhood. He writes:

By far the hardest question they ask me is, "So, how's married life?" I dread this question because I detect a note of sarcasm in it. When they ask me this, I feel that the whole institution of marriage is on trial, and it is up to me to give a compelling defense.

Functional and lasting marriages are virtually nonexistent in their families and neighborhoods, so no one expects to get married or even wants to. The boys have all been disillusioned by failed relationships. The youngest member of the crew did get married, but he got divorced after two years and vows never to marry again.

I don't know if I get through to these young men. Sometimes all they say is "Hmm," and I think that is a good sign. Sometimes they say, "You must be crazy," and I think that is a *really* good sign, for it shows that they are listening and at least considering my points. This reminds me of the scene in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus forbids divorce. His disciples' incredulous response is, "Then who would ever get married?"

God's plan for marriage seems too risky! But all moral choices involve a risk.... All moral choices are fundamentally acts of faith. Part of this faith is trusting that God is not tricking us.

I am fully aware that recounting something like this can make one feel despondent. After all, those young men in Southeast who will likely never get married have certainly not given up sexual activity, meaning that they will almost certainly beget children who will often grow up in single-parent households, sometimes not even knowing who their father is. For all the love that such children may receive from their mothers, harsh statistics tell us that their possibilities of a successful, productive life already face obstacles that those of us who grew up in a stable family environment were spared, just as Jesus was spared. We do not, of course, have many details at all about life in the Holy Family as he was growing up, but the love that certainly existed between Mary and Joseph and between them and Jesus will always be a model for families anywhere in the world.

Most of us—perhaps all of us—may have fewer practical possibilities than the volunteers at A Simple House for making a positive difference in the lives of young men and women living in public housing projects in our city, but at the very least today’s feast should inspire us to do everything we can to promote family life in whatever ways we can. Those of you who are married may want to take this occasion to reflect on such basic things as how well you communicate with your spouse. I heard the other day of a man who is himself very busy with a job that requires a lot of travel and who is married to a woman who literally works more than seventy hours a week. He said in all honesty and simplicity: “I don’t know what she’s thinking, and she doesn’t know what I’m thinking.” How very sad to hear something like that. One of my best friends ever since high school, a man who has had a long and happy marriage, once told me that the thing that has most cemented his marriage is the fact that he and his wife are the best of friends. That obviously means that they communicate with each other about things both trivial and profound and would never be able to say that they have no idea what the other is thinking.

And all of us—whether me in a religious community that is in some sense a family, or those who are single, or those who are married—could be led to reflect on what those beautiful opening lines of today’s second reading say about the conduct of any life with others: “Put on, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another: as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.” Just think how much better our entire society would be if everyone lived out those words. Let us, at least, take them to heart and put them into practice day by day. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, pray for us. Bless us now and at the hour of our death.