

Holy Family **B**2017  
(Sir 3:2-6,12-14; Col 3:12-17; Luke 2:22,39-40)

The reasons for celebrating the Holy Family at this time are pretty obvious. Simply to kneel at the Christmas crib, we see Jesus, Mary, and Joseph before us, the Holy Family beginning its life together. We may think of the Holy Family as extraordinary in every way, but in some ways they were fairly ordinary. They could be a pretty typical nuclear family--mother, father, and child. They lived in an obscure part of the world, the people who appear in their lives are the simpler members of society, the father was a carpenter who appears to have supported them marginally; their offering at the Presentation in the Temple, a pair of doves rather than a lamb, marked them as poor people.

In spite of appearances, they were not ordinary. Jesus was God incarnate, Mary an immaculate virgin. And their future would be greater still--Jesus to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Mary to be crowned Queen of Heaven, and Joseph to be Patron of the Universal Church.

This Holy Family was pure grace, a gift from God. Yet today=s readings suggest that the Church wants us to reflect not only on the Holy Family, but also on family relationships in general. And this is a very important matter because many of the evils that afflict our culture today can be traced to the breakdown of family life. How much better off a person is with the support of a family; it

helps us to avoid evil companions, comforts us in trouble and affliction, and strengthens us in difficulties.

Maintaining good family relationships is worth whatever effort it requires. But our readings look upon family relationships not as purely secular, worldly concerns, but as the very stuff of our spiritual lives. The first reading, from Sirach, deals mainly with the respect and obedience due to parents; such respect and obedience is seen as a religious offering. Sirach even says it "atones for sin." And he admonishes grown children to care for their parents.

The second reading urges us to cultivate those qualities and virtues that will make family life to be what it ought to be: qualities of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. It urges forgiveness of one another, a forgiveness like that with which the Lord has forgiven us. It urges peace and love.

All this is reflected in the Holy Family. One way in which the Holy Family certainly was extraordinary, was in the love, the patience, the unselfishness that characterized their behavior toward each other. Those little bickerings and major blow-ups that too often intrude into our own family relationships must have been absent from theirs--not because Jesus was God, not because Mary was immaculately conceived, but because they treated each other with love and respect. This is the way it should be in every family. If this were so, there would be fewer dysfunctional families, fewer divorces.

But I think God also wants us to take a more

inclusive view of family. Jesus does not hesitate to call those who hear the word of God and keep it His most intimate family members: "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is sister and brother and mother to me."

The early Church was very inclusive; the crowd at the first Pentecost included people "from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5), but the members regularly referred to each other as "sister" and "brother." St. Paul constantly addresses his readers as "brothers," which we now read inclusively as "sisters and brothers," and he called individuals who certainly were not related to him by blood "my sister," "my brother." In Galatians he refers to believers as "Those who belong to the family of the faith" (Gal 6:10)--or we might say, "the family of God." Thus we can think of the Church as a Holy Family. Again, this family is a gift from God, a grace, but now also needing the labor of the Apostles and early Christians.

But perhaps we should be even more inclusive than this. Revelation shows us a vision of "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue" standing before the throne (7:9). This is a vision of the end time, but it is already foreseen by the prophets. Isaiah tells us that in days to come all nations shall stream toward the mountain of the Lord to receive God's instruction, to walk in His ways, and no longer raise the sword against one another, no longer train for war (2:2-4).

Still more impressive is another vision in Isaiah. We know that Egypt was hated by Israel as the land of

bondage, Assyria, too, as destroyer of the northern kingdom. Egypt and Assyria were themselves always at war with each other. Yet now we find this sublime oracle: "On that day Israel shall be a third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, when the LORD of hosts gives this blessing: 'Blessed be my people Egypt, and the work of my hands Assyria, and my heritage, Israel'" (Isa 19:24-25). Here these inveterate enemies are one people. Never before had any but Israel been called "my people," but here it is Egypt; never before had any but Israel been called "the work of my hands," but here it is Assyria. The prophet expresses the yearning of God's heart that all His children be one.

We speak of "the family of man" and Adam named his wife "Eve" because she is mother of all the living. God wants all of us to be a "Holy Family." All His children should be one in love. This is what we pray for every time we say "Thy kingdom come."

How far we are from this! Even within our own country we find racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, hostility toward immigrants--anyone who is different, is a target. This is not the way it should be. This is what Pope Francis means when he said "A person who thinks only about building walls, ..., and not building bridges is not Christian. This is not the gospel." Chinese, Japanese, Caucasians, Nigerians, Native Americans, Mexicans are all called to be part of God's "Holy Family." As the Church became God's Holy Family through grace and the work of early Christians, so now through grace, we should be

building God's all-embracing Holy Family. Yuge endeavor, you say? Indeed it is, but as individuals we are each asked to do our small part.

We start by showing respect for one another. We look on each person as a human being like oneself and therefore worthy of the respect I think I deserve. Christ lived in poverty, so the poorest of the poor has dignity. Recognize and respect it. No one should be despised. Our political leaders, especially in their treatment of each other, are not good role models; let's not imitate them.

The next step is to consider everyone as deserving love. We can't truly love those we don't know, but all are made in God's image, Jesus shed His blood for all. He won't forgive us if we despise those for whom He died.

New Year's--tomorrow--is a good time for resolutions, a good time to decide to be a better person. Don't make extravagant resolutions that you can't keep and won't remember. Resolve now to show respect to all you know, to recognize as worthy of your love everyone God loves. That way we=ll be God=s Family, will be like the Holy Family.