



HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY – YEAR C

Today we celebrate the Holy Family, which quite simply is a picture of a family. It is sadly ironic that sometimes our reaction to the Holy Family is discouragement. We see a Christmas card of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in which everything is perfect and beautiful, and our first thought is, “My family looks nothing like that!!”

To begin with, we need to be clear - the Holy Family is not a Christmas card. This family, filled with grace as it was, went through unbelievable difficulties, trials, and struggles. Having grown up on a dairy farm, I am very familiar with the sights, sounds, and smells of a barn and it

doesn't resemble what you see on Christmas cards! That is what our own families are like - certainly not perfect. This family, the Holy Family, like ours, needed to make choices to love when it was difficult, to be faithful when the way forward was anything but sure. The Holy Family provides an ideal, yes, but one, which is still a real human family, that knows the very same hardships we know. Thus this day is a day of hope, not discouragement.

Our readings provide a beautiful picture of family life and the dynamics every family will face! The First Reading from the Book of Sirach speaks of the fulfillment of the fourth commandment and shows how loving our parents and members of our family, goes hand and hand with loving God. Jesus reiterates this when He tells us that the whole law can be summed up in loving God, and your neighbor, as yourself. Consider love then within the family. Love always starts with those closest to us, which are our family members. Loving our families is part and parcel with loving God and the two go hand in hand. To ignore one is to ignore the other.

The Letter to the Colossians, which was written between 60-62 AD by St. Paul, while imprisoned in Rome, is one of the “captivity” letters along with the Letter to Philemon and the Letter to the Ephesians. There are close parallels between Colossians and Ephesians, including sharing common themes and expressions and, sometimes, identical teachings. Ephesians has a calm, almost contemplative tone, while in the Letter to the Colossians, St. Paul is more “matter of fact” and aggressive. There are a lot of false teachings making inroads into the Church in Colossae which were confusing many of the new faithful. This could explain St. Paul's “tougher” tone, at times. Chapter 3-4 is about Christian behavior and is addressing family life in our passage today. It is a brief excerpt on Christian family life and St. Paul will expound on in more detail in his Letter to the Ephesians. However, there is another important point to make here: our Lectionary translation is the NABR (New American Bible Revised), which causes problems with the English translation of this passage. It reads; “wives be **subordinate**” to your husbands, as is proper to the Lord.” In English, “subordinate” has an inferior or “less than” connotation. However, the RSV (Revised Standard Version) translation, a much better translation from the original Greek language, reads: “wives be **subject** to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” The Greek implies her *submission* is free and voluntary, not degrading, servile or coercive in any way. St. Paul is introducing a new Christian understanding of mutual submission to the pagan Gentiles. This is about gender complementarity within the Christian understanding of marriage and family. St. Paul sees women not as property, as the ancient world viewed them, but as loving partners in marriage, deserving of love. St. Paul expands or unfolds this teaching in Ephesians 5: 21-33 when he says “out of reverence for Christ.” Mutual submission means being under the mission of the other and loving each other as Christ and the Church love each other. St. Paul is actually telling men NOT to demean or dominate women, as was the cultural norm, and love them as Christ loves and gives Himself to the Church. Wives, be under the mission of your husband as the feminine Church is under the mission of the masculine Christ. The mission of the husband is to build up the marriage and the family; to love, support and protect, including protecting from sin and evil. This was all expounded on beautifully by St. John Paul II in “*Men and Women He Created Them - A Theology of the Body.*”

In his letter to the Colossians St. Paul presents the realities of family life and the virtues a family requires. He compares these virtues to garments, which, like any garment, require our active choice to put them on or not. Family life will require choosing to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness even when we don't particularly feel like it. Consider what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to up and move to Egypt. I can guarantee in midst of that move with all of its fears, doubts, and uncertainties that they found many opportunities therein

to choose to put on many things, most especially patience! Every family, facing the realities of life, is given ample opportunity to put on the garments of a Christian family.

What we see in all of these readings are the basic, foundational things upon which every family will need to work and ask for grace. These are the things the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony makes possible, but requires us drawing on that grace.

On this Feast of the Holy Family, let's get back to the basics. Do we remember that love is a choice - and a choice that must be made again and again - to put on compassion, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness? Do I honor my Father and my Mother - even when it is most frustrating? Are there any blind spots in the family that are not being addressed? When it comes to passing on the faith do we do what God and the Church ask of us in regard the sacraments, prayer, etc? Another way to put it, are we humble enough to do what God asks of us - even if it means making hard decisions?

This kind of self-examination can be a discouraging task. Don't let it be so. Here are a couple of helpful suggestions. First, as you look to the basics it might seem there is a plethora of things to work on (if this is true for you welcome to the club!). Don't tackle all of them at once, but start with one thing. On this feast of the Holy Family, see what Jesus points to as an area of growth and take one good step in following Him as a family. Second, don't do this on your own - surround yourselves with other families. Look to a Mom's group or Dad's group and find the support and encouragement you need. If there isn't one in your parish, consider starting one!

The Holy Family is Holy, but we must remember they are not a Christmas card! They are a picture of a real family, filled with grace, yes, but still facing great difficulties and struggles. They are great patrons for each one of us who ourselves come from a family that has difficulties and struggles. Let us not be discouraged, but encouraged by the fact that Jesus came into the world in a family and that the Holy Family prays for us. Let us then commend ourselves to the Holy Family's example and prayers.



***Father Todd Koenigsknecht** was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Lansing in June of 2014. He is the parochial vicar for St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Father Todd attended Theology of the Body I in June 2015.*