

Homily
Holy Family C
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Saint Bernard Church
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Pope Saint John Paul II wrote in his major document on the Christian family that the future of humanity passes through the family. If we have enough strong families, our country, our culture and our Church will be strong. If we have too many weak families, we're in big trouble across the board.

If we're Christian, and if we want to have a strong family, we will pattern ourselves after the Holy Family, whom we are honoring today.

So let's take a look at what we know about the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and see what we know about them.

This morning, we're going to focus on 3 main characteristics of the Holy Family. We'll look at their structure, their identity and their sense of adventure.

First, the structure.

As Jews, Mary and Joseph followed the structure and the customs of Judaism. So Jesus was circumcised, presented formally in the temple as a very young child and taken to the temple in Jerusalem for every Passover.

Mary honored Joseph's authority, going with him to Egypt when Joseph led her and Jesus there to protect Jesus from Herod.

Jesus added to the structure when He stated in Matthew 19 that marriage was to be permanent, indicating that what God had joined He would sustain over time.

Saint Paul also added to the structure. He wrote, in his Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians, that wives should honor their husbands' authority. As for the husbands, he wrote in Ephesians that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the Church and handed Himself over for her.

So, there are two important points about husbands that we need to make very clear.

First, the basis of the husband's authority, of his decisions, is not his own thought process. In 1 Corinthians 11, verse 3, Saint Paul says this:

“I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and a husband the head of his wife...”

So the husband’s authority comes entirely from the husband’s prayerful discernment on what Christ wants for the husband’s wife and children.

Secondly, the husband is to sacrifice himself for the wife in the same way that Jesus sacrificed Himself for the Church.

When it comes to structure, this second point is what makes a marriage really flourish.

The power of every sacrament comes from the life, teachings, sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus. So the power of every married couple comes from a prayerful commitment to be like Jesus, for each person to say to their spouse, and really mean it, I will sacrifice myself for you. I will put your needs and the needs of our children ahead of my own needs.

Pope Saint John Paul II wrote that “Spouses remind the Church what happened on the Cross.”

As a husband, my commitment to my wife is modeled after the commitment Jesus made at the Last Supper. In every aspect of marriage, and especially in the sexual expression of my love, I am communicating that “This is my body which shall be given up for you. I will love you and sacrifice myself for you until the day I die. And if God blesses us with children, I will love them and sacrifice for them until my last breath.”

The commitment that I just described can only be lived out if both the husband and wife depend on the grace that comes from their faith in Jesus Christ to sustain them in their marriage. So they have to be prayerful and have an active faith.

Next, let’s look at the role that identity plays in a marriage, which really comes down to what a married couple perceives to be their mission and purpose.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph were obviously the holiest of families. They lived a quiet, simple life in Nazareth, a small town considered to be very much off the grid in terms of importance and influence. Their identity, their mission and purpose, was focused primarily on the spiritual and not on the worldly.

Our families will not be as holy as THE Holy Family, but holiness should still be our main objective. So every member of the family should make their faith in Jesus Christ the center of their lives. Parents should take the lead in this mission.

In addition to faith and holiness, every family should have other characteristics which distinguish their identity as a family.

For example, in my family, I often told my children that my father and his brother, who both did business in Tulsa, were known to be men of their word. So to be a Sullivan meant that you had to be completely honest in everything you said and did.

Other aspects of our identity included doing things together as often as possible, and especially being together every night for the family meal. We limited the use of technology, including television, and encouraged an appreciation for nature and doing things outdoors.

Finally, even though they lived in a quiet town, Mary and Joseph had a keen sense of adventure, an openness and flexibility in dealing with unforeseen developments. Mary agreed to be the mother of the Savior of humanity, the Son of God. Think of what it was like to be Mary and Joseph when they accidentally left the Savior stranded in Jerusalem when he was only 12.

Joseph agreed to go forward with his marriage to Mary even though she was carrying someone else's baby. Then he followed a message he got from an angel in a dream one night and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt, evading the death squads of King Herod. Subsequent dreams guided him back to Israel and eventually to Nazareth.

Ultimately, as we all know, the sense of adventure of the Holy Family led Jesus and Mary to Calvary.

The example of the Holy Family raises this question for every family: What is God's specific will for your family? Yes, be good and holy people. Obey God's commandments and the teachings of the Catholic Church. But beyond this, what does God want your family to do that is unique to your family?

Are the parents actively praying to discern God's will for the family? Are they sharing this process with their children, so the children can learn how God's will is revealed and experienced? Does the whole family have a sense that God is leading them in every aspect of the family's life?

Is the father of the family, like Joseph, taking steps to protect and guide the family, not just physically and financially but especially spiritually? Is the mother, like Mary, providing an example of purity, virtue and holiness?

Any family that is trying to discern and follow God's will is going to have a strong sense of adventure, an understanding of how God's will plays out in a person's life and a keen awareness of the reality of God's grace.