

Homily.Holy Family.12.27.20  
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## PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING A HOLY FAMILY

What's your image of a holy family?

Well, of course the ultimate is Joseph, Mary and Jesus, but we hardly know anything about how they functioned, what they did every day, what the rules were, how they prayed together and what they did for fun. Their life together in Nazareth was basically hidden for 30 years.

So today I'm going to describe how a holy family might function in a way that I think Joseph, Mary and Jesus would approve of, but is a lot more specific than what we know about them.

I'm going to give a list of principles and suggestions for building a holy family in today's world. This list is going to include ways to have fun, ways to enjoy each other, because a holy family is a family that laughs a lot together.

For some of the principles, I will give examples from my own family of how they can be applied. This does not mean that my family is the prototype of the holy family. It's just that we did successfully apply some of these principles. But some of the principles we hardly applied at all, because we learned them too late.

Principle number one is what I call the radiation principle. By this I mean that everything in the family radiates from the relationship between the husband and wife. The way the husband and wife relate to each other, the values they share, their generosity towards each other, all create a culture in the home that greatly influences all that happens there. The strengths and weaknesses of the parents are reflected in the lives of their children.

Principle number two, then, is that the top three priorities of the married couple are, in order, God, each other, then the children. The fact that the children are the third priority does not mean that the parents focus a disproportionate amount of time on themselves. It does mean that they are attentive to how they need to be growing and improving as a couple. And they do need to enjoy regular dates with each other. They demonstrate to the children what love is and how love is lived.

Principle number three is that praying together is an essential family activity. And the most important type of prayer is not memorizing all the Catholic prayers but learning how to pray for specific needs and then monitoring together how God answered the prayers. This way children learn that prayer is

powerful, that their relationship with God is real and dynamic, and that their conversation with God is essential and ongoing.

Principle number four is that Sunday is a day for the Lord and for the family. Keeping the Lord's Day holy is a commandment, not an option. These days, keeping the children from outside activities on Sundays requires the equivalent of a declaration of war.

One of my rules that drove the children crazy was that they could not spend the night at a friend's house on a Saturday night. We wanted the entire family together on Sunday morning, not scattered in other people's homes.

Principle number five is for the husband and wife to be strategic about using their complementarity. For example, my wife, Connie, was great at communication. She strived to always keep the communication channels with the children open and was at times very creative in accomplishing this.

I used my skill at stretching the children, getting them out of their comfort zone if I thought things were too cozy. For example, I started planning our trips, where we would go, where we would stay. Even my wife didn't know the details of our travels.

One year, for spring break, when our budget was tight, the kids were begging to know where we were going. They wanted a clue. I told them we were "bound for freedom." They had no idea what that meant. So we drove to Freedom, Oklahoma, out in the far western part of the state. It turned out to be a very memorable trip, one that the kids still talk about.

The point is that a father and mother need to take inventory of their respective personal characteristics and use them in an intentional way for the good of their children.

Principle number six is that cultural trends need to be carefully monitored. In our case, that meant putting strong restrictions on watching tv on school nights and using other forms of technology. We had an early version of Nintendo, but it broke and we never replaced it. So no one played video games. Now, when we get together, smart phones are kept out of sight unless someone has a call or is taking a picture.

Principle number seven is related to principle number six. It is a huge thing for a family to have fun together, and that's together with a capital T. Having fun together requires creativity, humor and a sense of adventure. At the core of having fun is creating opportunities where every member of the family is genuinely enjoying each other.

When most of our children were young adults and were dating someone, they came up with what they called “Love Fest.” This was an event which every adult child and their current love interest attended along with Connie and me. It included dinner at the family table followed by games such as Scattergories, Catch Phrase and Apples to Apples. You learn a lot about love interests from the way they play games like these. Several who attended Love Fest did not make the cut.

Principle number eight is knowing and respecting the balance between what parents can do and what God wants to do with our children. What this means is that the parents recognize the limits of their control, that there are times when they need to be flexible and patient enough for God to step in and do what is needed on his timetable, not the parents.

As an example, several of my children went to colleges I would never recommend to anyone. But in every one of these situations, the colleges chosen by my children ended up being a blessing in important and constructive ways.

That principle leads to principle number nine, which relates again to the issue of prayer. An extremely important aspect of prayer is not what our children say to God. It’s what God communicates to them. It’s the situations and circumstances in their lives that God orchestrates for their benefit. So the children must believe in God’s personal love for them and be paying attention to how God is leading them.

Ultimately, the bottom line purpose of the family is for each person in the family to be where God wants them to be and to do what God wants them to do. That requires prayer to discern God’s will and to be attentive to how God might be communicating His will to each member of the family.

I once went to see a priest for guidance in dealing with a problem with one of my adult children. After I described the situation, the priest said, basically, “You’ve done and said all you need to do and say. God has your child’s whole life to work out these types of attitudes and behaviors. And He can use other people besides you to accomplish His objectives.”

Principle number ten is that the relationship with Jesus is the primary, fundamental focus of the family and of each family member. The parents must communicate and model their conviction that Jesus is the center of their lives, that He is Lord and Savior and that grace is real. That the family is Catholic because it is through the Catholic Church that we can be closest to Jesus and have access to the most grace and to the most fulfilling life possible this side of heaven.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph are constantly available to help every family be a holy family. It's up to us to choose holiness as our objective, and to call upon Jesus, Mary and Joseph for guidance, protection, purification and grace.