

Holy Family

Did you hear or read about the pope's Christmas homily? He continued the tradition of offering Christmas greetings in different languages (64, the Providence Journal said), and called for "authentic solidarity" in this time of economic crisis. "If people look only to their own interests," he said, "our world will certainly fall apart." He also called for dialogue and negotiations in the troubled areas of the world, between the Israelis and the Palestinians, in war-torn eastern Congo, in the Sudan's Darfur region, in Somalia and in Zimbabwe. He prayed: "May the divine light of Bethlehem radiate throughout the Holy Land. May it spread throughout Lebanon, Iraq and the whole Middle East." As the first bishop of the Catholic Church, *primus inter pares* (first among equals), the pope has to have a universal outlook. He cannot limit his view to one nation or people. He has to include all the world in his vision. And that is what we see reflected in this Christmas sermon of Benedict XVI.

As members of the Catholic Church we have to share this universal outlook. Our vision must be universal. And the reason behind this universal vision is our belief that there is one God, that He has created the human race as a unity, and that his love for this human

race has now become human in one human being, Jesus of Nazareth. And if now and then our love seems less than universal, if we are surprised at time by our own smallness, by our own desire to restrict our love and even God's to those of our own kind, we must not be surprised. For we find that in the Lord himself .

The Gospels present Jesus to us as concentrating on his own people, on his fellow Jews. They tell us that when he found faith among Gentiles, he is surprised by it and at least in one scene almost forced into accepting it. That is the scene with the Canaanite (so non-Jewish) woman who begs Jesus to cure her possessed daughter. Jesus doesn't answer her at first. Then the disciples urge Jesus to send her away because she keeps following them and shouting at them. Jesus then says: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the woman persists, kneeling before him and saying, "Lord, help me." But he answers: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But the woman persists, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." He is vanquished by her faith and responds: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly" (Mt 15: 21-28).

This same experience is also reflected in the first days of the church. The apostles are surprised that their preaching finds acceptance among the Gentiles. Indeed, within a generation or two the church became predominantly Gentile because most Jews did not accept Jesus as he was being preached, as the risen Messiah, but the Gentiles did.

This tension between restrictiveness and universality continues in our church, for while we are open to all in charity, we do insist on the unity of our church and with that insistence comes the need to distinguish between those who are and who are not part of it as a living, visible institution. We do insist that people commit themselves to the church and its rules before they can share in its Eucharistic meal. Furthermore, the church sees its own unity as a model for the human race. Just as the church is one family, so too should the human race be one. Ideally, then, our church sees itself as including all people, even though many of us, I suspect, doubt that this vision will become a reality any time soon, perhaps not even within history.

But what about our own families on this Feast of the Holy Family?

For many of us the situation today is not what it was when we were young and practically all the members of our family and our group of friends were Catholic, and practicing Catholics. Today within the family there are believers and non-believers, Catholics and Protestants, Jews and perhaps even Muslims. All related, all family, all perhaps gathered to celebrate “the holidays.” What are we to do who still cling to the Church and still see the Church as the church sees itself, as the one, visible sacrament of Christ’s love in the world? How are we to behave? The answer is clear: we must model for them the love of Christ. We must be bringers of peace and understanding in our families. All that we ask of them is that they respect our faith and our allegiance to our church.

And parents today? May your own living of your faith guide you in your love for your children so that you will make it possible for them to become believers in Jesus, believers in the reality of God and his love for the human race as one human family. Teach them to pray. Teach them to be kind and considerate and respectful of others. Teach them to be responsible in the use of their gifts. You can say to them: Do as I say, not as I do. But that will run thin. In the long run, you have to do as you tell them to do, or they won’t do it either.

On this feast of the Holy Family, let us remember those who made family for us. May they be with God and the Lord Jesus in life eternal. Let us pray for our current family members. May we all be blessed with faith and hope and love. Let us pray especially for young families today, that the grace of our Lord Jesus may guide their parents in bringing up their children. Amen.