

Holy Family of Jesus

1. It is not surprising that the first feast we celebrate liturgically after the feast of Christmas is that of the Family. After all, when a couple marry, we refer to them as a couple. But, unless I am mistaken, we don't refer to them as a family until they have a child or children. Therefore, having celebrated the birth of the Lord Jesus, we now focus on him and his parents as a family. And the church, to celebrate this feast of the Holy Family, uses a reading from the Book of Sirach, from Paul's Letter to the Colossians, and from Matthew's Gospel.

2. The Book of Sirach, written around 180 B.C., so a late book of the Old Testament, tells us that those who honor their parents will be rewarded: their sins will be forgiven; their prayers will be heard, and they will have children and a long life. In other words, the text gives reasons why it is worth our while to honor our parents. It will go well with you, it says, if you do so. I suspect that we would agree with the text. Those who are good to their parents will normally benefit from their good actions because they will behave in a similar way, that is, in a caring and respectful, yes, in a loving way, in other situations of life and will therefore do well. For normally goodness brings good results. Those who are charitable

and hard working usually do well in life. They may not turn out to be the richest of people, but they will gather friends around themselves and will win the approval of those with whom they work. Bonum est utile, the medieval philosophers said. The Good is useful. We might put it this way: Goodness produces good results.

3. The second reading from Paul's Letter to the Colossians enumerates about six ways of acting which are proper to Christians in dealing with each other and of course with their families: compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness. Then throw over all of these virtues, Paul says, love, which is the bond of perfection. And not content with this instruction, he goes on to tell them to be peaceful and thankful, to listen to God's word, to teach and admonish each other, and to sing in gratitude to the Lord. Then he has particular admonitions: Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, and husbands, you're your wives. And children, obey your parents.

4. If we substitute the word *respect* for the word *subordinate* (wives, respect your husbands, or, we could also say, listen to your husbands, because the word *obey* means to listen), I think we would all be comfortable with this instruction. What a beautiful

way for people to live together! This is life in the Spirit of Jesus. This kind of behavior lived out by the early communities caused the society around them to say of them: See how they love one another. And this must have been the dynamic which brought about the conversion of many so that within two centuries the followers of a man crucified as a criminal were members of a church which had replaced the gods of Rome as the official religion of the Empire.

5. Today's Gospel from Matthew emphasizes the character of Joseph, as opposed to the Gospel of Luke which emphasizes Mary, and portrays him as the man who obeys God. Joseph is willing to leave his country at God's bidding.

6. The cry everywhere today is that family life is deteriorating. There are many causes for this. Both parents work today. There is less time at home together and around a common meal. The larger society corrupts children with its constant message that the only thing worthwhile in life is how sexually attractive you are. Or if there is something more worthwhile than that it, it is money and power, and then sexual attractiveness becomes the means to obtain these. Oh, it is the same old story which Ignatius of Loyola talked about. The way of the evil one leads people first to a desire for

money, then to a desire for vain fame, and from there to pride, whereas the Lord Jesus leads people first to a desire to be free of being possessed by possessions, and then to a desire to be selfless and humble. But how to preach that to children today? How to keep them pure? How to keep them free from consumerism?

7. There is one note in the first reading which sounds so up to date, that dealing with the care of the elderly and demented. Even 2000 thousand years ago this was a problem for people. Today it is ever more so because we are living longer, and many of us lose our minds.

8. I suspect most of us hold off as long as we from putting our parents in a home, but when we cannot care for them we have to do so. Perhaps society should make it easier for people to stay in their homes, but that is not always the case today. Here we all have to search our hearts to find out what is best for our parents, and not for ourselves. May God guide us in this matter! But there is no question that there is something beautiful and therefore Christian in the care which a grown-up child gives to a demented parent. And there is something ugly and unchristian in the lack of care which a grown-up child manifests toward a demented parent.

May God save us from acting in that unredeemed way, no matter what it costs us. For here too God is teaching us how to love.