

The Holy Family (B)  
(Genesis 15:1-6.21:1-3 / Luke 2:22-40)  
31.12.2017  
*Perfect families do not exist*

All the debates triggered by the last Roman Synod on the family and the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* show clearly that it is not easy to speak about family life.

We are caught between seemingly conflicting realities: the desire to maintain the family a stable institution, the challenging evolution of thought and understanding in regard to gender and sexual orientation issues, our experience of families where faith and love have been nurtured and strengthened and of families where women, men and children have been deeply wounded by various forms of abuse. And last but not least, we have the example of the Holy Family: a sinless mother, a holy father and a divine Son.

How is it possible to reconcile all these aspects of human and Christian family life?  
Do not expect me to give an exhaustive answer to that question!

First of all, as Christians, we must not forget that we belong to a greater family than the one formed by blood. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> Eucharistic Prayer, we ask God: “Listen graciously to the prayers of the family you have summoned before you”.

The family we form here this morning is a real family because we are children of the same Father and brothers and sisters of Christ. It is based on faith, hope and love and in a way these three bonds are stronger than blood.

It is true that “blood is thicker than water”, and yet what finally and fruitfully seals family life is not blood but faith, hope and love.

St John Paul II and Pope Francis have both spoken of the family as a school. Indeed the family should be a school where we learn to love, to forgive, to respect and to understand one another.

Above all it seems to me that the family should be the school where we learn to deal with failures and mistakes in a fruitful way. It is important to be reminded that in the school of the family, most of us are slow learners.

We should also begin by humbly acknowledging that perfect families do not exist. We do not help one another, and particularly those families who are going through a difficult time, by playing at keeping up appearances about our families. The point is not to share with everybody our problems and challenges, but to be honest about the fact that perfect parents or children do not exist, that many aspects of our relationships with our parents, children, siblings and relatives are marked by misunderstandings, mistakes, betrayals, and hurts.

Denials and secrets hold us prisoners and prevent us from working at the healing of our wounds and from moving on. A 15<sup>th</sup> c. monk warns us: “We are going to render an account to God, not only for our idle words, but also for our ill-considered silence”. In our families, there may be too many words left unspoken and sufferings left unheeded.

Family life should be the place where we are able to talk about our problems and difficulties because in our families, we are supposed to find security and unconditional love.

When love is conditional, when there is emotional and financial blackmail, when we are afraid of being rejected and remain silent then we allow wounds to fester, relationships to become superficial and pressure to rise. Again, it is important to insist, we all have been

wounded by our family. So we are not supposed to expect our families to be without problems but to be places where we can deal with problems in a healthy and fruitful way.

Too easily we take family life for granted. We suppose that it is normal and automatic for relatives to love one another. Things are not so simple. Love and respect have to be nurtured and strengthened by a commitment to love and to respect.

Because with time people change, the construction of a family is an ongoing and patient work of attentive listening and dialogue.

In our Gospel reading we were told that, in his home, Jesus “grew in maturity and was filled with wisdom”; a few verses later, St Luke adds that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour” (2:52). Mary and Joseph provided for Jesus an environment which helped him to grow in humanity and to learn and to understand what it meant to be a human being.

On the last day of our civil calendar and given that next August, Dublin will host the World Meeting of Families, we have to ask ourselves whether or not our families are schools where all grow in humanity, in life and in love.

God our Father never ceases to come to us his children, he never gives up on each one of us, he never abandons us, he always desires to reach out to all his sons and daughters. In the same way, in our families, whether we are parents or children and some of us may be both at the same time, we are called to manifest the power of love as the only power able to build and sustain our families.

As we care for our families, let us use with perseverance the tools of forgiveness, mercy, dialogue, trust and hope so that we may teach one another how to relate in a Christian way to those beyond the boundaries of our families.