

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (C)

(1 Samuel 1:20-22.24-28 / Luke 2:41-52)

27.12.2015

*Human Families*

The opening and concluding prayers of our celebration invite us to imitate the example of the Holy Family. This sounds quite appropriate... and yet what does it really mean for us to do this?

So-called artistic representations of the Holy Family always portray Mary, Joseph and Jesus in perfect harmony, smiling and happy. Actually they must have formed a happy family. However what we heard in our Gospel reading and the impression we get from our overall reading of the Gospels reveal a family which is not exempt of tensions and misunderstandings, doubts and disagreements.

Jesus' rebuke of his parents in the Temple is not an isolated event. Later in Jesus' life, there is the episode when his family wants "to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind' " (Mk 3:21); when his mother and brothers come to him and ask to see him, he declares: "Who are my mother and my brothers? Looking at those around him, he says, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!' " (Mk 3:31-34). So much for peace and harmony!

So what are we supposed to learn from the example of the Holy Family?

The Holy Family teaches us first of all what it means to be a truly human family. They show us that we do not have to despair when there are disagreements and misunderstandings in our families. Families in which everybody agrees, in which there are no tensions and no challenges are not real, human and ultimately humane families. Life is about diversity and tensions. A tensionless body cannot stand up. A tensionless family is either dead or it is ruled like a dictatorial and oppressive political regime.

Human maturity and holiness depend on the way members of the family deal with changes and growth rather than burying them, denying their existence or refusing to face up to them.

We are all tempted to expect our parents, our children, our siblings, our brothers and sisters in community to always be in agreement, in a good mood, and to see things as we see them. We all would like our brothers and sisters to relate to our parents in the same way we relate to them. We all expect our parents to behave with all their children in the same way. All these attitudes and expectations not only betray a biased and one-sided perspective on people and events but they betray also a wrong approach to Christian holiness.

Because God became a human being in Jesus Christ, our humanity has become our way to God. It is not by rejecting our humanity that we grow in holiness but by embracing it and transforming it with God's grace and love at work within us.

What I have just said is not a call to settle for mediocrity, or to be satisfied with divisions and unresolved conflicts. On the contrary, to grow in holiness is to invite God into all our messy relationships, into the troubled areas of the lives of our families and communities so that he may use them for his glory and for our good.

A holy human family is not a family wherein there are no disagreements but it is a family wherein disagreements are dealt with grace, justice, respect, truth, patience and love. What makes our families less than holy is not that they experience tensions, but that too often when tensions arise, people become defensive, judgemental, hard-hearted, impatient and proud.

Beyond all the clean and peaceful images of the Nativity we see on Christmas cards, we have to remember that Christ was born in a manger, rejected by mainstream society, that his birth was surrounded by the death of other children and that, with his parents, he had to flee from his homeland. It is in and from the midst of a messy world that the Lord shows us the way of holiness.

Our families and communities will become holy if, in them, we practice the way of Christ, the way of self-giving love, which alone can purify us from all forms of domination, jealousy, abuse and violence.

Family homes are not necessarily cosy, warm and pleasant places wherein we want to rest. Families are not always encouraging, respectful and life-giving.

While there is the natural bond of blood, there is nothing spontaneous and automatic about love in family life. The great challenge is to show to all, and particularly to the younger generations, that family is a school where we are supposed to grow in humanity. The image of the school implies work and perseverance. Families are built up by sacrifice and patience, by fidelity and love.

And ultimately the difficult aspect of family life is that we have to let go of our desire to possess one another. Family life is a school of letting go. The love which unites all the members of a family should allow them to go their own way in life, God's way for each one of them.

This is the deep meaning of Jesus' words to his parents, words that they did not understand: "Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?"

On next Ash Wednesday, Pope Francis will commission priests throughout the world as Missionaries of Mercy. I am sure that the call to be missionaries of mercy is not confined only to priests.

Why would we not all begin today to bear witness to God's mercy wherever we are, with our parents, children, siblings and relatives, with our brothers and sisters in community?

Inspired by Pope Francis, may we echo the word of God that resounds strong and clear as a message and a sign of pardon, strength, aid, and love. In our families and communities may we never tire of extending mercy, and be ever patient in offering compassion and comfort. (cf. Bull of Indiction, 11.04.2015)