

The Holy Family (C)
(1John 3:1-2.21-24 / Luke 2:41-52)
30.12.2018
The School of Love

In 1921, Pope Benedict XV considered that the institution of the family was threatened by the new developments which were taking place in society in the aftermath of the 1st World War. This is why he decided to introduce the feast of the Holy Family in the universal calendar of the Catholic Church.

Almost a hundred years later, there are many people who believe that families are under threat, that the institution of the family is going through a deep crisis. Ours is certainly a challenging time yet I suppose that we could find many Christian leaders who made anxious statements, throughout the centuries, about the state of the family in their own time. In the Bible, we see how from the beginning, relationships between spouses, between parents and children and between siblings were marked by rivalry, lies and resentment.

Today our Gospel reading shows us that, even in the Holy Family, there was room for misunderstanding and a need to learn to respect personal boundaries.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis warns us against what he calls an “excessive idealization” of our presentation of family life in general (n. 35). We do not help ourselves, we do not help our families and young people when we do not take into account the fact that family life is a complex, difficult, challenging and very often a messy reality.

The Pope is very clear: “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love” (*AL* n. 325). Mary, Joseph and Jesus had to learn to relate to one another in respect and in love.

Certainly one of the greatest disservices we can do to marriage and to families is to pretend that it is possible for them to be perfect from the beginning. Here the perfection I am talking about is really human perfection: it is the 19th c. Victorian image of the family, presented as the eternal perfect Christian family, where the main concern is to keep up appearances and the most important values are conformity and obedience... conformity to the so-called traditional values of society and obedience to the husband and father in the family unit.

We must be clear about the fact that this image is false and is no longer relevant. Family is a concept and a reality which has taken many different forms and shapes throughout human history. Today it still exists in all cultures and it expresses itself in various ways. This should prevent us from being too narrow in our definition of the word “family”.

Jesus himself seems to be keen to expand the meaning of the word. We have to remember that when his mother and brothers required his attention, he answered: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’.” (Mt 12:48-50)

Jesus’ words warn us against the temptation to focus all our attention on our small family units and to forget that these are to be inserted in the great family we are called to form together. This explains why, in the 3rd Eucharistic Prayer, the celebrant declares: “Lord, listen graciously to the prayers of this family, whom you have summoned before you” (n. 113). We are a family, God’s own family.

Now we have to ask ourselves: why is the experience of family life so important?

It seems to me that family is particularly important for us Christians because it is, for each one of us, our first school of love. It is a school, so it is an environment where we learn to love. If family is about learning, then in it, there is – there must be – room for mistakes and failures.

The family is the school where we learn to deal with our human limitations through the demanding practice of forgiveness and patient perseverance. The family, like all schools, is a place and environment which we must leave one day in order to put into practice with others elsewhere what we have learnt there.

Speaking about the Church as a whole, St Thérèse of Lisieux believed that “love alone imparts life to all the members” (*Story of a Soul*, p. 194). This applies to the family unit. Love alone imparts life to all the members of the family. Love gives its *raison d’être* to the family.

It is in our families, as schools of love, that we should all experience for the first time, in the formative years of our human childhood, the unconditional love of God. This love which makes us feel secure and confident about who we are, this love which helps us to overcome all the trials and difficulties in life.

However we have to be realistic and acknowledge that all our families have been, and still are for some, places of pain and woundedness. We keep these things hidden, we carry them silently and most of the time they weigh us down and prevent us from relating to others freely and in a life-giving way.

Christmas is precisely the time when we see God coming into the mess of our humanity, literally being born in a dirty manger where animals do what they have to do! This event, the Incarnation, which took place 2000 years ago, repeats itself for all of us today and each time we are struggling with pain and woundedness.

All parents have made mistakes, no family has been a perfect school of love, we all have been more or less hurt by our family. Sometimes we cope quite well with this, but at other times it is a rather difficult experience.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus show us today that love is the key. Deep within us there is a longing for belonging, for tenderness and presence, for encouragement and support. Let us never give up in our search for all these aspects of God’s unconditional love. We are not alone, men and women are ready to step up to the mark and in small and discreet ways, they are willing to love us, to create an atmosphere where we belong and are given the tenderness and encouragement we need. Let us not give up in our search for love, it is multifaceted and, most of the time, it will come from where we would least expect it.

Whatever may happen in our families, the primarily school of love, let us remember that, one day, we will all graduate with honours from the ultimate school of love, in God where Love dwells and is made perfect in Christ.