

Feast of Holy Family A/2007

In our society today we witness the breakdown of the traditional family and its values. The relationship between parents and their children has become more difficult than it was before. While couples divorce easily, the young people express some fear of getting married soon. In the middle of such a crisis, where can we find a remedy? Where can we draw strength to cope with all these difficult situations?

The readings of this Sunday try to help us deal with these questions by presenting the holy family of Jesus, Joseph and Mary as a model of Christian life in order to bring stability, peace and happiness to our own human families. The book of Sirach, in the first reading, referring to the patriarchal context of Jewish society, sets duties and obligations that both parents and children should fulfill in order to live in harmony with one another. Though these recommendations come from another age, they are, nevertheless, inspiring and our modern society can learn a lot from them.

First of all, there are the obligations of children toward their parents to whom they should owe respect, reverence, and love. These obligations apply to the whole parents' life to the point that when the parents become old and their facilities diminish, these become more than imperative. But all that has a price, says Sirach. To honor the parents atones for sins, makes the prayer heard before God, and brings the blessing of long life on the one who does it.

In order to complete these recommendations, the Gospel focuses especially on the life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and, thereby, shows the obligations of parents towards their children. What dominates this Gospel is the example of Joseph and Mary, how as good parents, they have protected Jesus from those who wanted to kill him by fleeing with him to Egypt.

By presenting Joseph and Mary fleeing with Jesus to Egypt, and then, again coming back to Israel once the danger was over, Matthew would like to present Jesus as the new Moses who was saved from the waters in order to bring Israel to the promised Land. In that perspective, Jesus is the new prophet announced and awaited by Israel from whom the salvation of the world comes. He is the new leader of the people of God who believe in him and who leads them from perdition to eternal life.

The episode of fleeing to Egypt shows us another aspect of the life of the holy family, namely that as a couple and like any parents, Joseph and Mary have certainly faced some difficult situations in their life. First of all, when Mary got pregnant through the action of the Holy Spirit, I presume that Joseph had a real hard time to explain to neighbors what happened to them. Mary herself, I guess, had it rough when Joseph was planning to divorce her. At the birth of Jesus when they could not find any place in the inn, Joseph and Mary certainly had it hard. When Jesus was lost for three days and when found he could not give any explanation than the answer of being at the business of his Father, as well as all the events surrounding his passion and death were not easy for his parents.

By evoking these cases, my aim is to bring to our awareness the fact that, if the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is called holy family, it does not mean they never had problems, but it is because of the quality of their relationship. In fact, what makes a family good or holy is the kind of relationship its members share with one another, and the personal stance each one has in his relationship with God. The more a family is dislocated, the more peripheral is the relationship; the stronger the relationship, the more a family lives in cohesion with one another.

That is why without some human qualities we strive to implement in our midst, which are at the utmost nourished by God's word, it is very difficult to build a strong and holy family. St Paul cites some like heartfelt compassion and kindness, humility and gentleness, patience and forgiveness. We know by experience that such human qualities are important to help a family to stand together. It is not a question of becoming a hero or champion, but of living the small burdens of everyday under the guidance of God and his word, knowing well that God is always with us in whatever hardship we might go through as a family.

St Paul cites also, among many other things, love and the word of God as elements facilitating the cohesion of a family and its holiness. As he says, "over all, put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. (...) Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God". It is love and the word of God that kept the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph together.

Today I can say that the big threat to the cohesion of our families is the lack of spending time together. We are so busy with one hundred and one things outside our home that the life of togetherness that builds a strong family becomes difficult. As I make this claim, I would like to recall a case I read a couple of years and I would like to share with you: A father had a daughter who lived in a big city far from him. Countless months had passed since they saw each other. The father tried always to call her and ask to visit, but the daughter never had time. Sometimes she evoked the heavy schedule and meetings, at other times the burden of travel or the importance of the clients, etc. Tired of all that, the father just said: "When I die, do you intend to come to my funeral?" With such a question, the reaction of the daughter was immediate: "Dad, how can you ask that of me! Of course I'll come". To which the father replied, "Good. Forget the funeral and come now; I need you more now than I will at my funeral".

May this example help us adjust our relationships in our families under the guidance of Jesus, Mary and Joseph! May the young families find in the wisdom and the faith of the elders an example to follow in order to strengthen their own bond! Let us pray for the divorced and their children. God bless you all.

Sirach 3, 2-6. 12-14; Colossians 3, 12-21; Matthew 2, 13-15.19-23



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