

Holy Family Sunday

December 28-29, 2013

Readings: Sirach 3: 2-6,12-14; Colossians 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

It is most appropriate for the Feast of the Holy Family to be situated in the context of the great season of Christmas. I presume that many of you have been spending quality time this past week with your family and relatives. It is equally true that if we do not want this season to be an “empty celebration,” we must remain united in life and in Christian charity, more than nice dinners and gifts.

Our Gospel this year centers on the flight to Egypt of the Holy Family, a journey unique both because of its circumstances as well as its participants. This was not a pilgrimage journey, or for the purpose of a census. This was an escape to an unknown land for an unspecified period of time. “Stay there until I tell you.” We are told that this dream of Joseph occurred after the Magi had left. The joy of seeing visitors come from afar to adore the Christ-Child was quickly muted by the realization that this child was already targeted.

Joseph takes the child by night, for he does what any father does...he protects his family. He did this and so much more: he gave the Child the shelter of a roof over his head and the right to call himself a son of David.

Hanging in my office I have a beautiful print of the “Rest During the Flight into Egypt” that was given to me as a gift. The original is in the Vatican Museum. It is so beautiful. The artist Frederico Fiori (Barocci) favored delicate images, rosy colors, soft light, and landscape settings. The peacefulness of the Holy Family at rest belies little of the fear that motivated their journey. There is Saint Joseph, providing and protecting, Guardian of the Redeemer.

I treasure this reproduction because the baby Jesus, pictured as somewhat older than an infant, is smiling at Saint Joseph, who is himself reaching out to hand the boy a branch with grapes on it. A donkey looks on in the background, also at rest. Mary is close at hand, peacefully looking down towards the ground where she is preparing some kind of snack perhaps. The family is at peace even in the midst of the turmoil of their lives.

Herein lies a lesson. We may not be able to control many things around us in life, but our family can and must remain united. A primary function of the Church is to provide the necessary spiritual support for you, the families entrusted to our care. Your concerns must be ours in the Church, or else we are failing you. I pray that this never happens, just as I pray that you continue to hold me up in prayer.

We priests pray for peace and tranquility in your families, and when necessary, we begin by praying for healing, especially during the ups and downs of family life, when some begin to question God's presence. Some families demonstrate heroic virtue in accepting particular crosses and challenges. Others feel at times or even in large part that the crosses have been too heavy and burdensome, and feel crushed by their inability to bear them in faith and trust. Know that your powerful witness is tremendously edifying to us priests, for our own vocations were borne from loving families, imperfect as we may all be.

May children be able to see the love of their parents, not just when they are showered with gifts, but more importantly when they are showered with questions, including those that begin with "why, where, when, with whom?" That is deep down a sign of love and concern. It is part of the protective function of parents. Their authority is found in God, and they pray daily to exercise that authority with all due respect and in charity.

For example, many parents work hard to protect their children and teenagers from the harmful effects of pornography on the internet. They are currently fighting a losing battle because technology keeps changing and developing. Our children are being exposed at a younger and younger age. Pornography does not have a demographic- it cuts across all demographics- young and older, single and married, college educated or not, it makes little difference. One reason why it is difficult to monitor for parents- the mobile phone. One in five mobile device searches are for pornography.

Saint Joseph knew his unique role within the Holy Family, even as he knew that he needed to prepare as well as protect. His role included giving to Jesus some of the earthly skills that he would later use in his ministry. Parents understand their dual role as protectors and also of preparing their children to engage the world as adults, armed with the faith and virtue needed to transform the secular culture through the spreading of God's truth. Parents also daily subordinate their comforts and interests on behalf of their children. Please know that your generosity and sacrifice will never be wasted if it is done in faith.

Let all fathers look to Saint Joseph today as a model and feel the presence of God in the very midst of some of life's questions that admit of no readily visible solutions. Let all families be kept together in love—young families, old, empty nesters, as well as those who are now alone due to death or other circumstances.

In honoring Jesus, Mary and Joseph today, we also honor all those who strive in their own families to emulate their example. May God's grace always be close at hand for each of you on this great Feast.