

Holy Family Sunday

*Son, why have you done this to us?*

December 26-27, 2015/ Cathedral of Saint Paul

Readings: 1Sm 1:20-22, 24-28; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:41-52

It is entirely appropriate for the Feast of the Holy Family to be situated in the context of the great season of Christmas. After all, it is quite likely that we have been spending more time than is typical this past week with our family as well as our relatives. It is part and parcel of the season. It is equally true that for our families to remain united in life and in Christian charity, we need more than delicious dinners and an exchange of gifts.

Today's feast is a great gift to the church largely because family life is at the very heart of our faith. A Church comprised without families is utterly incomprehensible. In this cycle "C" of readings, we encounter the Holy Family traveling to Jerusalem according to custom for the Feast of the Passover. The Law prescribed the Jerusalem pilgrimage for three major feasts: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, but custom excused those who lived at a distance from all but the Passover pilgrimage.

It is not at all unlikely that Jesus was walking for a time with other members of his village, with Mary and Joseph having no reason to assume that anything was amiss. All of the sudden, they realize he is not traveling with the crowd, and as would any couple, they became extremely worried.

One of a parent's greatest sorrows afflicts Mary—first that of losing sight of her child, and then a failure to understand her own child. Upon finding Jesus, she must have been filled with a mixture of emotions—joy, relief and certainly a mixture of frustration. So she asks this question: "Son, why have you done this to us?" Her words are the spontaneous cry of a mother's heart. Jesus returns the favor by asking a question beginning with the same word: "Why were you looking for me?"

There is likely no parent in this Church today who has not asked precisely this question, as family life is often challenging. It is also clear that Jesus

was aware of his mission, even at the tender age of twelve, while the straight-forward narrative makes no effort to conceal her human feelings. Mary experienced the trials of life, even though she was not guilty of sin.

As parents and children strive for mutual understanding, sometimes it seems to be in short supply, as does patience when one needs it the most. This Feast may well be one of the easiest with which to make connections in our daily lives. While we know we do not have perfect families, the fact is we all come from families, we all wonder about God's plans for us, our brothers and sisters, children and parents, and what is really meant by respect for authority.

We cannot deny the fact that Mary felt pain as a mother, and not only at the Crucifixion. It is extremely difficult for people to deal with the aftermath of having caused their own mother's some measure of pain; even those incarcerated for crimes note this as a key area of regret. Jesus, clearly guilty of no crime whatsoever, was merely beginning to exercise a measure of independence as he grew in awareness of his divine mission.

The late Fr. Benedict Groeschel once observed, "The parents could have been spared the pain of this situation by God's Providence, even by the thoughtfulness of Christ, but they were not." He would not spare her from all pain, for this is part and parcel of the life of a disciple. Additionally, Jesus taught Mary and Joseph the necessity of subordinating their claims to the interests of His heavenly Father.

The long process of a child becoming more independent is as scary to parents as it is necessary. Children and teenagers should always keep in mind the effect their actions may have on their parents, and parents should equally seek to be able to manage these changes effectively.

We pray for peace and tranquility in our families, and if necessary, we begin by praying for healing. We have our hopes and dreams and we may question where God may be found in the ups and downs of family life. 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.

To these families, the Church's promise of prayers and support must be heard and proclaimed. Your witness is tremendously edifying to those of us who have answered the call to a religious vocation, for our own vocations were borne from loving families, imperfect as we may all be. May we all look to the Holy Family as a model of love, fidelity and firmness of purpose.

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.

May parents be able to discern when their own motivations in regards to their children are pure and when they may be clouded by unrealistic or unnecessary expectations. Let them feel the presence of God in the very midst of some of life's questions that admit of no readily visible solutions.

Most of all let all these challenges be subordinated under the banner and headship of Jesus Christ, who is himself the head of all households. 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.