

Homily, 31 January 2017

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Genesis 15:1-6, 21:1-3; Psalms 105:1-2,3-4,5-6,8-9; Hebrews 11:8,11-12,17-19; Luke 2:22-40



The family is the original cell of social life. [CCC]



I've been thinking a lot about families lately, I suppose it's because I find myself partially immersed in the milieu I'd experienced 30 or 35 years ago. Back then, many couples I knew, Janet and I included, were expecting, or caring for babies and toddlers, or raising small children. Sometimes all of these at once. Those were busy, exciting, and life changing times.

Now it's happening again, but at some distance: for now, instead of being a new father, I am a grandfather, a great uncle, or it is my friends' children who are in a family way.

And this time, because I am at more of a distance from the immediacy of being a young parent, I have more time to ponder and reflect. Although my grandchildren are so precious and wonderful, it's not just about them that I have been thinking, and it's not really about them that I want to talk about today.

If you want to hear about them, catch me after mass. I can even show you pictures.



In creating man and woman, God instituted the human family. It is the original cell of social life. It is so foundational to his providential plan for us that he used it as the first event of our salvation. Consider that Adam and Eve are the only people who came into this world as adults. Not even Jesus the Emmanuel did that.

He came to us in the incarnation, spending the first nine months of his life in the womb of his mother and then growing to manhood under the love and care of Mary and Joseph and, undoubtedly, also of aunts, and uncles, and cousins.

And let's not forget to add: also under the watchful of eye of his heavenly father, and the holy spirit, and all the angels. Just like my grandchildren!

Yet if God shows so much concern for family life and parenthood, how should I think about people who don't become parents? About people whose families are troubled? About those who seem to have lost their families.

- I know married couples who have never had children for one reason or another, yet they are good and loving people.
- In my extended family, there have been troubled marriages and news this fall of divorces.
- I know older people who have lost spouses, siblings, and even children ... and those family members who remain seem to have drifted from their lives and left them quite alone and lonely.

Why would God create a fundamental aspect of human society that too often seems so fragile and even so elusive for many people?



It's worth recalling what we know about Jesus own family situation. Jesus was conceived when Mary was betrothed, but not yet living with her husband. Joseph was Jesus foster father. Jesus had a cousin, John the Baptist, who we think never married. Jesus was an only child in a culture that considered a large family as a blessing from God. Mary was a widow and her lost her only child. And of course, Jesus himself was celibate. And to top it all off, they were refugees. Yet we revere the Holy Family.

In the first reading from Genesis, Abram and Sarah were childless long past their normal childbearing years. They weren't exactly what we'd consider "typical" parents, yet Abram is the model of a faithful life.

And in the church, from its earliest days down to the present, living a chaste single life devoted to God has always been viewed as favorably as marriage. Yet the Church is very adamant about the fundamental importance of family in human life and society.

So what seems to matter is not so much that we have children, although that is very important for married couples, what matters is that we are children. We have parents, and to a greater or lesser extent we have families.



Why is this important? Listen to how the Church views family life:

The family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn

moral values, begin to honor God, and make good use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society.

The family should live in such a way that its members learn to care and take responsibility for the young the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor.



As I reflect on my children, I am often struck by their love for each other and the genuine friendship that they share. It's remarkable because they are very different people. They have different temperaments, different likes and dislikes, different hobbies and interests. As adults, their lives have taken very different paths. In short, all the things that would work to make people friends are missing. Yet friends they are, because they grew up as brothers and sister.

It's something that I think we have all experienced and it's not hard to see how family relationships can lay the foundation for all our other relationships and integration into the broader life of society. When families are strong and healthy, society is strong and healthy as well. There are parts of our society that are deeply troubled by unemployment, crime, and seemingly intractable poverty. It's no coincidence that the collapse of family life in these neighborhoods heralded their decline and also limits their recovery.

Yet experience tells us that there is a tension there. Not all children grow up in traditional families, and not all families are healthy. Yet often, through the efforts and love of even just one parent or caregiver, children can still flourish.



Recall that God desires only what is good for us, regardless of our circumstances. He does not abandon the orphan, the widow, the poor, the sick and the suffering. But that does not mean that we should be indifferent to his providence.

God created marriage and family life and we are expected to nurture and support it to the best of our abilities. When society acts to diminish the family, especially by diminishing the importance, permanence and meaning of marriage, we have to defend it, and do our best to change the hearts and minds of those who have turned away from a proper understanding of marriage and family life.

When families cannot fulfill their obligations, when parents need help or simply cannot raise their children, then we must step in and help. We must help as appropriate: as individuals, neighbors or through civil authority. Always keeping in mind that marriage and family life are established by God and, whatever our state in life, it is our obligation to support it.