

Holy Family - B
Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14;
Colossians 3:12-17;
Luke 2:22-40
Little Flower - 12/31/23

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Today families are a lot more complicated than they used to be with divorce and remarriage, with couples, even couples with children, living together without marriage, and with same-sex couples without or without children. Many children grow up in blended families and are part of multiple families. Many children are being raised by grandparents or other relatives. However, today's readings offer us several insights into family.

When I was grade school, the Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," was understood to refer primarily to younger children and their parents. In Rome, however, I learned that the commandment was originally directed to adult children and their relationship with their parents, especially their elderly parents. In those days, there was no Social Security, pensions, or 401(k)s. In other words, adult children were called to honor their parents by respecting, caring for, and providing for them.

As we end 2023 and enter 2024, today's reading from Sirach once again reminds us of our responsibilities to our parents, grandparents, and extended family. With people living longer and more people suffering from Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, many of us are being asked to make real sacrifices to help care for them. Also, we often see parents spend their entire lives taking care of a challenged child. After the parents die, other family members have to step in to continue that care. The truth is that many of you are already doing a heroic job caring for family members young and old.

As we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family, I would like to suggest that we put more emphasis on our connections with our extended families. As families grow and people relocate, this is often very difficult to do. I had several first cousins whom I never met. I find this sad. This is where interest in genealogy can be a really blessing to families. Also, I really admire those families who make the effort to maintain connections with extended family, for example, through regular family reunions.

Today's second reading is often chosen by couples for their wedding. Although St. Paul is describing the qualities of an ideal Christian community, he is also describing the qualities of an ideal family. St. Paul first lists some of the qualities of the ideal family, placing special emphasis on forgiveness. He also reminds us to be thankful. The more we are grateful for what we have, no matter how much or how little, the happier and more at peace we will be. Finally, Paul calls us to put faith and religion at the center of our lives. As we look at today's problems, I really do wonder how much of this is because faith and religion are no longer important in many families.

Although St. Paul may be painting a picture of the ideal family or community, we know that there are no perfect families or communities. Paul's picture of the family is aspirational. This is the kind of family we aspire to become. As I have often said, children learn what they live and live what they learn. Therefore, it is important that families try their best to live the qualities enumerated by St. Paul. Simeon even prophesied that a sword would pierce Mary's heart. Several times after Masses on this feast, people have pointed out to me that they grew up in destructive, abusive families. If you grew up in such a family, please try to create your own families of loving, supportive people.

My brothers and sisters, in today's Gospel, Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the temple. Faith and religion were an important part of their lives. If we want to have the best families possible, faith and religion need to be part of our families. Because the Holy Family was holy and not just good, *"the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him."* This is what we should want for ourselves no matter what age we are and for our children.