

## Feast of the Holy Family: The Heart of the Church



On the Sunday after the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, Christmas, we consider the family. Now when we hear the title of the celebration, the Feast of the Holy Family, we are inclined to just dismiss the possibility that our families can be like the Holy Family. We forget that Jesus' family was holy because they lived united to God.

Still, many of you may be thinking that your own families are far from the ideal. Well, join the crowd. Ever family is far from the ideal because every family is made of unique individuals with their positive qualities and their negative quirks. Or, to put it simply, if you think your family is strange, you're right. You have crazy Uncle Fred whose behavior has to be interpreted to the younger children. And then there is nasty old Aunt Martha, who you would have sat next to Fr. Joe at your daughter's wedding reception, but he was smart enough to decline the invitation. My family is strange too. I have a 30 year old cousin who after graduating college is still looking for work to use her special talent--she's a fire eater and flame thrower. Good old, cousin Patty, the Dragon Lady. Hey, at least she comes in handy at the family re-unions. She's in charge of lighting the charcoal.

So, your family is strange, but so are you. And my family is strange, and so am I. All families have their positive and negative aspects. The fact is that the very negatives become the opportunities of grace leading the rest of the family to God. This is what St. Paul is referring to in the second reading when he tells the Colossians and us to "put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt

compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.” The compassion that we have for the weakest member of the family, whether that be physically weak, psychologically weak, or morally weak, becomes our means to grow in union with God. The efforts that we make to accept each other’s quirks are themselves acts of virtue.

Being a holy family means being a family separate for the Lord. To be holy means to be set distinct from all that is not holy. So for our families to be holy we have to choose that which is often contrary to the choices made by other families. For example, we keep immoral material, shows, etc out of our houses because we ask God to dwell there. At the same time we, actually you, have to be very careful of where your children are visiting or staying overnight because other families might allow immorality into their homes, or, simply, not supervise their own children. This could earn you a lot of criticism from others, but the integrity of your family is an infinitely greater value than it’s popularity.

Being a holy family demands that our homes be places of prayer. The Church, at least in our country, is still suffering from the misconception that worship takes place only on Sundays and in the churches and that religious instruction is the exclusive realm of parish programs. This is all wrong. We come to Church on Sundays to be united to Christ in Word and Sacrament so that we can strengthen the union that takes place in our homes. Some families do this through the family rosary. Others have family prayer at bedtime. Most make it a point to have family prayer before meals.

You send your children to religious education for the basic outline of what you need to communicate to your children every day. Parents, not parishes, are the first teachers of their children in the ways of the faith. Some parents hold themselves back in this area because they feel unworthy to teach their children about God. They forget, God makes them worthy. Just as your authority as moms and dads gives you the grace to impart God’s blessing on your children, and many of you do this every night, so also your authority as moms and dads gives you the grace to impart God’s knowledge to your children. You do not have to be theologians to teach the faith. You just need to be united to God.

Many of you have raised your children. Some of these now have their own families. You are the matriarchs and patriarchs. You still need to point your children and grandchildren to the Lord. You can no longer determine what they are exposed to in their homes, but you can and must give them the example of union with God. Your children and your grandchildren still look to you to be holy families.

Many of you are married but do not have children, others of us are called to the single life. We must center our spirituality in our homes. This is true for the priests and religious also. If we are united to God in our homes, we will not be hypocrites when we fulfill the call of evangelization, bringing His Presence to all around us.

Whether there are children at home or not, the center of our spiritual life must be our homes. That is why we need to give God our day when we wake up, morning prayer, and thank Him for our day when we go to bed, night prayer. We need to keep our minds pure so we can speak to the Lord all day.

The heart of our parish is not this church. The heart of the universal church is not the Vatican. The heart of the church is the family.

We pray today, that all our families might be holy families.

Fr. Joseph Pellegrino