

Holy Family Sunday – December 30, 2007

Portrait of a Christian Family: Introduction & Reflections

An old saying goes like this: Everyone's greatest **blessing** is also their greatest **curse**.

- ✍ At least sometimes, most of us probably feel that way about **family life**.
- ✍ Somehow, our **greatest joys** and our **greatest sufferings** are both linked up with **family relationships**.
- ✍ My **own** family (immediate and extended) is hardly perfect: divorce, not speaking to one another, lawsuits over money, fights, etc.

But, looking at the world, trying to discern (with a spiritual eye) where Satan is at work in order to warn people, I must admit to you one of my greatest fears:

- ✍ Satan is at work in our families!
- ✍ I am in GREAT fear that our families are not withstanding the attack!

I realize that NO family is perfect – divorce and remarriage, step-children, single parents – these are all realities.

But, these don't **detract** from the call to model our lives on the Holy Family, as best we can. However, I fear greatly for our families – even right here in our parish – I fear, first of all, because it appears that God is not at their center:

- ✍ What has happened to family prayer? Do you **ever** spend time praying together?
 - ✍ Are there ever meals shared together, not only for a home cooked meal (rather than McDonald's), but to share the daily experiences of life?
 - ✍ What about "formation" and time spent together?
 - ✍ Are children learning that they **are** their father's **beloved sons** and mother's **beloved daughters**?
 - ✍ Do we spend time with our children, "initiating them" into manhood & womanhood?
 - ✍ Do parents spend time talking to their children about dating, sex and morality – or is it all learned on the street?
 - ✍ Do families have adventures together and memories of their time spent together?
 - ✍ Quality, formation time with children is more valuable than anything material or financial – and working more or a bigger house or more things will not provide this to our children.



☞ Is God truly at the center of our families? Do we show that in our families by placing our priorities in the proper place (Mass on Sunday **no matter what** and Faith education (CCD) **before and above any sporting event** or other activity?)

I am in GREAT FEAR that, unless we **all** change course, our families will be lost to the power of the Evil One and **not** have God at their center – but things which cannot satisfy nor bring us true happiness and, ultimately, Salvation.



This is my **most grave concern as a pastor and priest**. And so, my admonition and call to every parent and child today. We **must change course** to recapture what God has intended for family life and begin to truly model our families on the Holy Family.

So, some may consider these reflections and words harsh, however they are not criticisms or accusations, but words of a pastor to his flock – to challenge, to cause you to reflect and evaluate your families in light of God's plan and the Holy Family.

And so, my first question is, did you ever wonder why God bothered to **invent family life**?



- ☞ He could have just made us like **ferns** - self-sufficient and self-propagating.
- ☞ But he didn't. Instead, he created us **in his own image and likeness**.
- ☞ Just as God is a **Trinity**, a communion of **three Persons** sharing the **divine nature**, we also are created to find fulfillment in **community**, in the **intricate network of relationships** that makes each one of us **dependent on others**, and **others dependent on us**.
- ☞ To be created in the image of God is to be created for **family life**.

But since we are **human beings**, our family life doesn't come **ready-made**.

- ☞ The perfect family is not **pre-fabricated** somewhere and available for **purchase** on a **wedding register**.
- ☞ Family life is a **task**, a **calling** we have received from God.
- ☞ By creating us in his image, God has made us **like a coloring book** - the **outline** of what we are meant to be is provided, and the crayons, but **it's up to us** to **color it in**.

And **how** do we do that? How do we fulfill this **central mission** of our lives, **imaging God** through living a **truly Christian family life**?

Three crayons are all we need to color in that portrait.

1) Respecting Family Roles

The **first thing** we can do to live a healthy Christian family life is to **respect family roles**.

☞ Just as the **natural structure of a tree** includes **roots, trunk, and branches**, so the **natural structure of the family** includes **dad, mom, and children**.

☞ They all go **together** and they all **need each other** in order to bear the **fruit** of maturity, wisdom, and happiness.

☞ All fatherhood (spiritual or physical) is rooted in God the Father.

☞ Parents – do your lives and roles in the family mirror God to your children and the world?



The **First Reading** and **Psalm** paint a beautiful picture of this.

☞ Mom and Dad are **in charge**. Together they have and exercise **authority** over their children. ☞ As the Psalm reminded us, this authority is **received from God**, and with it comes **responsibility**.

☞ Parents must not **abuse** their authority, nor **neglect** the love, education in the faith, and training in virtue that they **owe** to their children. Parents are, **first of all**, to train their children in the ways of Faith.

☞ Servant of God Pope John Paul II, paraphrasing Pope Paul VI, said this in his encyclical *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio 60)*:



“Do you teach your children the Christian prayers? Do you prepare them, in conjunction with the priests, for the sacraments that they receive when they are young – Confession, Communion and Confirmation? Do you encourage them, when they are sick, to think of Christ suffering, to invoke the aid of the Blessed Virgin and the saints? Do you say the family Rosary together...? Do you pray with your children, with the whole domestic community, at least sometimes? Your

example of honesty in thought and action, joined to some common prayer, is a lesson for life and an act of worship of singular value. In this way you bring peace to your homes. Remember, it is thus that you build up the Church.”

☞ Parents, this is your **primary mission** in life. God is **counting on you** for this. It is a responsibility for which you will have to answer in eternity, at judgment.

And St Paul in the Second Reading gives the **formula** for carrying it out: spouses must keep their **love strong by serving each other**.

☞ The **new life** of their children **flowed** from their **joyful and mutual self-giving**.

- ✍ To grow into **healthy young adults**, those children need a home atmosphere nourished by that same **joyful, self-forgetful** love of the parents.
- ✍ It's not primarily a matter of **parenting techniques**. Rather, it's a matter of **parents loving one another** unconditionally, as Christ loves each of them.
- ✍ Parents and spouses are called to **sacrifice everything**, time, salary, sports, self-interest – for their spouse and children.
- ✍ This **begins with faithfulness** in marriage and it overflows into personal sacrifices made for the family.
- ✍ Recently the US Bishops, aware of how many marriages are failing today, launched an initiative with a catchy slogan: “What have you done for your marriage today?” It’s a **great question** that spouses can ask **every day**. **What have you done for your marriage today?** For tips and ideas, check out the website: “ForYourMarriage.org. It’s linked on the parish website.



But it’s not **all about** the parents. Today’s First Reading and Psalm remind us that **children** have a **key role** too.

They are to **honor and obey** their parents while they are growing up, and **respect and care for** them later on.

These are the **healthy roles** of family life.



- ✍ **Children** shouldn't act like **parents**, and **parents** shouldn't act like **children**.
 - Parents, **please don't be your kids' friends!** They need your discipline and your love. They need to be told “NO.”
 - Children, you simply are **not in charge**. You need to **submit and obey**, not **demand** and throw a fit until you get what you want (manipulating your parents).

2) Saying "I'm Sorry"

Respecting those roles is **not easy** in this fallen world, and that's where the **second crayon comes in**, helping us to color in the outline of the family.

In today's Second Reading, St Paul gives us the **foolproof formula** for **rebuilding the family** whenever it gets **broken** or **bent out of shape**.

- ✍ It can be summed up in two simple words: **I'm sorry**.
- ✍ If we know how to say, "I'm sorry," our family relationships can **endure and grow** even through very, **very** difficult times.

"Put on... patience," St Paul writes, "**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 **always** because we are **in Christ** with Him at the **center** of our homes. The situations and circumstances of life will change – but love **in Christ**, living in **perfect unity** will **never change**.



- ✍ There is no way to create an **atmosphere of forgiveness** without being ready to **ask** for forgiveness.
- ✍ The **best gift** we can give our families is to make a **commitment** to always be the **first one** to say "I'm sorry" whenever there is the **slightest** need.



We could **never** do that without **Christ's** example and help. But we **have** Christ's example and help, so we **can** do it.

- ✍ That little phrase (I'm sorry) is like the **super-glue** for family relationships.
- ✍ But it's even **better** than super-glue, because, like a broken bone that has been **healed**, a family relationship can become **stronger than ever** when nourished with the **calcium of forgiveness**.

3) Expecting Trouble

But even our best efforts **to build a truly Christian family** will face obstacles.

The fact that we live in a **fallen world** is - well, a **fact**. We can't **escape** from it.

And that's where the **third crayon** comes in.

To **build** a healthy Christian family, we have to **expect trouble**.

- ✍ We are **pilgrims on earth**.
- ✍ We are **soldiers in a real spiritual battle** – with the family at the center of the battle
- ✍ We are **human beings** with **free will** and **deep-seated tendencies** towards **selfishness and sin** - and we are **surrounded** by people with those **same** tendencies.

Today's Gospel described for us a **family on the run, suffering, struggling** just to survive.

If that's what happened to the **holiest** family in history, surely we should expect **some of the same** for our families.

God permits hardships, because he knows that **hardships can bring us closer to him**.

- ✍ St Matthew points out that the flight to Egypt **fulfilled a prophecy** - it **furthered** God's plan of salvation.
- ✍ Just so, when we face the **hardships** of family life with **courage**, we **grow in virtue** and glorify God **better**, because we have a chance to love more **heroically**.



Family life truly is the **school** where we learn to **color in the outline of the image of God** in which we were created. But only if it is centered on God and if the family is committed to spending time together – to being together **as a family**.

APPLICATION: Conclusion: Attacks against the Family

This is why many forces in **modern culture** are trying desperately to **extinguish** family life – because it **is** the school of virtue – it is the **domestic Church** – the Church on her smallest and most intimate level. This is why the devil is attacking our families – because families make up and build up the Church!

The forces of our modern culture are **anti-Christian** and **anti-God** if not downright demonic attacks.

They **resent** the fact that **God is God** and **they are not**, and so they delight in **disfiguring** the image of God, the human family.



- ✍ This is the **real reason** behind the **immoral movement** towards legally recognizing **homosexual unions** as equivalent to **marriages**.
- ✍ It is the **real reason** behind the efforts to **expand abortion laws** throughout the world,
- ✍ to **promote contraception** and **pre-marital sex**,
- ✍ to **legalize adoption by homosexual couples**,
- ✍ to **expand no-fault divorce laws**,
- ✍ to **legalize euthanasia** so as to be able to dispose of the elderly when they get inconvenient.

All of these trends **claim** to promote human freedom and dignity.

But in **fact**, whether their promoters realize it or not, they are direct attacks **against** human freedom and dignity.

God has created and designed marriage and family life to be the means of becoming truly holy people – of reaching our ultimate goal of heaven – and the Holy Family of Nazareth gives us the model to follow.

Today, let's decide, as we prepare to enter a new year, that the **center of our lives will NOT** be work or money or things, but **family and God**. Only **then** will we discover the family peace and joy we **all** so desperately seek.

