



30 December 2018, 9.15 a.m. | Holy Family
Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14 | Psalm 128 | Colossians 3:12-21 | Luke 2:41-52

FAMILY LIFE

Introduction

This morning, I invite all of you to pray as one family as we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family in the midst of this beautiful Christmas season. Let us pray for our family members, and let us pray for families in the parish, especially families that are going through one form of difficulty or the other, that God may bless these homes with his loving presence.

Let us come together to the Lord, and as we come, let us ask for the Lord's forgiveness. Let us also pray that forgiveness and reconciliation may take place in our families.

Homily

As we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family, the Church invites us to reflect on our own family life and to keep the Holy Family as a yardstick, a benchmark for what our families could be and should be.

I would like to begin with a little quote by Pope Francis. Although he lives in the Vatican, and to a certain extent, apparently isolated from the world, Pope Francis is a man very much in tune with the happenings of the world, and he seems to have understood the challenges of family life in today's context, especially the hardships and challenges faced in urban family life. The Pope says that a family's fellowship when gathered together for a meal is a 'thermometer that measures the health of relationships. If there is in the family something that is not well, or some hidden wound, at the table it is immediately understood'. He said if a family does not eat together and speak and listen to one another around a common table, then 'This is not a family. It is a boarding house'. He spoke particularly about the use of cell phones, computers or television at mealtimes, saying that these devices prevent fellowship, and even make a family 'very little of a family'.

The Holy Father is not directly saying that families should pray together. Let families begin by sharing a meal, and at the table, family members can discover each other and that will lead to family prayer.

Let us look at this beautiful incident that we just heard in the gospel today – an incident in the life of Jesus and in the life of the holy family, from which we can learn some characteristics of what family life should be.

The first thing that we note is that Jesus is twelve years old. The gospel according to Luke, which gives many of the infancy stories, speaks about this incident. After this incident when he is twelve years old, we will only hear about Jesus when he is a grownup and is in his ministry. So this is a very significant and crucial incident placed in the gospel according to Luke. Luke mentions this incident and describes it in detail.

The gospel says that the family, as usual, went up to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage. As usual – which means that it was a custom for the holy family to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year. It means that the holy family fostered certain good religious practices and habits. They followed the customs and traditions of the Jewish faith. It also shows that the holy family was learning and being with the community. Sometimes, there are families that live in isolation, and they think that as long as they are happy together, they need not get integrated with the larger community. But we see that the holy family follows the traditions of their faith and go on a pilgrimage with other people in the community in order that they might practise, in their religious life, certain habits that are good.

We also see in this incident that the holy family does not proceed to Jerusalem as a single family unit, but in a caravan. They do this firstly because of their own safety. It was not safe to travel alone in the time of Jesus, and so they had the safety of a caravan. The gospel tells us that the people in the caravan were their kinspeople and acquaintances. In other words, the holy family is also getting integrated with other people around – their relatives, friends and also certain acquaintances that possibly become friends. We see the openness of this family life: it is not turned into itself, but integrated with people around them. They became part of a group of people, and you can imagine that it was a big group, because we hear that on their return, the parents of Jesus didn't even realise that he was missing because they thought that he was walking along with the others.

Again we note that Jesus is twelve years old. At the age of thirteen, a Jewish young man becomes an adult (bar mitzvah). When he becomes an adult, he has the right to be a lector – to read in a community, to proclaim the word. So, Jesus is on the threshold of his adulthood. When he is lost, his parents go back in search of him. And what is this twelve-year-old boy doing? He is not roaming about the streets in Jerusalem but is talking to the elders. The gospel says that he is listening and asking questions. This tells us that Jesus did not fall from the heavens or come as an adult, a mature person. He was listening, which means he was learning about the faith, and he was asking questions.

This indicates something very important for our family lives. How many parents allow children to ask questions? Very often, we shut them out. I know even some of the Sunday school catechists complain when the children ask questions. That's not good. Children should be free enough in the safe setting of the home to ask sometimes radical and important questions about the faith. If they don't ask these questions in the home, they will look for them in wrong places and maybe find false answers. Jesus was with the elders, asking questions and listening. Let us pray that in our homes also, we might listen to each other and we might allow space for people to feel comfortable to ask questions.

In the gospel, we see that the parents of Jesus must have gone through real hardship when they did not find him. The gospel says that they had travelled three days in the caravan, and spent one day searching for him in Jerusalem – which means four days in all. When they meet Jesus, Mary tells him, ‘We were anxious and we were looking for you’. She does not scold him. She tells this little boy the hardships that they had gone through, with the hope that he will realise what he did and the effect that it had on his parents.

In a home, when we have fellowship, there is also respect for the individual. We should not intrude into the space of people in our homes. We should allow them their own space, their own thinking, their own position in the home. Jesus was respected in his own home. The gospel also says that his parents did not understand his response and yet Mary treasured these things in her heart. She treasures what she has not understood of her son, Jesus. And Jesus is probably telling his parents: While you are my parents, I also have a bigger mission in the world. I have my father in heaven, and he has given me a mission. Probably their eyes were beginning to be opened to who their son, Jesus, was. The gospel ends beautifully with these words: The boy Jesus goes back home with them to Nazareth and there, he grew up in stature – physical growth; he grows up in knowledge – wisdom; he grows up in his relationship with God – his spiritual life; and he grows up in his relationship with men – social skills. A very holistic, wholesome type of growth fostered in his home.

Let us pray that in our homes also, parents will not be over-occupied only with tuitions and studies but make our children grow up in this wholesome and holistic way: growing in stature – physically; growing in wisdom – intellectually, growing in spirituality – relationship with God, and growing in social skills – relationships with people. Let us pray as we celebrate this feast of the Holy Family that our families may begin to truly live together, support members of the family, and at the same time, respect them for who they are, Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

As we say the Lord's Prayer, which is a family prayer, may we recognise God as our Father, let us remember each member of our families and pray for them, that God may bless them. We pray, Our Father...

Final Blessing

Let us stand and say a little prayer for our own families. You may repeat after me:

Almighty God,
keep our home
and all who dwell in it
safe from all harm of the evil spirit.

Preserve us in mind, body and soul.
Deliver our home from fire, storms,
and destruction of any kind.

May our home be a sanctuary of love,
a place of growth in the likeness of Jesus,
and a school of every Christian virtue.

Holy immaculate Mother of God,
and glorious St. Joseph,
protector and patron of our home,
save and protect us
now and at the hour of our death,
Amen.



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