

Today we celebrate the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. During this time of Christmas and New Year's festivities we are immersed in all kinds of family activities, interactions and events. More than any other time of the year, we are reminded of family with all its joys, pleasures, warts and wrinkles. We don't live in a perfect world and no family is perfect.

Today's celebration honors the Holy family of Nazareth – not the sweet, picture-perfect family that we see on Christmas cards and in pictures, but a real life family. What we see in those pious pictures of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus is a little like what we see when we go to a professional photographer to have a formal family photo taken. We put on our best clothes, our best smiles, we look our best and the photographer captures us at our best. The picture is beautiful but it doesn't show the real story, the nitty-gritty of our day-to-day life. Like my friend family theologian David Thomas says, "Family Life is Messy!"

The Holy Family is a model for all families – as unreal and challenging as that may seem. For most of us it is a little hard to make the connection with a family in which there are 2 people who never sinned and a third who never talks.

Those pictures of the Holy Family that we hold in our mind are an artist's perception – they only give us an idea. Mary, Joseph and Jesus were a real family. They had more than their share of trials and tribulations. They lived in a time of war and upheaval. There was illness and poverty. Life was uncertain. They faced sincere challenges. Review the scenario:

Their baby was not born in the security of home or the safety of a sterile hospital but in a cave that served as a stable – while the family was on a journey that had been imposed on them.

A few weeks later, they took Jesus to the temple for presentation, as was the custom, and the good Simeon startled the young mother with the prophecy that her precious child would be responsible for the fall and rising of many and a sword would pierce her own soul!

Later, as we learned in today's gospel, the family was forced to flee into exile in Egypt – they were truly refugees in a foreign land. (And you can bet Joseph didn't wait until he was legal to cross the border.) It was a matter of life and death.

Finally, 12 years later, Mary and Joseph lose Jesus for 3 days in the temple in Jerusalem where they have gone for their annual Passover Pilgrimage. A happy event turned into a near tragedy. Anyone who has ever lost a child – for even 5 minutes – can empathize with their distress.

The story of the Holy Family is not exactly calm and serene. Perhaps, not so different from some of our own. Modern families have their own struggles- with job security, affordable housing, an adequate standard of living, affordable health-care, illness, dysfunction,

brokenness, abuse, busyness and in general an anti-family mentality that has permeated our society. Life is not a bed of roses for many of our families.

How did the Holy Family survive? How do we survive?

There are 3 significant hallmarks that can be identified with the family of Nazareth:

- 1 They were obedient to God
- 2 They had a mutual love for one another
- 3 They were of service to others

Of all the ways God could have chosen to send his son into the world he chose for him to be born in a family. Not just a family of a mother and, father but an extended family as well. People in the Middle East lived in close proximity 2,000 years ago. There must have been aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, kinsmen. We can only imagine how they interacted in the lives of the Holy Family. They would have been very much a part of life in Nazareth.

The average extended family of the 21st century may not live in such close proximity as the Jewish Middle-Eastern family 2,000 years ago, but we are still impacted by one another. Unfortunately, our modern families have become isolated and fewer live near aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. In many cases, Moms and Dads are expected to do it all and to be it all - an impossible task. Children need the interaction of other special, caring family members. Research shows that their self-image is stronger if they know who they are and where they come from. We all need to know we are part of something bigger. How can this happen unless they interact with their extended family, unless someone tells them the family history and the family stories? St. John Neuman said we have to know that we are a link in a chain in order to know our link to God.

In our workshops for grandparents, my wife Kay and I always remind grandparents that they are a crucial link in the family chain. They are usually the keepers of the family stories. Grandparenting is a vocation and grandparents have a responsibility to tell the family stories to the next generation. In many ways, grandparents are also the keepers of the faith. Pope Francis has spoken of the huge impact that his own grandmother, Rosa, had on him and his faith.

A family is woven together of many strands. Today, we celebrate family in its many dimensions. We pray for families in their brokenness and in their wholeness. And as families we look to the Holy Family as a model that we can emulate:

To be obedient to God
To love one another
And to be of service to others.

Deacon Gary Aitchison