

HOLY FAMILY – 2021 (C)

Our brand new Christmas season continues today with the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The mystery of the Incarnation—God the Son taking on our human nature when conceived in Mary’s womb by the Holy Spirit—is further reflected in the fact that Jesus was born into a family and grew up in a family like we all did. Of course, we can’t follow the example of the Holy Family in all things; after all, none of us are eternally begotten of the Father like Jesus and none of us are completely without sin from the moment of our conception like Mary.

But we are still called to imitate the Holy Family as much as we can; the opening prayer for this Mass refers to ‘the shining example of the Holy Family’ and asks God to help us ‘in practicing the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity.’ Today’s gospel of the finding of Jesus in the Temple gives us some good connecting points to help us grow in that ‘virtue’ and ‘charity’ in our own family lives and relationships. Let’s remember the context: the Holy Family, faithfully following their Jewish faith, went to Jerusalem every year for Passover. The celebration had concluded, and Joseph and Mary started back home to Nazareth—not realizing at first that the twelve-year-old Jesus stayed behind. When they realized what happened, they looked for him for three days--no doubt a bit frantically--until they finally found him in the temple.

Parents, let me ask you: have you ever been out somewhere with your children (at the mall, the grocery store, or anywhere else) and suddenly realize that one of them is missing? Not being a parent myself, I can’t imagine just how scary that would be. Well, that’s just what Joseph and Mary went through...and for three days! Let’s return to the temple where they finally find Jesus—no doubt to their great relief, but also perhaps with, dare I say it, a hint of frustration? Listen again to Mary’s words: Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.” Parents, you know exactly what Mary and Joseph were going through! Have you ever said to your kids anything like “Where were you; what were you thinking? We’ve been going crazy looking for you!” That would be a more contemporary translation of what Mary said to her Son... My point is a simple one: parents, you can always approach Mary and Joseph with your concerns and even frustrations regarding your children and ask them to pray for you and them; they knew first-hand the anxiety of raising children.

Then there is Jesus’ response to his Mother’s concern: “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Luke then tells us that Mary and Joseph did not understand what he was saying. We shouldn’t be at all surprised by that—they certainly knew that Jesus was a uniquely special child, but they did not and could not fully grasp the fact that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human at one and the same time. None of us can grasp that Incarnation mystery either.

Parents, have you ever been at a loss to understand what your kids are up to, why they say and do the things they say and do? I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that your answer to that question is “yes”...no matter what their age! Again, don’t hesitate for a moment to approach Mary and Joseph and ask for their prayers in helping you to connect with and understand your children...and children, you can do the same to help you better connect with and understand your

parents. It is a two-way street, after all. Mary and Joseph can help both parent and child because they experienced those kinds of questions and concerns with their child Jesus.

Finally, Luke gives us a few other details about the Holy Family after their return to Nazareth:

--Jesus was obedient to Mary and Joseph; he lived faithfully the Fourth Commandment—‘Honor your father and your mother’. Even though Jesus was the fully divine Son of God, he was also the fully human Son of Mary who obeyed her. Even though Jesus did not have a human father (remember: he was conceived in Mary’s womb by the power of the Holy Spirit), he did obey Joseph who faithfully and lovingly fulfilled the father role for Jesus in his growing-up years. You children and young people, Jesus’ obedience is a great model and example for you in respecting and obeying your parents—the ones who cooperated with God in giving you life in the first place.

--Mary ‘kept all these things in her heart’. As we have already seen, Mary didn’t get the whole picture; she had to embrace the mystery of her Son just as we all do.

--‘Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man’. This is so important for us to realize: yes, Jesus knew himself to be the Son of God who needed to be in his heavenly ‘Father’s house’. But in his human nature, Jesus learned, he grew in knowledge just like us. Jesus is fully God and fully man at one and the same time: not 50-50, but 100-100. Welcome once again to the absolute mystery of the Incarnation—what this Christmas season and our Christian faith are all about!

We know very little more about the life of the Holy Family, and I think we’d all like to know more. When did baby Jesus roll over for the first time, or take his first steps, or say his first words? Do you suppose Mary’s heart melted the first time she heard him say “Mama”...just like any other mother? What was Jesus like as a toddler, or as a teenager? How did he work together with Joseph in the carpentry trade? I’m hoping that one of the countless joys of eternal life in heaven will be the opportunity to know some of those family details; after all, ‘inquiring minds want to know’, right?!

In the meantime, we know what we need to know: 1) Jesus was obedient to Joseph and Mary; 2) they in turn loved him and were totally devoted to him even if they couldn’t fully understand him; and 3) Jesus continued to grow in wisdom and love as he grew up. No, none of us are the Incarnation like Jesus or the Immaculate Conception like Mary. Still, we can imitate the Holy Family’s obedience, their total love and devotion to God and each other, and their desire always to do the will of God. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the most Holy Family, help us by your prayers and example to live and love as you did in our own families and in the family of God whose children we are blessed to be.