

(HOLY FAMILY 2024/25 - C)

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family, and the Church gives us this feast to remind us of the importance the family plays in every aspect of human affairs. In fact, the family is central to our lives and, in a larger sense, to every healthy human society.

Now because the family is so central to our understanding of even life itself, we often take it for granted. Like the air we breathe, it's necessary for life, but it's not something we spend much time thinking about. That's why it's good that we have this Feast of the Holy Family. It gives us an opportunity to reflect on the nature and importance of the family. So let's do that.

First of all, we need to be clear about what we mean by the word family. We need to define the word, and we need to define the word because it is often used in ways that only approximate the family or in ways that include individuals and things that are not really members of the family.

As an example of what I mean, consider these various ways in which the word "family" is commonly used. We hear about the nuclear family, the extended family, the single-parent family, the foster family, and in the business world, the corporate family. Then there are school families and sports families and on and on.

So what are we talking about when we use the word family? Let's start with the definition found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Here it is: "A man and woman united in marriage together with their children form a family (CCC 2202)."

Starting with this definition, we can say several things. First, this definition makes clear that true families are composed of people. True families are composed of real live human beings. This definition excludes institutional relationships, families are not composed of corporations or legal persons.

Next, families are founded on marriage, and here we mean true marriage between a man and a woman. In God's plan, there is no such thing as "gay marriage" which is in reality, just a sinful sexual relationship which is sterile by its very nature.

Finally, families include any children that are either born or adopted into that family. Notice here that families do not include pets. Animals can give us comfort and joy, but they are not family members.

So now we have our working definition of family, "A man and woman united in marriage together with their children."

Now let's consider some more ideas about family. First of all is this. God has a plan for everyone, and His plan is that we all become saints. That said, God never repeats Himself in His creation. God has a different and unique plan for each of us. To put it another way, we all have our own path to walk on the road of life.

Notice here that while each of us will walk down a different path, there are also some things common to us all. We are all called to be part of God's family. We will all receive blessings from God. We will all experience both joys and sorrows in life, and in the end, we will all experience death (unless we live to see Christ's second coming).

Now, with regard to God's plans, most people are called to marriage, but not everyone is called to marriage. Some are called to the single life. In fact, all of us are called to the single life at least for a time. We all start out life as single people, and at least half of those who marry will end up single again when their spouse dies.

Others are called to the single life and never marry. For example, priests and sisters are called to the single life so that they can pursue a deeper relationship with God, and so they can help care for God's family which is the Church.

God calls others to the single life for various reasons. Some may be called to care for aged parents or handicapped siblings. Others may be called to be missionaries or to work in some field that requires all of their time. Some are incapable of marriage because of mental or physical handicaps.

Turning to those who are called to marriage, those who marry do so for two reasons. First for love where each seeks the good of the other and where each helps the other on the road that leads to heaven and eternal life. Second for children where they join with God in bringing new life into the world, and where they teach their children to grow in the love and knowledge of God.

This is a great and noble task. It is a courageous thing to raise children because it requires great sacrifices from parents. Here married couples should keep in mind that God is anxious to help them. To that end, they should seek His guidance in prayer and ask for the wisdom to raise their children well.

They should also be open to life and pray to discern when and if God is calling them to accept another child. They need to keep in mind that God has already planned their families and already knows how many children He wants to give them. It is for them to discern God's will through prayer and the prudent considerations of their own particular circumstances.

Sometimes people are called to marriage, but they refuse the call which leaves the one God had prepared for them alone. Sometimes sin intervenes as for example when a spouse has an affair and leaves the marriage. These are the crosses sometimes encountered in life. Yet even then, God is still loving to those who suffer in these ways and holds them close.

Some are called to marriage, but not to having children which is another form of suffering. Hannah was such a woman. She longed for children and was heartbroken she had none. She is joined other women in the Old Testament such as Sarah, the wife of Abraham, Rachel, the wife of Jacob, and Elizabeth the mother of Saint John the Baptist who all carried the same cross. Yet again, God is still loving to those who suffer in this way and holds them close.

Here I would also mention that a woman who has miscarried is in fact a mother because she has conceived and that is the point at which life begins. Someday, she will meet her child in heaven. In the meantime while waiting, she and her husband should make sure they name their baby.

The Holy Family of Saint Joseph, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Christ Child is held up for us today as an example of how we should live our lives. Those who are husbands and fathers can follow the example of Saint Joseph who was faithful in his role as husband and as foster-father to Jesus. As head of his family, he cared for and protected the Blessed Virgin and the Baby Jesus.

When King Herod sought to kill the Christ Child, Saint Joseph defended his family by taking the Child and His mother Mary to Egypt out of the reach of Herod's soldiers. Then when Herod died, Saint Joseph brought his family back to Nazareth where he worked as a carpenter, providing for them and making sure that the religious laws were followed in his home.

Those who are wives and mothers can follow the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary who was faithful in her role as wife and mother. She cared for her family in a womanly way, lovingly sacrificing for her Son and her husband. Obedient to the will of God in all things, she was always patient and kind.

Finally, we are all God's children and as such we are all called to follow the example of Jesus who was obedient to His parents when He was a child and who continued to be respectful of them and to care for them when He was an adult.

Let me make one last point. There is also another proper way in which we use the word family, and we do so when we refer to the Church which is the family of God. By virtue of our baptism, we have all been reborn to new life and become spiritual brothers and sisters. We all call God our Father, and we are all God's children.

Furthermore, as God's children, as members of God's family, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we should care for each other and help each other as we travel on the road of life which leads to heaven.

When we see someone in need, we should be Christ to them and offer them our love and consolation and material help when necessary. We should treat them as our brothers and sisters which in fact they are on a spiritual level.

Then, when our lives here on earth come to an end, Jesus will say to us, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Mt 25:34)." Then too, we will be reunited with all of our loved ones in heaven, all of our family members who have gone before us, and that time will be a most joyous family reunion. Amen.