

The Challenges of a Holy Family

When I was a kid, the image of the Holy Family of Nazareth was both inspiring and challenging for me.

What a peaceful image it was,

- Joseph working diligently in his carpenter shop and teaching the trade to Jesus.
- a smiling and serene Mary, caring for and loving her family so very much.
- Joseph teaching Jesus about the Law and the Prophets, and
- Jesus respectfully and eagerly soaking up all that was offered.

I imagined the quality time they spent together, living together, praying together and doing God's work.

The challenge of this Christmas Card image of the Holy Family - was that it didn't seem anything like my family.

Perhaps because of my age at the time, or perhaps because of the gauzy images created by holy cards and Holy Family Sunday homilies . . . the difficulties and challenges face by this young Jewish family were not evident to me.

I never considered the challenges faced by Mary, a teenager, explaining to her family and to Joseph that she had been visited by an angel and asked to be the Mother of God. And thus her virgin pregnancy.

I never considered the challenges face by Joseph when the scripture said that he was "ready to quietly divorce her.

I never considered the challenges involved in making a 90 mile journey on a donkey when Mary was 9 months pregnant.

Or for that matter, never considered that

- she had labor pains like real women experience at childbirth but no LaMaze coaching -
- separated as she was from family and giving birth in a place where only cattle stayed.

Nice planning Joseph. Ever hear about Travelocity?

It was easy to forget the flight into Egypt and even the stress caused by Jesus as he stayed behind in the temple without telling Mary and Joseph.

And, as a young person, I couldn't have comprehended the emotions of Jesus' mother as everyone important turned away from her son and betrayed him.

Now, because I've been a parent myself . . .

I understand that the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth must have been anything but peaceful and serene!

But they stuck together!

They knew where their strength came from.

- They prayed together often.
- They trusted that things would be all right if they did things God's way.

Those were the values they learned from their own parents and grandparents.

And that is why, on this weekend of recovery from the stresses and joys of family life that many of us experience each Christmas . . . The Church invites us to consider the challenges faced by the Holy Family.

For, our families can be holier families if follow their example and do the same.

Our lives are stressful! Things we would never plan or choose can come our way.

- We may need to face illness and even the death of loved ones.
- We can be deeply hurt by unfaithfulness.
- We can be devastated when those we love behave badly.
- We can be even more devastated by our own weaknesses and unworthy behavior.

All these things can bring great tension to our families and even threaten to destroy them.

It is then, as the Holy Family did,
that we need to look to the source of our strength.
We need to look to God!

There are children all around us.

Some of us have children at home.

We have grandchildren too, nieces and nephews,
neighborhood children and the children that are the
treasure of our parish.

They look at everything we do and
listen to everything we say.

The values we hold become their values as well.

We can lead them toward God or draw them away.

- Our prejudices can easily become theirs.
- Our honesty or dishonesty can be passed on to them.
- Our patience or our judgment can become very much a part of them.

God calls us to show them how to live as God's children, as a holy family.

Fr. Patrick Peyton, who about 60 years ago founded the Family Rosary Crusade, used to preach that "The family that prays together stays together."

I believe that those words are as true today as they were when first spoken.

Times of prayer together, as a family or as a parish,

- can bring us together and
- help us focus on what is truly important in life.

Things may not turn out the way we think they should, but we can make the best of them and not allow them to corrupt our peace of mind or the values of the little ones around us.

As we look to God we can come to understand that God understands our pain and disappointment completely.

We can hear God's call for us to hang in there - together, using these challenges to build a holy family.

Let's face it, we learn most of life's lessons during times of stress, disappointment and difficulty. Human beings learn little, when everything is going well.

It is how we face our challenges that mold us into the people we become. Those life lessons are precious to us and precious to our children as well.

May we look to the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth for the strength we need.

May the many families we belong to grow more holy this day because we're a part of them.

And may our children learn to build holy families by following the example we've set for them!