

## The Feast of the Holy Family

December 29/30, 2007 (A)

When I was a kid, we used to call this Sunday,  
“Poke in the Ribs” Sunday.

Certainly not a very nice name for what the Church calls –  
The Feast of the Holy Family.

We called it that because of the last line of the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading.  
*“Fathers – do not provoke (the old translation used “nag”) your children so they may not become discouraged.”*

Little did we know that there was other poking going on in pews  
throughout the church.

Husbands were poking wives over the infamous  
*“Wives be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord.”*

Wives responded with a poke at the words  
*“Husbands, love your wives, and avoid and bitterness toward them.”*

And later, as the priest spoke about the

- always loving,
- always kind,
- never poking

Holy Family composed of the  
Virgin Mother, Joseph, her most chaste spouse,  
and the perfect child – the baby Jesus –  
we knew that our family – was far from holy.

Usually just 15 minutes earlier,  
as we rushed to get to church before Mass had begun,  
the car had been a battleground of sibling warfare.

Jesus, being an only child,  
 didn't have to put up with the likes of my sister and brother  
 who, by the way, have somehow grown into very nice people.

Years later, after my mother's prophetic words came to pass . . .  
*"Someday, you're going to have children just like you!"*  
 and Pat and I struggled with the realities of marriage and parenting,  
 the readings for Holy Family Sunday,  
 continued to generate discussion and comparison.

Much of the discussion centered around Paul's word's  
 in the second half of today's second reading.

In our modern society,  
 the thought of *"a wife being subordinate to her husband"*  
 could be enough to discount Paul's entire letter  
 as "the ramblings of an out of touch male chauvinist."

As a matter of fact, the Church now gives us the option of  
 avoiding those lines of scripture entirely . . . .

and with good reason –

**they are too often misinterpreted.**

- Misinterpreted by men who wish to pick and choose  
 which scriptures need to be interpreted literally  
 to insure their dominant domestic status.
- Misinterpreted by men  
 (and believe it or not by some women,)  
 who believe that inequality within marriage  
is somehow part of "God's plan."

Catholic scripture scholars caution us not to make any such interpretation . . .

For while Paul did not completely rise above the attitudes of the patriarchal society in which he lived . . . this passage makes it clear that the traditional attitudes in his society that regarded wives as “property” must be abandoned in the Christian world-view.

The teachings of Vatican II further clarified the relationship of husband and wife in a truly sacramental marriage

The relationship of love between husband and wife mirrors the relationship of love

that God has with you and me

A relationship that is unconditionally loving, faithful and life-giving

- in good times and bad,
- for richer for poorer,
- in sickness and in health,
- as long as we live.

**This is God’s plan for marriage.**

Certainly not - any relationship based on power, or dominance or gender inferiority.

Rather, in their dealings with one another and with their children,

husbands and wives, are called to act as God’s chosen ones . . .

holy and beloved.

Paul says that . . .

*“They should clothe themselves with heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another any grievance as the Lord forgives us.”*

And over all, we should “*put on love*” – for that is the bond which truly holds families together.

**Does that sound like your marriage?**

**Does that sound like the way that you and your spouse deal with each other day to day?**

**Does that sound like your family . . .**

- Compassionate, kind, gentle and patient
- Humbly bearing with one another.
- Forgiving one another as the Lord forgives us?

**It doesn’t sound like mine either.**

**For many families, the past few days have been anything but joyous.**

The Christmas TV commercials have depicted

- smiling families
- joyously opening gifts,
- sharing meals with family and friends.

Not a hint of the realities and dysfunctions that many have experienced in family life over the past few days.

For some, Christmas has been a time when the struggles within marriage and family life have been most evident and painful.

Perhaps that's why the Church chooses this Sunday to also share with us Matthew's Gospel story of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt.

Being family, wasn't easy for them  
As it often isn't easy for us.

But just as God remained close to Joseph, Mary and their child as they struggled for survival, safety and peace,  
**God remains with us as well.**

**We are practicing Catholics – not perfect ones.**

Our faith does not guarantee us relationships and families without difficulties.

Our Faith does however assure us that we are not alone as we strive to love each other as Christ loves us

- In good times and bad,
- in sickness and in health,
- for richer for poorer,
- bearing with one another,
- forgiving each other.

If we do belong to a solid, loving family,  
let us be grateful.

If our family is now nothing more than a fond memory,  
let us rejoice in that memory.

And if our family is crazy and dysfunctional,  
realize that there are plenty of stories from sacred scripture  
That demonstrate how that can ultimately  
work for good as well.

Emmanuel! God is with us!

As we prepare to begin the year 2008,  
may we be open to the wonderful mystery  
of God's loving care for us continuing to unfold.

Even if our family life is far from ideal,  
we need to realize that  
the most important family we will ever  
belong to and know  
is the family of God.

This family, we can always celebrate.

May that peace envelop your family and bring it closer to the  
ideal to which you aspire and hope.