

HOMILY

The Solemnity of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

December 28, 2008 – Year B

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Today, on the feast of the Holy Family of Nazareth, I want to tell you the story Rabbi Neil Kurshan has in his book entitled *Raising Your Child to Be a Mensch* (a Yiddish word for a person having admirable characteristics such as fortitude and firmness of purpose).

A young woman, about to be married, had come to the Rabbi for counseling. When she told the Rabbi that she hoped she would not make the same mistakes her parents had made, he pressed her to elaborate.

The woman explained that each summer her wealthy parents traveled to Europe while she remained behind with a nanny. One year, when the girl was 11, the housekeeper suddenly quit just shortly before her parents' annual trip to Europe. Upset that their vacation might be jeopardized, the parents quickly found a replacement. A few days before their departure, the girl noticed that her mother had wrapped the family jewels and silverware and placed them in the safe. Since this had never been done before, she asked why. Her mother explained that she could not trust the new housekeeper with the family valuables. Though certainly not intended, that insensitive remark so shocked and hurt the little girl that she never ever forgot it. Wasn't she a family valuable? Didn't she have more value than silverware and jewels?

That is a question all of us should ask about our attitudes toward our families and family members—parents, brothers, sisters, dependent members, young, old or in-between—on this feast day of the Holy Family. The Old Testament reading from the Book of Genesis and the reading from the Gospel of St. Luke tell us of the beliefs and convictions of two patriarchs who were men of faith about their families.

Abraham believed that God would fulfill his promise to make of him a nation as numerous as the stars in the sky. In the ripe old age of Abraham and Sarah, God fulfills the promise to give him a son. Abraham believes that promises are going to

be fulfilled around the son. Joseph is asked to believe that Mary's child is the Son of God. Salvation is going to be worked out around the son of Mary.

- The first lesson that God wanted these patriarchs to grasp looks like this to me. Family means normally a father, a mother and child or children. God did not want the slave Eliezer's son to inherit the promises! Can we have Christian families with couples vowing to themselves, for whatever the reason may be, not to have children between them? Or think of the many kids of today who say I am at my dad's house on weekdays and I am at my mom's house on weekends, or those who say this weekend I am at my dad's house and next weekend I am at my mom's house. Deep down, aren't they telling you and me that they have no home of their own? Parents should remember that God put them together—the father, mother and child.

In the Infancy Story of Matthew, Joseph begins as the breaker than the maker of the family. But then he ends up as someone who does everything possible to keep the Holy Family together. He unconditionally accepts that the Holy Family is the creation of God.

Are not our families, too, created by God? Let us recall the book of Genesis and the words of Jesus about divorce! How sad to see that 50% of our marriages that are covenanted to form a family instead of staying together are breaking up in two years! That was the first information that Sister Jane passed on to me when I came here. Yet, we have nothing in place for those two years to help the numerous young couples, who make their vows in all sincerity, to cross over that difficult period of adjustment and stay together! The duty of every spouse and every parent is to help these young men and women make their marriages work rather than to break it! Joseph and Mary are the best examples for this stupendous task of making a marriage work!

- The second point that God wants Abraham and Joseph to understand is that a child is God's gift to the parents. Psalm 127 says, "*Truly sons are a gift from the Lord, a blessing, the fruit of the womb!*" (Psalm 127:3 Prayer of the Church) So, parents have to accept children in faith! That means they respect their children just as the patriarchs accepted and respected their children as coming from God. Contrast this with today's attitude of considering children as inconveniences to the comforts and pleasures of parents. Contrast this with the attitude of the rich parents of that young Jewish girl in the story, because possessions and pleasures became pricier to them than children.

- The third point is that the child should become the focal point of the family and its life. Children should occupy a central place in our families. They are the most valuable of the valuables that parents ever can possess!
- If these values are accepted as coming from God, family life will center on the very purpose for which God instituted it. Family will become the first school for every child to learn from the parents everything they believe in and practice. From the faith and the fidelity of the father, children will move on to genuine faith in God. From the love and affection of the mother, they will learn to love God. From the mutual appreciation of the parents and their willingness to co-operate with each other in the management of family affairs, children will learn to appreciate and respect their parents, brothers and sisters, and neighbors. The concept of a global family becomes a natural outcome.

A family should, therefore, make God an integral part of its life. We should bring God into our families. ***The question is: How this can be achieved?*** I can only suggest the usual things we do and encourage you to be faithful to them.

- Keeping captions like “*Christ, the unseen guest of this meal*” near the dining table. Keeping a separate seat and a plate for Jesus at the family table on important feast days.
- The practice of a devout mother blessing a child with the sign of the cross before giving the good night kiss to it surely brings God into the child’s mind and heart at a very tender age.
- A customary grace before each family meal will help the child to appreciate the gifts of God coming through the parents.
- A mother, the Eucharistic minister, her daughter or son as an altar server, the father an usher in the church or a lector, sends powerful signals to members of a family.
- A family rosary said in the evenings before dinner. Let us remember the old saying: *The family that prays together stays together*. In the calm and storms of life, families that pray together will be bound together as the Holy Family of Nazareth was.
- The family is the domestic Church, the nucleus Church, the miniature Church. It is also a nucleus society, a stable institution that provides emotional, spiritual and temporal support to the spouses and the kids.

Pope Paul VI, in one of his addresses, says, “The home of Nazareth is the school where WE begin to understand the life of Jesus—the school of the Gospel. In that school,

- ~ the first lesson we learn is to listen, to meditate and penetrate the meaning, the very simple, the very humble and very beautiful manifestation of the Son of God. Perhaps, we learn, even very imperceptibly, the lesson of imitation.”
- ~ Here, in this school, one learns why it is necessary to have a spiritual rule of life, if one wishes to follow the teaching of the Gospel and become a disciple of Christ.
- ~ In this school we learn, the Pope said, “the lesson on family life, the communion of love, its austere and simple beauty, and its sacred and inviolable character.”
- ~ In this school we learn the lesson of work (Nazareth was the home of the “Carpenter’s Son”) the severe redeeming law of human work.
- ~ This work cannot be an end in itself; over and above its economic worth, there is something behind it, the value of those who work.
- All these and much more are reflected in the Holy Family of Nazareth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Jesus learned all these in the home of Nazareth. May all of us, too, learn them from the Holy Family of Nazareth! Let us pray that our families may be inspired to emulate this wonderful example.

Amen

Reading I: Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3. Abraham’s family is a sign of faith and love of God.

Reading II: Hebrews 8:11-12, 17-18. Faith becomes the source of hope and happiness for the family of Abraham.

Gospel: Luke 2:22-40. Presentation of Jesus. Purification of Mary.