

Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

2018

What it means to be a family is undergoing a redefinition in our culture. No longer is the term “family” applied strictly to a household with mom, dad and the children all living together in the same home at the same time. As a matter of fact, what is known as the nuclear family is now in the minority. We now have various arrangements found in single parent families, in second marriages, in families in which the parents are of the same gender, and in families in which one parent is simply living with a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

One major consequence is that children now must relate to multiple sets of parents, multiple sets of grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other adults who are not related to them by birth or blood. The Fourth Commandment, “Honor thy father and honor thy mother” is now strained, to say the least. How is that divine commandment, handed down on Mt. Sinai to Moses and the Israelites, to be applied in such diverse and modern household living arrangements?

Another major force at work upon the family of today is the fact that adults in their fifties and sixties must now relate to their own children as well as to their own parents who are in their seventies, eighties and nineties and living with them. This latter factor is something that will increase during the years ahead of us as people continue to live longer. We are facing multiple strains on our family relationships. But until World War II, this was the norm.

It is hard to relate to our children when they do not behave as we would wish and do not believe in what we believe. Added to that we have parents whose own older parents cause them impatience, resentment, frustration, and draining exhaustion. What does the phrase “shared values” mean in such situations?

It is in this cultural context that our Church today bids us give attention to the Holy Family, asking us in that context to examine what is wholesome and all-inclusive in our families. Our response is not optional. Our response is necessary. Do we simply reject our religious heritage outright, claiming that it is now irrelevant, or do we take the wisdom that comes to us from our religious tradition and apply it afresh to the living situations in which we find ourselves today?

It is no secret that other cultures, cultures that are not derived from our Judeo-Christian culture, revere their elders. Their elders are held in great esteem and respect. What is understood by the word “tradition” is regarded with great honor. Can we say the same for our American culture? Indeed, when it comes to “being an American”, what part of tradition shapes and forms us as so-called “Americans”? Sadly we even watch what was given us by our nation’s founders being stripped away from public observance. The “Almighty Now” seems to be totally in control of what we think, say and do.

Much needs to be done to build up and buttress our present day American families. Indeed, we find a number of social movements and organizations appearing on the scene in the last few decades that are designed to do just that.

So today I would like to focus our attention on the role our elderly parents can play in our present day household and family arrangements.

Think for a moment now on the memories being carried in the minds and hearts of our elder parents and grandparents. What was life like for them in their families when they were young? What was America like for them those many decades ago? What did it mean to be “an American”, to be a Christian, to be a Catholic? What did their religious heritage mean to them and what did it give to them? How did it shape and form their characters and their souls?

There is a huge and rich mother lode of wisdom and insight contained in them, one that should be shared with us all, one that should certainly be shared with their grandchildren and even their great-grandchildren.

What sort of instruction are our children receiving in their school classrooms? Does that instruction accurately and faithfully transmit to them our American traditions and values and/or our Judeo-Christian traditions and values? This is not to imply that our children cannot or should not be exposed to our Native Americans’ beliefs and morals.

Nor does it imply that we should be kept in the dark about African values, traditions and beliefs, or Chinese, or Mexican, or Japanese, or Arab. All I am suggesting here is that our children not be kept away from our own American philosophies, morals and beliefs. How willing are we to pay for qualified teachers in our public schools, teachers who support, buttress and build up all that we mean by the term “family”?

Granted that we live in a society that separates Church and State, does that mean we should be living in a society in which religion plays no part? And given all of that, what are we doing within our own families, in our own households however they are constituted, to transmit the wisdom of our elders to our children and grandchildren?

An all-inclusive and holy family is integrated, not fractured; other-centered, not self-centered; lives in forgiveness, affirms the uniqueness of each of its members; builds up instead of tears down; is mindful of God and not neglectful of His Presence and love.

The thoughts of St. Paul we heard read to us a few minutes ago, writing to the Colossians two-thousand years ago, apply to us just as urgently now as they did back then – perhaps more so. Saint Paul said:

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another, as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. [Colossians 3:12-17]

May you live with Christ in a happy and holy family.