

# **The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph**

**December 26, 2021**

**Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass  
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish**

**celebrated at**

**St. Joseph Catholic Church**

**116 Theodore Street**

**Scranton, PA 18508**

**Colossians 3:12-21**

I spoke yesterday about the sacramental economy, and how we as Catholics have access to grace through the means instituted by Jesus Christ, the Divine Founder of the Church. The daily strength we need to do as we ought is found here at the altar rail. And the forgiveness we need to be reconciled to both God and man is found in the confessional at the back of the church. Indeed, in her genius, Holy Mother Church places the confessional at the back, for we must be forgiven, if we are to approach our Lord in Holy Communion here at the front of the church.

On this Feast of the Holy Family we should consider both what in our family life requires forgiveness and those duties for which we need divine strength. St. Paul hints at both at the end of today's Epistle, when he addresses wives, children, and husbands and fathers. On the one hand, we need to forgive each other for the offenses he mentions, and on the other, we need to receive from the Lord the strength to fulfill each particular call. Interestingly, each of the admonitions St. Paul offers comports perfectly with the sins I hear confessed most often by husbands, wives, and their children, with regard to family life.

He first tells wives to be subject to their husbands as is fitting in the Lord, which indicates right off the bat that this was not happening consistently enough in the Colossian Church. While this verse is vague, I believe the issue was one of disrespect, based on what St. Paul says explicitly to the wives in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5 and, as I said, what I hear regularly two thousand years later in the confessional. A lack of appreciation for her husband's sacrifices, combined with a sharp tongue, appear to be temptations into which women have fallen for millennia. In our own day we see female contempt for men exhibited in every form of entertainment and advertising, not to mention the countless encounters we have all had with women publicly and shamelessly belittling their husbands as if we weren't standing there. For St. Paul, as for the Church, to be subject to one's husband is to be respectful towards him at all times.

The Apostle's admonition towards men is twofold. He tells husbands not to be harsh with their wives while also warning fathers not to provoke their children, lest they become discouraged. When I hear those sins confessed, which is often, I remind husbands and fathers that they are to be the good shepherd in their household, never acting in such a way that their wives or children might mistake them for the wolf. When women and children begin to feel threatened by the behavior of the man of the house, they begin to look outside the sanctuary of the fold for protection and comfort. And the wolf is only too happy to put on sheep's clothing in order to draw in the abused, in order that he may devour them. To husbands and fathers is given the difficult task of appearing fierce to outsiders who would do us harm and kind to those inside the fold. When he gets these two roles reversed and is cordial with strangers but explosive

with his spouse and offspring, this causes all kinds of confusion and pain; and the consequences of this disorder are often tragic. The wolf stands ever ready to comfort, so that he can then kill.

St. Paul tells children to be obedient to their parents, and if I had to name one sin that I hear confessed most often, wherever I happen to be hearing confessions, this is number one. I tell penitents guilty of this mortal sin that disobedience to a just command by one's own parents is the height of ingratitude. The very people who collaborated with God to give you life, who spoon fed you and changed your diapers, who have provided for your food, clothing, and shelter, now ask you to do some inconvenient task, and your response is to disobey? It beggars belief. I remind them, of course, that unjust commands, which amongst the faithful are rather rare, must never be obeyed, for our loyalty and honor are owed to God first, and secondarily to parents. The reality, though, is not that all kinds of Catholic parents are telling their children to do bad things, even if parents do sometimes set bad examples. The crisis is one of disobedience, a disobedience encouraged by the culture in the name of self-expression. Children can be consoled in that this their sacrifice is accompanied by a promise. St. Paul assures us that their obedience pleases the Lord.

In this consists a holy family: respectful wives, strong yet tender husbands and fathers, and obedient, grateful children. Every one of us knows that we have fallen short, and the holy family definition does not always describe us. But this doesn't mean we can't have a holy family, so I will close as I commended you yesterday, with a story about how the grace of the sacraments can and does transform lives.

If you've heard this story already, I beg your indulgence, that you will listen anyway.

My dad was harsh, and I was disobedient. Our clashes weren't daily or even weekly, but they represent some of my siblings' worst memories of their childhood, particularly since I freely redistributed amongst my siblings the harshness I myself had suffered. She isn't here today, so I can tell you that holding everything together was the love of my mother, who would insist upon the reconciliation of father and son whenever things fell apart. Somehow, by God's grace, we made our way into the Church, my mother's decades of prayers having been answered. Unbeknownst to each other, I took the name Augustine and she Monica.

The grace of the sacraments completely changed our lives. Within three months I was healed of an eleven-year-long life-threatening illness, and my father was transformed into a big teddy bear. I once tried to tell my children a story about our volatile relationship, and they began to cry. They rebuked me, saying, "You're lying. Our grandfather could never act that way." I didn't try to tell any more stories. After about ten years in the Church, going to Mass and receiving Holy Communion every week, my dad was summoned by my grandmother for a private meeting, to which he was to come without my mother. Grandma told him, "You've been a very good husband to my daughter, and you've become a lot nicer person since you became Catholic." Less than a year later, on her deathbed, she was reconciled to the Church; I confirmed her and gave her First Holy Communion. The Host was the last thing she ate, and she died 20 hours later. My dad told that story on himself at his 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, which we celebrated six months after my grandmother's death.

What grace did was make forgiveness possible. Having been absolved ourselves, we forgave each other, and our family's life was transformed. My sister and her family moved here in 2006, a year after our conversion, and my sister-in-law and her family followed two years later. "Compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience" came to be lived realities, as St. Paul urged in the Epistle, rather than concepts impossible to process, much less see lived out. And it didn't happen because we willed it. It happened because in receiving Jesus every week and every day, respectively, my dad and I became more closely conformed to Christ and were thus able to help build something attractive, this parish, to which others now desire to belong. We are all the beneficiaries of God's grace.

My father died two years ago, but the influence of our reconciliation over current affairs has not ceased. Yesterday after Mass, on Christmas Day, while greeting my parishioners, I was interrupted and yelled at by a man, a guest from New York, who was furious that I was not wearing a mask and had distributed Holy Communion on the tongue. He was rude and incredibly disrespectful, but I did not punch him in the face, as I might have, when I was still a jerk. Instead, I kept my cool and offered him Holy Communion.