



December 26, 2021

## Christmastime—the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

*"Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety."*

—Luke 2:48

Dear Friends;

Christ is Born!

Recently I was having dinner with some parishioners. They were speaking of the challenges of parenting. Everyone agreed that the first time you have a child that there is a lot of fear about doing something wrong. In one story the mother placed her first child in his crib for a nap. Then the mother went off to the kitchen to prepare dinner. The next thing she saw the child crawling on the floor. Mom felt shock and fear wondering how the heck her son was able escape his crib by himself. Moments like these parents can feel like they are "inadequate."

In the Gospel reading for today we see that Mary and Joseph had their own difficulties in raising Mary's firstborn son. In order to fully comprehend the story we need the cultural context otherwise we may misjudge Joseph and Mary.

In First Century Palestine roles were strictly determined by cultural values and tradition. Genders were segregated by time and place. People lived in in the large extended family groupings. Boys are raised together with girls until the age of puberty by their mothers, aunts, sisters etc. Because males are so highly valued, especially the oldest sons, they are doted upon and spoiled by the women. And these spoiled males can conclude that his every word to women is like law.

At puberty the males are unceremoniously shoved out of the cocoon of this female world into the harsh hierarchy of the world of men. Here the men teach the adolescent male his proper place and behavior. Often through beatings the male is taught to suffer in silence without retaliation. He naturally concludes that such stoic suffering is one way to demonstrate manliness.

The confusion over where the adolescent Jesus is and why his parents don't miss him is understandable. Caravans traveled in the gender divisions that permeate this society. The adolescent Jesus is in the transition to adult manhood. The women and children traveled together. Men and boys past the age of puberty traveled in a group.

Joseph probably was disappointed when he discovers that Jesus is not in the men's group. He may have concluded that Jesus is still struggling with his transition and ran back to mom and the women for comfort. In contrast Mary mistakenly but proudly believes that her son has taken his place among the men. It was only after a day's journey that Jesus is not found with either the male or female relatives.

When they find Jesus in the Temple he is meeting with a group of adult male teachers. He gives evidence of his intelligent understanding. This indicates that he successfully made the transition to the world of adult males. But the other side of the story is revealed in his dialogue with Mary. She is understandably frustrated with her son. Jesus should behave like a responsible adult male. Jesus obviously did not bother to inform Joseph, Mary or any other family member or adult of his plans. In this group-centered culture this independent and individualistic behavior is irresponsible and disrespectful.

Jesus' response to Mary is understandable. Male maturity in his culture means being liberated from female control. The males in this society struggle with a lifelong tension between leaving female company behind yet continue the strong bond with his mother. Jesus is shows that maturation is a process and like many youth the transition is never a straight line but a going back and forth. Healthy families understand the tensions.

Raising children is never easy in any culture. Sometimes, like Mary, all parents can do is ponder the mystery and hope the child will grow wise and mature before human beings and God.

Joy and Peace!

*Fr Ron*

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