

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

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Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14

Psalms 128

Colossians 3:12-21

Luke 2: 22-40

PEACE AND ORDER IN FAMILY LIFE

“Don’t touch the third rail!” The third rail on a subway line is electrified. If you touch it, you will be electrocuted. Politicians used to apply this saying to Social Security. To try to change Social Security was to touch the “third rail” – political electrocution! These days, it seems that trying to preach or teach on God’s word about marriage and family life is to touch the “third rail.” Do so at your own risk! But that’s what the readings are about today on the Feast of the Holy Family.

The first human beings God created were a man and a woman – a married couple. When the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, it was in the midst of a family. Obviously, then, family life is very important in the plan of the Lord. It follows, then, that today’s celebration is important as well.

Many jokes are made about family arguments and discord, especially during holiday meals and gatherings. As we all know, however, the fracturing and fragmentation of marriages and families is a real fact and no joke. According to St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and others, peace is equated with good order. So today we not only honor the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but we also celebrate family life as willed and ordered by God’s holy word. In the months before getting married, I studied Scripture extensively to gain wisdom on the subject of marriage and family life. The readings of today’s liturgy were among those I pondered.

SIRACH

Respect and obedience: this reading stresses the two elements needed to safeguard peace and order in the home. It is interesting and instructive that honor and respect toward parents is linked with making atonement for sin.

This reading from Sirach brings some personal memories to mind. The first memory is that after reading this passage about honoring one’s father when I was in my thirties and had a family of my own, I felt prompted to write my own father a letter to honor him and express my appreciation for all he had done for me. To this day, I am thankful for that “prompting” and for the grace to follow it. The second memory is that of drilling my own children on “respect and obedience” by having them repeat those words over and over again – usually following upon some infraction on their part!

The word of God promises many blessings for honoring one’s parents. Along with natural love and gratitude, this provides us strong motivation for doing so!

GOSPEL

The gospel further emphasizes the theme of order and obedience. Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, in obedience to the law of Moses. Here they encounter Simeon, who utters a prophecy over the child Jesus. Simeon gives the Lord his “*Nunc Dimittis*,” saying that he can go home in peace since he has seen the promised Savior – “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.” Simeon further prophesies that Jesus will be a “sign of contradiction” and that a sword will pierce Mary’s heart.

This gospel reading makes the point some four times that Mary and Joseph were obedient to the “prescriptions of the law of the Lord.” What would the Holy Family want to teach our families today, who desperately need peace and order? Obey God’s word and God’s law!

COLOSSIANS

The virtues St. Paul itemizes in the second reading from Colossians are applicable to everyone, always and everywhere. But since we live much of our lives at home and with family, they are especially relevant there. I once heard in a sermon: “If your Christianity doesn’t work at home, it doesn’t work anywhere.” Paul lists compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness – “as the Lord has forgiven you.” He says that love is the “bond of perfection,” and urges that the peace of Christ reign in our hearts. Paul stresses gratitude and thanksgiving, and that the word of Christ should dwell in us richly.

This reading ends with a description of a well-ordered family life, with the various roles of each member, functioning appropriately in the bond of love. On today’s Feast it seems worth noting that it is Joseph who is referred to as the “Head of the Holy Family” – the family which included the Son of God made Flesh and the Virgin Mother, immaculately conceived!

PEACE AND ORDER, GOD’S WAY

Life is not always easy and pleasant. And family life, also, is not always easy and pleasant. The readings of today’s Feast tell us that things go a lot better when families intentionally set out to obey God’s law. Things still may not always be easy – they were not always easy for the Holy Family – but there will be the peace and order that comes with obedience to God’s word. That will help not only in this life on earth, but will definitely help us as we move to the next life in eternity.