

Feast of the Holy Family

Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist

30 December 2017

Introduction

I will not talk to you, who are already so well versed on the family as the cell of society, which is under such threat today, nor even of the family as the domestic church. Rather, after a few introductory comments, I will say a few words about the two women that appear in today's Gospel account: one, a young woman and mother, Mary; and the other, an old woman and widow, Anna.

History

First, a little history. This feast of the Holy Family was initiated by Pope Leo XIII. It is one of the “idea feasts” – like that of the Holy Trinity, the Sacred Heart or Christ the King – which came much later into the Church's liturgical calendar. Most feasts, prior to that, celebrated great events in the history of salvation: Jesus' birth, death, Resurrection, Ascension, the descent of the Holy Spirit; or the “birthdays” into heaven which marked the feastdays of the Saints.

Another fact of some interest. In Western Christianity, a cult of veneration for the Holy Family as a group, rather than as individuals, did not arise until the 17th century. Although, especially from the Renaissance onwards, much visual art portrayed what we now call the Holy Family, it was more commonly known as the *trinitas terrestris*, the “earthly trinity,” “understanding the interrelations of Jesus, Mary and

Joseph as a sort of mirror on earth of the divine Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Jesus embodying the Son, Mary symbolizing the Holy Spirit, and Joseph playing the role of God the Father.”¹

Whatever we think of this designation, it does have one distinct advantage. Not everyone lives in a nuclear family; some come from broken families; others belong to a wider group whether linked by blood or by other ties, such as those living in a Religious community. But, except for an unfortunate few, all of us have homes. In that way, the *trinitas terrestris* is able to be patron of a much wider variety of homes than became the case when the Holy Family was linked to the smaller, nuclear family.

Temptation

My second comment comes from the temptation to make the Holy Family a far-away, unrealizable representation of family life. There is, I think, a tendency in devotion and preaching to idealize the Family of Nazareth. This risks the consequence that many families, aware that their own families are fraught with wounds of various kinds, shy away from identifying with the Holy Family or seeing it as a model they could imitate in a practical way.

¹ Aidan Nichols, *Year of the Lord's Favour*, vol. 2 (Leominster: Gracewing, 2012), 69.

Pope Francis, in his numerous addresses as well as in his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, has done much to ensure that an over-idealization of the family does not make it impossible for ordinary families to identify with the Holy Family. A typical comment of his is this: “At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God’s grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite.”²

When we think about the Holy Family of Nazareth we assume they led a charmed life, admirable to be sure, but, far removed from our own families. Ours we know to be a good deal less than perfect. They are often noisy, sometimes filled with harsh and angry words or assailed by bitterness and resentment, caught up in concerns about work and money, about how to take care of ageing parents or discipline teenagers no longer willing to listen. But was the Holy Family so free of trials that it is impossible to imitate?

We forget that the Holy Family, too, was beset with difficulties from the outset: the expected and scandalous pregnancy of Mary; Joseph’s doubts about breaking their engagement; the couple forced to

² Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 36.

place newborn Jesus in the poverty of a manger; hearing about the slaughter of the Innocents which resulted from their Son's birth; forced to become a refugee family in Egypt; and looking in vain for three days for their twelve-year in Jerusalem, only to find him and be reproached by a son on the verge of adolescence with the reminder that he first belonged to God and not to his earthly parents.

The Holy Father reaffirms this point that all families face tribulations when he urges that "Every family should look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares."³ He wants to remind families that they must grow and mature to become like the Holy Family, since, as he wrote, "no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love."⁴

Now to the two women in Luke's account of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple.

Mary at the Presentation

³ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 30.

⁴ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 325.

At the centre of the narrative is the Child Jesus who is presented in the Temple with the offering of the poor, a fact to which Luke draws attention since his “entire Gospel is shot through with a theology of the poor and of poverty.”⁵ But unlike the usual case, it was not that Jesus had to be “redeemed” or bought back from being God’s property by offering the sacrifice required by the Law of Moses. Indeed, the Child comes into his own Temple where he is given over totally to the Father.

Mary presents Jesus, together with Joseph, for this an act of the couple, but says not a word. She does, however, symbolically hand over her Child – for the first, but not last, time – to Simeon, who “took him in his arms” (Lk 2:28). And Luke records her being “amazed” (Lk 2:33) at the words of Simeon’s prophecy regarding her newborn Son. It appears that Mary did not yet fully grasp the full import of the mystery in which she was engaged.

But then, Simeon, in a touching gesture of understanding her puzzlement “blessed them.” But then he went on rather bluntly – even insensitively to a young mother? – to warn her in a very personal prophecy – about what to expect from this Infant regarding both his destiny but also her own: “This child is destined for the falling the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 3: *The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image, 2012), 81.

thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your soul too” (Lk 2:34-35).

Just after Simeon’s prophecy that the Child would be a “light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Lk 2:32), comes betoken prophecy of the Passion. Already even here we have a foreshadowing. “The theology of glory is inseparably linked with the theology of the Cross.”⁶ This is the Paschal Mystery already revealed.

That “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:35) tells Mary that the contradiction her Son will meet will also be directed to her and will cut her to the heart. Pierced by the sword of sorrow, Mary’s role in the history of salvation was not to end in the mystery of the Incarnation but would extend to the very act of Redemption accomplished on the Cross. “Not only must she let go of her child and thereby offer him up, but she herself will be drawn into the offering when her child’s time of sacrifice arrives.”⁷

Commenting on this passage, Pope Benedict wrote that
From Mary we can learn what true com-
passion is: quite
unsentimentally assuming the sufferings of others as one’s
own.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 3: *The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image, 2012), 85.

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Light of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 158,

In the writings of the Church Fathers, a lack of feeling – insensitivity toward the suffering of others – is considered typical of paganism. In contrast to this attitude, the Christian faith holds up the God who suffers with men, and thereby draws us into his “com-passion.” The *Mater Dolorosa*, the mother whose heart is pierced by a sword, is an iconic image of this fundamental attitude of the Christian faith.⁸

Anna

After this rather devastating prophecy to Mary, Luke introduces us to another “Prophet” (cf. Lk 2:36) – someone who sees things as they really are and not as they appear to be – an 84-year old widow, Anna from the Hebrew “Hannah” meaning “grace.”⁹ At home in the Temple, she lived with God and for God – a Spirit-filled and wise elderly woman, remarkable for her perseverance, no doubt through thick and thin, for she was widowed young and is now of advanced age, especially at that time (cf. Lk 2:36-37). Anna reminds me of the many women who form the core of the faithful at daily Mass, and probably do more than anyone to pass on the faith.¹⁰

⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 3: *The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image, 2012), 87.

⁹ David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 48.

¹⁰ Cf. Don Talafous, *Homilies for Weekdays: Year 1* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006), 20.

Her prophecy was inspired no doubt by her years of closeness to God in prayer. She “interpreted the deep meaning of historical events and of God’s message concealed within them. Consequently, she could give thanks to God’ (Lk 2:38).”¹¹ Her prophecy, whose words are not recorded (and in this she is like Mary; women are silent), is however, not directed to Jesus or Mary. She speaks to others who came to visit the Temple and were looking for the redemption, the freedom, of Jerusalem (cf. Lk 2:38). I think we can say she was a “proto-evangelist,” for she passed on to others the hope that was now within her, after hearing Simeon’s prophecy about the Child destined to be “glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:32).

Conclusion

As we continue this Mass, let us pray for our families and all families and especially that the dignity of family life will be increasingly recognized in our world and for all those who promote and foster that dignity.

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¹¹ Benedict XVI, Homily (2 February 2006).