

Holy Family – Year C

There is a Chinese proverb that states, “Nobody’s family can hang out the sign, ‘Nothing the matter here.’” The point of this maxim is that every family has its issues and concerns.

The Gospel for today seems to suggest that even the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph had a situation of sorts. This issue and/or situation unfolds when Jesus is twelve years old. Typically that is a tough age for a child in as much as it signals the threshold of the teenage years. It is an age which can be even more trying for the parents.

In any event, according to Jewish custom the Holy Family along with a caravan of people journey to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Upon their return they lose track of Jesus. They thought perhaps he was with the relatives, but he was not. Finally, after three days Mary and Joseph discover Jesus in the temple. And what they see is incredible. Jesus is among the teachers holding on to their every word and asking questions as well. This was no doubt a moment of great awe and pride for the Jewish parents as they saw their twelve year old in the temple.

Nevertheless, this does not preclude the mother of Jesus from raising the issue. With obvious energy, Mary asks, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.”

Meanwhile, Jesus, in what is perhaps typical twelve year old fashion responds to his mother’s question with a series of questions. He asks, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my father’s house?”

Luke underscores the heart of the issue when he states of Mary and Joseph “But they did not understand what he said to them.”

Understanding – it remains one of the greatest of human needs particularly with regard to our families. For we either want to understand and/or be understood. And yet, so many of our families lack this reality, and as a result, become divided.

Why do some of us lack understanding in our families? There are at least three answers to that question. First, we do not communicate enough. Even with all of the communication resources at our disposal

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from email to cell phone to faxes we do not communicate. This is tragic because understanding can only happen through communication, particularly through listening. When we fail to listen to our loved ones how can we ever expect to understand them or their actions therein?

Second, we lack understanding in our families because individually, for selfish reasons, we get locked in to our own agenda. A clear example of this for me manifested itself numerous times when I was director of vocations for the diocese. Many young men would come forward to express an interest in priesthood only to pull back because their parents did not want them to be a priest. While we all no doubt want what is best for our children, where is God's agenda in all of this?

The third reason why we lack understanding at times in our families is that we allow the conflict, whatever it is, to take precedence over our commitment. Another way to say this is that we allow the issue to overshadow the person. Obviously our family members from time to time do things we not only fail to understand but also may hurt us, but do we ever try to put ourselves in their shoes?

While Mary and Joseph did not necessarily understand Jesus, they did not detach or unplug, nor did they try to project their own agenda. They simply trusted and in God's time they came to understand. Mary, for her part, "kept all these things in her heart." She and Joseph did not understand necessarily the immediacy of the moment, but they got the big picture and understood the plan of God.

Every year at this time, my dear mother would take a gold bow and place it on the frame of our family portrait hanging in the living room. She knew the wisdom of the Chinese proverb, that no family can hang a sign, "Nothing the matter here." But she also knew, in spite of it all, that every family, including our own, is a gift from God that needs to be unwrapped every day.

That is the spirit that the Holy Family lived by each day. Like the Holy Family even when we do not always understand, may God give us the courage to appreciate the gift of our own family. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, pray for us.