

Well, last Sunday, when I started to think about this homily, I had found this great story about family love that fit perfectly with those pictures you find painted of the Holy Family. You know the ones - where Joseph is doing a bit of carpentry, the boy Jesus is handing him a piece of wood or a tool of some sort, and Mary is sitting nearby smiling and sewing, or knitting, or doing something domestic. You know, the sort of pictures that are meant to convey the love and perfect lives of the Holy Family as something to which we should aspire. It seemed like a good place to start. But, then came Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Now as you know as a permanent deacon, I'm married. Becky and I celebrated our 41st wedding anniversary earlier this month. We have four adult children, two boys, two girls. Three of whom were married in the last two years. So, the plan was for children and spouses, no grandchildren yet, to start arriving the afternoon of the 24th. Now, the boys had asked ahead of time if they could bring their dogs, a total of three. We have two dogs and, possibly foolishly, we said, "Why not?"

So, we started Christmas eve with nine people and five dogs in the house. One big happy family, but not a silent night. Well, on Christmas Day my younger brother and his wife were to join us, but she wasn't feeling up to it. Her MS has come out of remission, and she was exhausted after having their four kids at home Christmas Eve, but she talked him into coming over without her.

So, we were up to ten people, and yes, five dogs. Shortly before we were to begin dinner, Becky's sister called. There had been, let's just call it a culinary catastrophe, and so we said come on over. So, we added Becky's sister and brother-in-law, their grandson, who they are raising, and Becky's Mom. Fourteen people and five dogs.... Merry Christmas – Merry Chaos... As I looked at the chaos, I may have thought “holy something”, but not necessarily “holy family”. But you know what? It was a very good day. It was a great day. And, it made me rethink what the idea of a “holy family” and this Feast of the Holy Family should be about.

So, let's set aside those pious paintings and consider who the Holy Family was. OK, first we have Jesus. The Son of God and the Son of Mary. True God and true man, or in the case of today's Gospel, true boy. Like us in all things but sin. Yes, He was the perfect child, or as close as you can get. But, I imagine that there were other episodes like in today's Gospel. Times when Mary and Joseph, who despite knowing who He is, - after all the angel told them -, were still struggling to understand just what it all meant. Consider today's Gospel. Now, they weren't negligent parents. Luke tells us that Jesus was twelve. At the age of thirteen, a Jewish boy makes his Bar Mitzvah, literally “son of the Law”, and becomes an adult according to Mosaic Law. And, they were traveling in a caravan most probably made up of friends, neighbors, and family.

I'm sure they thought He was in the group and quite capable of being away from them as they traveled. But, after a day of travel, they realized that He had stayed behind in Jerusalem. Now, we can imagine their panic, their fear. I've often thought, "What is one of the first things a parent would do when a child is missing?" Well, hopefully, pray... But, can you imagine that prayer? "Heavenly Father our son is missing, well really, Your Son, who You entrusted to us..." That's awkward... They searched for Him for three days, three panicky, fearful days, before they found Him in the Temple "sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers." And, what did He say to Mary and Joseph? "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" What did that mean? Both then and for the future... So much for the little boy handing Joseph tools...

OK, so we now have Mary, a young woman who had committed herself to remain a virgin. Conceived free from sin and remaining sinless all her life, we might say the perfect woman or as close as you're going to get. She was married to an older man, in an arranged marriage, who was to be her provider and protector. As a girl of maybe fourteen or fifteen, she had said "yes" to an angel and brought God's Son into the world not knowing all that it would mean but trusting in God.

In the course of her lifetime she would be an unwed mother and a refugee forced to flee to Egypt. She would become homeless following her Son as He traveled and preached. In the end she would hold her Son's lifeless body, the mother of the political prisoner, the executed criminal. But, she would see Him resurrected and finally understand. So much for just smiling and doing something domestic.

Finally, we have Joseph – a man living with the only two perfect, sinless people to ever walk the face of the earth. Talk about odd man out... Some scholars say he may have been as much as ten to fifteen years older than Mary, possibly even a widower with children. Was the Holy Family what some today might call a blended family? Called to marry and to become the provider and protector for a young pregnant girl who an angel had assured him was carrying God's Son. Called to raise, to be a father to a child that he didn't fully understand. Warned by that same angel, he would flee with his family to Egypt where as an immigrant he would continue to support and protect and love them. We assume that he died before Jesus began His public ministry. He's not mentioned later in the Gospels. That's why Joseph is the patron saint of a happy death, because we can imagine that Jesus and Mary were physically present when he died. So much for doing a bit of carpentry...

So... We have Jesus – sometimes a total puzzle to His parents. Have we been there? We have Mary – holding the pieces of this puzzle in “her heart” while coping with all that her “Yes” to God, has brought about. Have we been there? We have Joseph – a good man, a just man, loving and doing the best he can for his family. Have we been there?

What held them together? Love for one another. Love for and trust in God. Maybe, that’s all there is to being a “holy family”. Love for one another. Love for and trust in God. It does require work. It does require sacrifice. It does require faith and prayer. But, you know, all those pious pictures aside, we can do it, sometimes even with five dogs under foot.