

If I were a more industrious person, I'd write something called "A Catechism for The Rest of Us," the "rest of us" being those who aren't perfect; those for whom faith raises as many questions as answers; those for whom discipleship usually involves two steps forward and one step back — and often more than one. This would be an appropriate day to start it because, to me, among the most important aspects of today's feast, the Feast of the Holy Family, is that it's a feast for the rest of us.

We might suppose that Holy Family is an ancient observance. It's not. It was first acclaimed as a regional commemoration by Pope Leo XIII in 1892, though interest in the Holy Family began to grow during the Counter-Reformation. Leo's day, like ours, was marked by great turbulence: rapacious capitalism, the rise of revolutionary movements, rapid social change, and more — all of which inevitably had an effect on family life. In Leo's view, it was a grim time. He observed:

You know the times in which we live; they are scarcely less deplorable for the Christian religion than the worst days, which in times past, were most full of misery for Church. We see faith ... lessening in many souls; we see charity growing cold; the young generation daily growing in depravity of morals and views; the Church of Jesus Christ attacked on every side by open force or by craft; a relentless war waged against the Sovereign Pontiff¹; and the very foundations of religion undermined with a boldness which waxes daily in intensity.²

Leo urged a devotion to St. Joseph and the Holy Family as a way of addressing these malign developments. Such a devotion, Leo felt, would foster for "fathers ... a shining pattern for watchfulness and foresight. Mothers ... an extraordinary model of love, of modesty, of

¹ Today, ironically, "relentless wars" against the Holy Father are far more likely to be waged from inside the Church than from outside of it.

² Pope Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries* 1, The Holy See, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15081889_quamquam-pluries.html), http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15081889_quamquam-pluries.html

submissiveness of mind, and of perfect faith. Children ... a divine example of obedience to admire, cultivate and imitate,” in the words of one liturgical text.³

In 1921, Pope Benedict XV went Leo one step further by including the Feast of the Holy Family in the liturgical calendar of the universal Church.

The Catechism informs us that today’s Feast is meant to extol the family as “a school for human enrichment” and to inspire “the family exercise [of] the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way ... [by] prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and self-denial and active charity.”⁴ That’s a good thing. We can all use some inspiration in forging stronger, more loving relationships with others, particularly those closest to us.

There’s a danger, though, in making the example of the Holy Family so lofty and sublime that it becomes an impossible standard for, well, the rest of us; that is to say, for we mere mortals. After all, I suspect few of us are likely to be mistaken for Mary or Joseph — to say nothing of Jesus Himself. The reality is that all human families are imperfect. Sometimes they’re more likely to resemble the Adams Family than the Holy Family. How, then, are we to relate to something so seemingly unattainable?

Don’t despair.

A close reading of Scripture tells us that while Joseph and Mary were holy, they weren’t perfect. Holiness and perfection are two entirely different things, after all. The same is true of being without sin and perfection. Those are entirely different things, too. For example, though his language is ambiguous, one might reasonably infer from Luke’s Gospel that the Holy Parents weren’t scrupulous in having Jesus circumscribed according to the schedule

³ Abbot Gueranger, *The Liturgical Year*, quoted in “The Traditional Catholic Liturgy: Feast of the Holy Family - Sunday After Epiphany,” [www. salveregina.info](http://www.salveregina.info), <https://www.salvemariaregina.info/SalveMariaRegina/SMR-179/HolyFamily.htm>

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) N°1657.

mandated by Mosaic Law. And, of course, His parents managed to lose the child Jesus. If you misplace your child and leave him or her all alone wandering unaccompanied in a public venue for three days, you can expect the Department of Children's Services to drop by for a chat. Yet, it's their very imperfection that makes the Holy Family such an example for the rest of us. That they managed to overcome their struggles holds out hope for us, too.

And struggles, they had — in abundance. Let's face it. Things didn't start out with a promising bang for Mary and Joseph and their Son. They learn of the child Jesus' impending birth in a most extraordinary way: a fearful visit by an angel who proclaims that Mary's Son will reign forever.⁵ Then follows an arduous ninety-mile journey to visit Elizabeth, Mary's elderly cousin who is also pregnant, miraculously enough. Think what that must have been like: a pregnant young woman sitting atop a donkey for ninety bone-jarring miles — unless, even worse, she walked. Think what it must have been like to lead the donkey who must have tired of the trip early on and had to be — shall we say — “coaxed along,” mile after grueling mile.

Then back home, only to head back south, this time to Bethlehem. Why? Because they wanted to? No, because the Emperor demanded it and one didn't trifle with the Emperor. Luke tells us they tried to stay at an inn, but no luck. There wasn't room for them. This is an interesting detail given that they were in Bethlehem in the first place because Bethlehem was Joseph's “own town”⁶ where presumably his family still lived. The implication is that they wouldn't put them up, hence the need for an inn — a significant breach of middle Eastern cultural hospitality, then and now. Joseph was holy, yes. The rest of his extended family? Possibly not so much. In any event, the child Jesus ends up being born in what's politely described as a “manger”, but which was, in fact, a feeding trough. Hardly ideal.

⁵ Lk 1:26-33 (NRSV). The fact that the very first thing that Gabriel says to Mary after greeting her is, “Do not be afraid ...” indicates that this was exactly Mary's initial reaction: fear, understandably enough.

⁶ Lk 2:3 (NRSV).

All of this is followed by a disquieting encounter in the Temple when Mary and Joseph bring their infant to the Temple as part of the requisite “purification” rites following childbirth. Mary is told that the child Jesus “is destined for the falling and rising of many ... and to be a sign that will be opposed ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”⁷ Welcome to family life! And if all that weren’t enough, they were also forced to flee the murderous intentions of the madman who governed them.⁸

Scripture speaks of the fear and confusion that Joseph and Mary felt. No wonder! Who wouldn’t have been shaken by all of this? But Scripture tells us something else, too. It tells us that despite the trials they faced, and despite the anxiety their trials inevitably elicited, they somehow managed to persevere and overcome them. For as Luke tells us, under their tutelage, “The child [Jesus] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon them.”⁹

How was it possible? That, really, is the question that Mary had first posed to Gabriel: how will all of this be possible? Gabriel answered by saying, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”¹⁰ Later, when Elizabeth exclaimed to Mary, “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled,”¹¹ this is what she was referring to: Mary’s *faith* in what Gabriel had prophesied, not Mary’s *understanding* of what it involved or how it would come about. The same can be said of Joseph. He, too, had been the recipient of jolting prophecies about the Son Mary would bear and the threats the child would face. It was their faith that made Mary and Joseph holy, not any sense that they were either omniscient or perfect.

⁷ Lk 2:34-35 (NRSV)

⁸ Mt 2:13-15 (NRSV)

⁹ Lk 2:40 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Lk 1:35 (NRSV).

¹¹ Lk 1:45 (NAB)

What both of them certainly *did* know was that faith has to be nurtured. Before they could help Jesus “become strong [and] filled with wisdom,” they needed to become stronger and wiser in faith themselves. In Judaism, both in Jesus’ day and ours, while the synagogue may be the center of worship, the family is the center of faith, and the Holy Family could hardly be that without the faith that Mary and Joseph contributed to their family, a faith that wasn’t stagnant but lively and enduring, fed sometimes by the very difficulties they faced.

The same is true of us, which is why the Church speaks so often of the family as “the domestic church”. It’s also why the Church often addresses issues like marriage, sexual ethics, and the like — not because it’s obsessed with these things *per se*, but because of their obvious importance in shaping family life for either good or for ill.

Joseph and Mary knew, too, that not only does faith need to be nurtured, it needs to be protected. Today’s Gospel conveys a stark and urgent warning: there will always be a Herod — and often many of them — around. Some of them will compete with him in their cruelty; others will attempt to smother the light of the Christ-child in far subtler — and often, for that reason, more effective — ways by persuading us to adopt an anti-Gospel of enmity and division or by whispering in our ear the ancient temptation to make of ourselves our own little gods. The Holy Family fled their Herod. We should flee ours whenever they pop up.

The great meaning of today’s Feast, I think, is that it’s not enough simply to admire the sanctity of the Holy Family from a distance. If today were just about their holiness, it wouldn’t have much to do with the rest of us. We’re just ordinary people, mostly good though flawed, who have to learn to live with other ordinary people, mostly good though flawed, and the family is normally where we’ll learn to do it. It’s in the families both of our birth and of our choice that we’ll learn to practice the virtues that Paul writes about: “heartfelt compassion, kindness,

humility, gentleness, ... patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another.”¹² These are the things that make a family, whether its members are related or not, and these are the things that’ll let us know we’re at home, among kin, whenever and wherever we encounter them.

Were it not for Jesus, no one would remember or care who Joseph and Mary were. Ultimately, the Holy Family is holy because of Christ. So it is today. Where Christ is, holiness is, and where Christ is, there too are family. Perfection may be unattainable for the rest of us, but learning to recognize, nurture and protect the Light of Christ in ourselves and in others is not. And therein lies the path to holiness.

¹² Co 3:12-13 (NAB).