



## The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph: Learning Holiness at the School of Nazareth

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**We can learn the meaning and mystery of this beautiful Feast and apply it to our own family life - the path to holiness is found in living our ordinary family life with the Lord Jesus at the center of it all**

CHESAPEAKE, Va. (Catholic Online) - During the Octave (eight days) of Christmas we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. The significance of the Feast becomes much more meaningful when we consider the deeper truths it reveals. Yes, it teaches us about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. But it also speaks to each one of us how to live differently in our own families, make Jesus Christ the center of our life together.

Through our Baptism, we are invited to live our lives in Jesus Christ by living them in the Church - which is the Risen Body of Christ, continuing His redemptive mission. The Church is the place where we learn, as the Apostle Paul reminded the Colossian Christians, to "put on love, that is, the bond of perfection". (Col. 3:14)

The Church, as sacrament and sign, mediates and reveals the Lord's life to us, in the Word proclaimed and the Sacraments communicated. Jesus has been raised from the dead. The head and the Body cannot be separated. He continues his ministry through His Church. As the Catechism states with such simplicity and profundity "The Church in this world is the sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument of the communion of God and men." (CCC# 780)

The Gospel of Holy Mass during years when we follow Cycle A, is taken from the second chapter of Matthew (Mt. 2:13-15, 19-23). It tells of the journey of the Holy family to Nazareth when, after being warned in a dream by an angel, Joseph, the Guardian of the Redeemer and Husband of Mary, steered them away from threat of Herod and to the town where the child would be raised and fulfill another of the ancient prophecies, *He shall be called a Nazorean.*

Our Sunday liturgical readings on Sunday, in the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church, rotate over a three year sequence. This year is Cycle B, and we hear the presentation of Jesus in the temple account in St. Luke and the beautiful canticle of Zechariah. (Luke 2:22-40) Upon the Holy Family leaving the temple to return to Nazareth, we heard these words:

*When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

All of the accounts, in each year, point us to Nazareth and the profound truth of what occurred there. Yet, it is Luke who offers that profoundly important insight into the life of the supernaturally natural life of the Holy Family. There, in Nazareth, the Holy family lived a Holy life, precisely because Jesus was at the center of it all.

We can learn the meaning and mystery of this beautiful Feast and apply it to our own family life. The path to our own holiness is found in living our ordinary family life with the Lord Jesus at the center of it all. It becomes naturally supernatural.

In a beautiful address on December 28, 2011, at a Wednesday audience, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke of the life of the Holy Family in Nazareth. Here is a

short excerpt: "The house of Nazareth is a school of prayer where we learn to listen, to meditate, to penetrate the deepest meaning of the manifestation of the Son of God, drawing our example from Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

*The Holy Family is an icon of the domestic Church, which is called to pray together. The family is the first school of prayer where, from their infancy, children learn to perceive God thanks to the teaching and example of their parents. An authentically Christian education cannot neglect the experience of prayer. If we do not learn to pray in the family, it will be difficult to fill this gap later. I would, then, like to invite people to rediscover the beauty of praying together as a family, following the school of the Holy Family of Nazareth.*

The Christian family is the first cell of the whole Christian Church. It is the place where we begin the journey toward holiness and learn to become more fully human. The Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, became one of us. He was born into a human family. That was neither accidental nor incidental. There, in what the late Pope Paul VI called the *School of Nazareth*, we can learn the way of love. The late Pope's reflection called *The Example of Nazareth* is in the Office of Readings for the Liturgy of the Hours (the breviary) for the Feast of the Holy Family.

Every moment of his time among us Jesus was saving the world, re-creating it from within. To use a word from the early Church Father and Bishop St. Ireneus, he was *recapitulating* the entire human experience. There, in the holy habitation of Nazareth, He forever transformed family life. Now, He teaches us how to live in His presence, if we will enroll in the School of Nazareth.

From antiquity the Christian family has rightly been called a *domestic church*. In our life within the Christian family Jesus Christ is truly present. However, we need the eyes to see Him at work, the ears to hear His instruction and the hearts to make a place for Him to dwell. In our family we can learn the way of selfless love by enrolling in the School of Nazareth.

Jesus spent 30 of his 33 earthly years in Nazareth. Some spiritual writers have called these the *hidden years*, because there is so little written about them in the Gospel narratives. However, they reveal the holiness of ordinary life and show us how it becomes extraordinary for those baptized into Christ.

Every moment of his time among us Jesus was saving, redeeming, and re-creating the world. From his conception, throughout His saving life, death and Resurrection, the One whom scripture calls the *New Adam* was making all things new. The Fathers of the last great Council of the Church put it this way:

*The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. He Who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), is Himself the perfect man.*

*To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin (Gaudium et Spes # 22)*

In the holy habitation of Nazareth Jesus transformed daily family life. Already blessed as God's plan for the whole human race and the first society, marriage and the Christian family has been elevated in Christ to a Sacrament, a vehicle of grace and a sign of God's presence. The Church proclaims Christian marriage, and the family founded upon it, is a vocation, a response to the call of the Lord. In the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we learn the way of love in the School of Nazareth.

The phrase domestic church was one of particular fondness to the great Bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom. It was a framework for the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on Christian marriage and family. Blessed Pope John Paul II developed this teaching in his *Christian family in the Modern World* and his *Letter to the Family*. In these writings he invites every Christian family to, using his pregnant phrase, *become what you are, a domestic church*.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Joseph and Mary is not only our model, it is the beginning of the new family of the Church. Our Gospel story today tells us of a family trip which is packed with lessons for those enrolled in the School of Nazareth. In and through the ordinary stuff of daily life we find Jesus and in the encounter discover ourselves. Pope Paul VI wrote:

*Nazareth is a kind of school where we may begin to discover what Christ's life was like and even to understand his Gospel. Here we can learn to realize who Christ really is. Here everything speaks to us, everything has meaning.*

We live in Church. We were baptized into the Lord and now live in His Risen Body as members. The Church is a communion, a relationship in Christ. The Christian family is the smallest cell of that Body of Christ. The extended church community is a family of families.

This understanding is more than piety - it is sound ecclesiology and solid anthropology. It is reality. Family life is where the *rubber hits the road* for most Christians. It is here where the universal call to holiness, in all its real, earthy, humanness and ordinariness, is first issued. It is here where we learn the way of discipleship.

Family is where progress in the Christian life, the way of ordinary holiness, can find its raw material. Whether we choose to respond to grace - and develop the eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to accept the hidden invitations to learn to love beneath the surface of that daily stuff - is all wrapped up in the mystery of human freedom. Our choices not only affect the world around us, they make us become the people we will become.

St. Paul exhorted the early Christians to *Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus, who though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself* (Phil. 2:5). The Greek word translated emptied in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians is *kenosis*.

This word refers to the voluntary pouring out-like water-of oneself in an act of sacrificial love. This emptying is the proper response of the love of a Christian for the One who first loved us. It is also the very heart of the vocation of Christian marriage and family.

When the right choices are made in this life of domestic *kenosis*, this life of domestic emptying lived in Christian family, we change. We are converted. We cooperate with the Lord's invitation to follow Him by exercising our human freedom; we choose to give ourselves away in love to the other, and find ourselves made new.

In this life of responding to the Lord's invitations we are gradually transformed into an image, a living icon, of Jesus Christ, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reminded the faithful. This way of holiness is not easy, as anyone who has lived the vocation can attest, but make no mistake; it is a very real path to holiness. It is also a wonderful one.

The challenge lies in the choices we make, daily, hourly, and even moment-by-moment. Two trees still grow in the garden of domestic life. They invite the exercise of our freedom, which is the core of the Image of God within us. There is

the tree in Eden where the first Eve said, *No I will not serve*. Then, there is that Tree on Calvary where Mary, the Second Eve, as the early Church Fathers called her, stood with the beloved disciple John and, along with him, again proclaimed her YES.

Through those choices, presented to us from the moment we open our eyes every morning to the time we close them at night, we are invited to learn in the *School of Nazareth* and, in imitation of the Holy Family, become a domestic church. We are invited into a domestic *kenosis*, learning to love, pray and grow in holiness in the School of Nazareth

St. Paul wrote to the early Christians: *Brothers and sisters: Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.* (Col. 3)

The first school of prayer and practice, the place where we learn this new way of life, is the first cell of the Church, the domestic church of the Christian family. Happy Feast of the Holy Family.