

## Holy Family 2019

When we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family my thoughts first turn to J.M.J. In the Catholic grade-school I went to as a child that was what went on the top of every homework assignment, every spelling test, every written record of my earliest achievements. J.M.J. Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

The Holy Family was a big devotion for my family and my extended family. With 92 cousins just on my mom's side it stands to reason. We believed in family life, fostered it, idolized it, even.

And it helped immensely. The image of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in the home at Nazareth kept before us an image of what we were working toward: harmony, mutual caring and love, growth to maturity in a safe and secure environment.

We knew the story portrayed in today's Gospel; how Joseph had to take Mary and Jesus and to seek refuge in a foreign land, Egypt, because life in their homeland was just too dangerous to endure. In Israel they would have to live fearing for their mortal lives, and they were powerless to do anything about it.

But when it came time to put up a shrine in our yard dedicated to the Holy Family the image chosen was not Joseph leading a donkey with Mary and Jesus on its back, but Joseph with a board and plane, standing next to Mary with a kitchen bowl and young Jesus standing in front of them. That image spoke better to the actual life we were living. All the better for us.

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That image, however, works for fewer and fewer families these days.

When, in 1921, Pope Benedict the 15<sup>th</sup> declared that this feast would be celebrated throughout the Western Church, he did so because he saw the family under threat. Fathers were no longer working within sight of their home, as farmers or in a carpenter shop or down the street in the blacksmith's forge, where the sons would learn the trade and, at some point, take over the family business.

They had begun to go to the factory, where they worked, cut off from the life of the family until they arrived home that night. Most families today take that rhythm as a given and have found a way to work at family life with that in mind.

Today the pressures on family life are much different and for a larger portion of the population the image from the life of the Holy Family that they might most easily identify with is the chaotic flight into Egypt.

Our own stained-glass window that depicts the scene captures the alarm quite poignantly, I think. I invite you to spend a moment just gazing at it, taking it in, especially the face of Jesus, who knows already at that young age, that the world is a dangerous place.

That's the experience of more and more families these days as the drug epidemic continues, poverty and economic displacement hollows out the present and future, extended families become less and less the norm, and children are forced to give up their childhoods simply to survive.

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A recent newspaper article reports that in Southwestern Ohio, in an area much like our own, “at least a quarter of the school district’s nearly 650 junior high and high school students have a close relative who uses drugs. At least 140 — more than 20 percent — do not live with their parents, including 41 who are considered homeless...”

Sensitive to that reality, the art teacher at the High School there said she always begins her family portrait lesson by explaining that family is whatever her pupils determine it

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to be. “I can’t think of any student painting a two-parent family right now,” she said.

One of her students, Hannah, keeps photos of her parents in a collage hanging above her bed, but she said her aunt and uncle had given her a real family when her parents were not able to. “They’re my safe place,” she said. “I don’t have to be scared anymore.”

Since we are taking St. Matthew as our scriptural guide this year perhaps we can make more room for the image of the Holy Family on the move, and put the carpenter’s home in Nazareth in the background, and sharpen our eyes to be on the lookout for those people in our midst whose family life needs a boost, sometimes by being a family-like presence for them, as they labor to weather the storm of chaos, in whatever form it takes.