How to have a holy family

It’s not about not having problems

It was a scorching July day 32 years ago that my family last posed for a formal portrait. There we are, my mother and her five children (our dad had died in 1972), spouses and grandchildren, standing or sitting at attention in the living room, dressed in Sunday’s best, shoes spit-shined and hair freshly combed, smiling as if there were no cares in the world.

What the photograph doesn’t tell, however, is how that July day was one of the hottest on record, and how the air conditioner was being taxed to its limit. It doesn’t tell how the photographer and his assistant had to use every stuffed animal in the vicinity to coax the little ones to smile. It doesn’t tell how we had privately warned him to make sure that at least the corner of my mother’s newly reupholstered couch appeared in the picture. It doesn’t tell how I was in a hurry to drive to a wedding 100 miles away.

It doesn’t tell what was in our minds and hearts that day — the joys, the memories, the cares, the hopes, the concerns, the dreams, the worries.

The final product, while beautiful and cherished by each of us, does not really say anything about our family; it only records what we looked like, and how we dressed, that hot July day.

The relationship litmus test

Families are more than a posed portrait. We are living, breathing communities of persons who share a heritage and give one another an identity. We cannot be captured by the blink of a camera’s shutter or a smartphone, for we are always changing, growing and adjusting. Rarely is there a time that could be called “status quo” in a family! We are old, reaching back generations; but we are also young, constantly stretching toward the future.

As an old proverb goes, “No family can hang out a shingle that reads, ‘Nothing the matter here.’”

Our only source of strength

The family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus was by no means carefree. The essence of their lives is no more captured by a statue than ours is captured by a portrait. They formed a family that knew both the joy of a newborn son and the disorientation of political upheaval and flight, as well as personal tragedy. To be sure, their family was fueled by God’s extraordinary grace to Mary and Joseph in light of their role in salvation; still, it was a grace that called for response. What gave them strength was their unfailing confidence that the love of God was at work through it all, for despite the uncertainties they gave themselves to him above all else.

Our families are holy not when difficulties cease, but when we learn to turn to God as our only source of strength. Our families are holy not when we never argue or disagree, but when we forgive rather than keep fists tightly clinched.

Our families are holy not when we stop having problems, but when we courageously ask God for guidance, trusting that he will be true to his promises.

Our families are holy not because parents and kids never have differences, but because despite our differences we never give up on one another.

Our families are holy not when parents always make the right decisions, but when they discover that wisdom comes from prayer — and that we’ll probably never know whether we’re wise or not.

Our families are holy not when we look at joy as our own accomplishment, but when we see joy as one of God’s blessings, for which we can give constant thanks.

Our families are holy not when we appear outwardly as polished as a portrait, but when we realize that God is using all the characters and drama that pass through our lives as the very means to make us holy.

Our families are holy not when we have reached our goals and retired, but when we have surrendered ourselves unconditionally to lifelong growth in Christ.

Our families are holy when husbands and wives and mothers and fathers and children give themselves as individuals, and together their entire family, to Jesus as his disciples.

May the Lord Jesus be the prism through whom we pass every relationship in our lives, especially our family relationships. Holy families, yours and mine.

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