

## Feast of the Holy Family

### Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

December 31, 2017 St. Augustine Cathedral 9:30 a.m.

On this Sunday after Christmas but right before New Years, we can't help but be more tuned into wishing one another "Happy New Year's" greetings than "Merry Christmas" greetings, since this is actually New Year's Eve! But what we should really be wishing one another is "Happy Holy Family" Sunday, though I don't think Hallmark has marketed a card for that occasion yet.

Christmas is such a hugely-important Feast that not only do we celebrate it for eight days, but the Sunday between Christmas and the Solemnity of Mary (which the rest of the world calls New Years!) while still celebrating the Joy of Christmas, the Church focuses our attention on the most important fact about the Birth of Jesus.

Jesus, the Son of God----the Word made Flesh---the Prince of Peace---the Savior of the World-----was also the Infant Baby. He was born just like every other human being in the history of the world, and born into a Family of Mary His mother and Joseph His foster father, who would love Him, protect Him, take care of His every human need, teach Him, and be one with Him until He was old enough to go off on His own. And the reason why we celebrate this Feast with such Joy in the midst of this Christmas Octave is because what Jesus has done by being born into a Family that we have come to know as "the Holy Family", has blessed all Family Life and made it "holy".

Notice I said that Family Life is "holy"; I didn't say that it was "perfect" or "easy" or a "constant picnic". That was also true for the Holy Family; they certainly didn't have it "easy" nor was their life a "constant holiday". We don't know very much about Jesus' early years, but everything that we do know about, and what is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew or Luke, lets us know about the problems, the suffering, and the worries that they constantly endured.

We know about the conditions in which Mary and Joseph had to give birth to this Holy Child; they were poor, and far away from home, and had to settle for a cold, dirty stable for shelter and a manger for a bassinette.

And shortly after Jesus' Birth, they had to pick up and flee into Egypt because King Herod issued a decree to murder all the baby boys in the Bethlehem area 2 years of age or younger; so they became refugees, living in fear for the safety of their Child until they could eventually return.

And yet, they were the "Holy Family" because Jesus, the Son of God, was with them. What made the difference was not how many problems they had, or how big those problems were, but how they dealt with those problems. Mary and Joseph dealt with every single difficult circumstance of their lives as a loving couple, nurturing parents and faith-filled believers in God's Love for them.

The Holy Family shows all families how to be holy. Part of what helped them to be holy was their love for and adherence to God's Holy Word. They would certainly have been very familiar with the First Reading we listened to this morning from the Book of Sirach, one of the Wisdom Books of what we call the Old Testament. We heard in that Reading: "*God sets a father in honor over his children*"; "*Whoever honors his father/mother atones for sins....*"; "*Whoever respects his father/mother will live a long life.....*" The two key words in that Reading were "*honor*" and "*respect*". Honor and Respect are the two foundational virtues for all Family Life. We learn them in our families; we live them in our families; and we are called to go forth from our families to show "honor" and "respect" to all other human beings we encounter, because all human life is a gift from God and must be "honored" and "respected", protected and defended.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus lived their Family Life with those two foundational virtues, and that helped to make them "holy". How about in our own families; do we "honor" one another? Do we show "respect" for one another?

In today's Second Reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, he gives us all great advice on what it means to be "holy".

In these very frigid Michigan winter days, we come to learn that the best way to protect ourselves from the cold is to dress in layers. In a way, that's what St. Paul was advising us to do in a spiritual way; to dress spiritually with the various layers of "virtues". St. Paul told us that as "*God's chosen ones*", we are to "*put on*" the first virtue of "*heartfelt compassion*", followed by "*kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with and forgiving one another when needed* (which in any family would be quite often). And then,

St. Paul tells us: “*And over all these*” (like a good winter coat),.... “*put on love*” which keeps everything together.

St. Paul also gives us three final ingredients for “holiness”: 1) *let the Peace of Christ control your hearts*----like a good, warm **Hat**; 2) *always be thankful*---like a nice soft **Scarf**; and 3) “*whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the Name of the Lord Jesus*”---like strong **Boots** to keep us on track.

When we think about what it takes to be “holy”, I wonder if we don’t make it overly complicated? We might think that we have to be “perfect” and never make a mistake-----Wrong! We might think that we have to always be praying or thinking about God----Wrong! We might think that we will constantly be living in harmony with the other members of the family and we’ll never have a mean word or a disagreement-----Wrong!

What made the Holy Family “holy” is that Jesus “sanctified” it. What today’s Feast reveals to us is that if you welcome Jesus into your Family Life, if Jesus finds a central place in your daily family life, your Family will also be “holy”; again, not “perfect”, and not “problem-free”; but “holy”.

As we heard in today’s Gospel, when the Baby Jesus was 40 days old, Mary and Joseph took Him to the Temple to give thanks to God for a safe delivery of this Holy Child, both for Mary’s sake and Jesus’ sake. While they were doing what every good Jewish family does, they were shocked by the elderly priest Simeon, and the aged holy woman Anna, each of whom in their own way “recognized” Jesus for Who they knew Him to be. Simeon called Jesus “*God’s salvation*” and “*a light for the Gentiles and the glory of Israel*”. However, he also said that Jesus would grow up to be: “*a sign that will be contradicted*”; and then he said to Mary: “*and a sword will pierce your heart*”. Those words would have given Mary and Joseph much to ponder as they traveled all the way back to their home in Nazareth where, St. Luke tells us, Jesus *grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon Him.*”

In addition to Holy Family Sunday, today is New Year’s Eve, a day when most people take some time to “ponder”, to reflect on this past year, and to make “new year’s resolutions” about what we want to do differently for this new year about to begin. Among the resolutions that you will consider, please consider resolving to work on making your Family even more “holy” than you already are. As we’ve said, that doesn’t mean acting at home like we’re in church, or trying to pretend to be who we are not.

It means making room in your lives for Jesus; it means treating one another with “honor and respect”; it means “spiritually dressing” in the layers of virtues that allows our love for one another to be what helps us make good daily decisions; and finally, being a “holy family” means allowing those 3 final ingredients for holiness (Christ’s Peace---**Hat**; Gratitude-**Scarf**; and being God-centered---**Boots**) to guide our family life and keep us focused on our ultimate goal: to help one another to get to Heaven.

As we look forward to 2018, I pray that each of you will entrust your family to the Lord. Please pray for one another, and ask God for the grace you need to keep yourselves united in your love for one another, and Christ’s Love for you, and for all families everywhere. In today’s Responsorial Psalm we prayed: “*Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in His ways.*” May we too “fear the Lord” and “*walk in His ways*” every day of this new year, and always!

God bless you---and Happy New Year!

+ *Bishop Paul J. Bradley*