

What Makes a Family Holy

A reflection inspired by a text of Dianne Bergant

St. Luke's tale of the search for Jesus and his being found in the Temple tells us what makes a family holy. Its members place their relationship with the Lord at the center of their way of living together. When Mary and Joseph "found" Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple and told him of their anxiety he responded: Didn't you know that I would have to be in my Father's House? They should have known, he thinks, that his central concern was the Heavenly Father and so he would be wherever he could learn about God's will and worship God. Mary and Joseph didn't grasp this; it hadn't occurred to them. But their reaction was simply to take him back to Nazareth and to reflect on what had happened and been said. Is that our reaction to puzzling things?

The first reading at this Sunday's Eucharist is about honoring one's parents, even when their minds fail. Actually, it gives equal importance to the care of children and to spouses care for one another. To understand God's way of using our family life to lead us to the Kingdom of Heaven we have to look at the three stages of life—growth, maturity, and diminishment. We have to reflect on what each season of life has to teach us about the path to God. For instance, at every stage of life we need to grow in what we call virtue—skills and values that enable us to love and help one another. When we grow old will we be tolerant, forgiving, patient, appreciative and focused on others? Or will we be critical, impatient, never satisfied, intolerant of what is new or different, and focused on ourselves and our needs? Will we be the kind of persons others like to be around and think they can learn from? If we haven't been learning and practicing these virtues from childhood through maturity then we won't have them when we begin to lose abilities to do for ourselves and care for ourselves. If we don't like our "old" self then we don't like the way God chooses to bring us to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Those who make God the center of their living seek to see how God is working and leading them through all the events—pleasant and unpleasant—that make up a human life. They don't give up when at first they can't see this, don't understand—as Mary and Joseph didn't understand Jesus' words to them. That needn't mean any more than understanding that they too should always seek to be present to the Heavenly Father. It is not a theoretical understanding that leads us to God but a practical one. This practical approach to everything is what enables one to acquire virtues and grow in them. These, in turn, enable us to show how seeking always to live in God's presence makes us people who attract others to seek God. We can take our cue from St. Paul's words: Strive to be filled with heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience". This is how our God treats us. Why shouldn't we treat others in the same way? We are not to drive others to God but to draw them. We are to be examples of the kind of person God makes those who love and seek and imitate Jesus.

Our Solidarity in God

A reflection inspired by a text of Megan McKenna

Theologians down the ages have spent great effort trying to spell out the necessary conditions for an individual's salvation. Almost all the theories require individuals to do something that binds them to God and God's will. In celebrating the Feast of the Holy Innocents we step away from all such theories and recognize that salvation is a free gift of God—God can give it whether individuals do special deeds or not. The Gospel tells us these martyrs were three years old or less when they were killed and that they were not killed for religious but political considerations. They are saved, so it seems, simply because they were somehow in solidarity with Christ, who was the intended victim.

Shortly before the Jubilee Year of 2000 a Columbian bishop told this story: In a remote village in his diocese the local midwife told the family of a pregnant mother to be that the baby's head was too large for it to survive the normal ordinary birth process. So the people of her village organized a group of young men who, in relays, carried the women for the twenty hours it took to reach the nearest clinic. The baby lived, and was ever after called "child of the community". In the solidarity of mutual love and concern the child received the gift of life and likewise the Holy Innocents received the gift of eternal life.

Over the ages many have said "I don't understand". They are like Mary and Joseph listening to Jesus tell them why they needn't have worried about his "being lost". Like Mary, we have to reflect on what happens in our hearts—put in a practical rather than theoretical way; i.e., we are not saved, or drawn to God, in a purely individual way; no one of us came to know of the Lord, let alone known Jesus intimately, all by ourselves. Think of the people who, deliberately or unknowingly, led you to know of God and then to believe God is your savior and loves you personally. Like the relay of young men who spent twenty hours carrying a woman about to give birth, there was a relay of people who carried you and brought you to the door of salvation—to your faith community. We can't actually make individual decisions to believe, or not to believe, all on our own. God's Providence guided these many individuals to do a part in bringing you to divine life. Our vocation is to do the same for others.

We celebrate today all who have been born to God's Kingdom by others, starting before we knew what was going on. We are all "children of the community of faith". So we are called to bear others up. The parents of the Holy Innocents couldn't do anything to prevent Herod's fear from killing all their sons of three or less but could only entrust them to God's love. God didn't let them down; nor has God let us down. God won't let down those sent to us to be born toward the Kingdom. Perhaps we can only pray for some; yet there are some we can help practically. God's call to us is to do all that we can do, no matter how difficult or seemingly impossible that task may be.

Seeing With Jesus' Eyes

A reflection inspired by a text of Carroll Stuhlmueller

In the First Letter of John we are first told that the commandment we have been taught is nothing new, and then he turns around and tells us it is new. Almost since birth we have been taught to care for the other members of our family, and perhaps of our community. It is something that goes with being human in all our world's cultures. When we look at ourselves in a mirror we are to remember that we are seeing not an isolated individual but a family member, a community member. This is perhaps the oldest of all commandments.

Yet when we Christians look in a mirror we are taught to see Christ. We are, in recent language, "other Christs". If that is so then we are being reminded to love one another as Christ does. That was what Jesus called a "new commandment" at the Last Supper. That means we are to see ourselves, and our lives, as having been given to us "for others", as was the life Jesus began at his birth. Pause and reflect on the fact that today we hear once again of Jesus' being presented to God the Father in the Jerusalem temple and of his encounter with Simeon. He had been promised that he wouldn't die until he has seen the Messiah. He rejoices that he now sees him and declares he is ready to die—he can now "die happy", as we say. He understands his individual life wholly in relation to his People and its salvation. He knows many will reject Jesus, and says so; he knows many will suffer because of Jesus, and tells Mary she is one of them. But the meaning of his life comes from the hope for Israel's salvation. So the meaning of his life is complete in that God has given life to the One who will offer all salvation.

Every life embodies a hope. It is not a merely individual one. It is a hope for some community and some family within that community, and for the individual members of that family. We are asked to look at ourselves in the mirror which is our community and the hope we are in and for it. It is not a static hope but one which grows and changes continually for the community as much as for us personally.

Not only that, but we bring sorrow and pain as well as bright hopes. It may be the pain inseparable from growth and from the changes that we, in effect, call forth from others because of who we are and what we do. Much of the hope we offer to others has to do with our being "in Christ" and called by Christ to serve others and our community. Christ comes to transform the world through each of us. One of the chief paths of transformation is the way we open others' eyes to the new hope that they are for others in Christ. We can see this truth in the child Jesus. Can we believe that in us this Jesus, and the God who sent Him to us, offers the world such transforming and life-changing hope. We are called to love and support one another so that his hope may become reality. This is a part of what we see when we look at ourselves with Jesus' eyes.

Learning From Jesus

A reflection by Origen of Alexandria

When Jesus was twelve years old, he stayed behind in Jerusalem after the Feast. His parents did not know this and so, when their anxious searching didn't find him in the caravan, they returned to Jerusalem. It was his own parents who were looking for him, the father who had brought him up and cared for him when they fled into Egypt, as well as his mother. They looked among all those they knew, as they had looked among their relatives and acquaintances in the caravan. There are ways of looking for Jesus which are of no use. Let us learn where it was that Joseph and Mary finally discovered him. In their company we too may be able to find him.

They find him in God's Temple. And he was not just anywhere in the Temple. He was among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. We too must look for Jesus in the House of God—that is, in the Church—and we must look among the teachers who belong to the Church and are faithful to its teaching. If we seek Jesus there we shall find him. Yet, one who claims to be a teacher without possessing Christ already is a teacher only in name. Jesus is the Word and Wisdom of God and is not found with the help of one who does not already possess Him.

We are told that they found Jesus sitting among the teachers. He was not merely sitting there, however, but was listening to them and learning from them. At his very moment Jesus is present among us too. He is questioning us and listening to what we are saying. Scripture tells us that the teachers were amazed. What caused their astonishment? Not simply his questions—which were no doubt extraordinary—but his answers. His answers to what? He questioned the doctors, but they couldn't always give an answer. So he replied to his own questions and these replies were not mere disputation but real teaching about life as God would have us live it, not about controversies. God instructed Moses about matters he was unable to understand. Sometimes Jesus asks us questions and sometimes he answers them. Wonderful though the questions are yet his replies are even more wonderful.

So in order that we too may be his hearers and that he may put questions to us, and then answer them himself, we need to pray in great earnest. We must seek, with great effort and even in anguish, to hear his replies. If we do, our search will be rewarded. Not for nothing was it written: Your father and I have been looking for you "anxiously". The search for Jesus can't either be careless or unconcerned, nor must it be simply a passing interest. Those who seek Jesus and his replies will never find him in that way. We must be able to say, and truly: We have been looking for you anxiously! If we can say this then he will reply to our weary and anxious souls in the words: Did you not know that I must be found in my father's house? He has given us the Church to help us seek and to help us find him and his teaching.

The Struggle Hidden Within Us

A reflection by Fr. Hugo Rahner

Lord Jesus Christ, I adore you. God eternal, Lord of life and history, and of our hearts, I adore you. You are my life's choice, you and nothing else. I confess that you, Jesus of Nazareth, poor, humble and human are the Eternal Word, the sword which compels all mankind to a choice.

I confess that you are the Word through whom everything was made and that is made. You are the creator of atomic power, you are the lord of the human body and of its secrets. To you is judgment given, you are the arbiter over all human justice. You are the Logos, mysteriously at work in all ages and in the minds of all. Wherever something of truth was apprehended or something of beauty formed, you were present. All beauty, be it of earth or of heaven, is contained in you alone. And the day will come when you will appear, the splendor of your Godhead irradiating your humanity, to tell all human kind: I am Alpha. I am Omega, the beginning of all things and their goal. So says the Lord God; the one who is and ever was and is still to come, the Almighty.

But the darkness is still with us. You are still hidden and the world which you have made does not want to know you or receive you. There is still war between you and the Adversary. For you have come to undo the work of the devil. You have come to bring not peace but a sword. Down the centuries of history and into the very fastness of my own heart, rings the truth of the words spoken to you when you were taken as an infant to the temple: Behold, this child is destined to bring about the fall of many and the rise of many, and to be a sign which people will refuse to acknowledge. You are still the hidden child in a world grown old. You took human flesh humbly, inviting faith not compelling it. You are still obscured by the veils of this world's history; you are still destined not to be acknowledged in the scandal of your death on the cross. You are still hidden in your "visible" Church. You are still dumb in the oppressive stillness of your Sacrament. The world knows you not, it overlooks you, and when it does acknowledge you, it despises you or idly spurns you.

But I, O hidden Lord of all things, boldly affirm my faith in you. In confessing you I take my stand with you, the rejected King of this world, despised in human history, utterly unknown by your own creation. Yet I take my stand too, with you, who alone among all could say: Take courage, I have overcome the world. If I make this avowal of faith, it must pierce the depths of my heart like a sword. I must bend my knee before you, saying: I must alter my life. I have still to become a Christian. You, O Christ, must give to my earthly existence the final secret meaning that will constantly reshape my life.

The Gift that is Spiritual Motherhood

Adapted from a reflection by Br. Max Thurian of Taizé

The “Disciple whom Jesus Loved” knew Mary as the Mother of Jesus, but by Jesus’ gift he also knew her as his own mother. She was not the teenager who had accepted the angelic call to be the Messiah’s mother but one who had grown and deepened her life with God, and with her son, in a lifetime of struggle. She is now a person who can draw the Beloved Disciple even closer to Christ. She has witnessed his ministry and his crucifixion, she heard his last words and she too received the Spirit he transmitted to his disciples and his Church, and she is now a special sign of the transforming presence and power of the Lord, a “spiritual mother” in the midst of the Church. Every Christian is called to be a brother or sister of the Lord. Who can better teach us how to do this than Mary?

In the Acts of the Apostles we see the eleven returning to Jerusalem, to the Upper Room where they had eaten the Last Supper with their Lord, and awaiting the out-pouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. *“All, with one accord, devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women, with Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers”*. Mary is there, of one heart and mind with them, awaiting the great out-pouring of the Holy Spirit which will open the missionary era of the Church. She is a type of the Church as mother and spiritual mother. She is there, as she was in the beginning of the story of salvation, a humble handmaid of the Lord and an example of prayer.

In the ancient Church she was seen as the model of wise widowhood—of those women who put all their hope in God and persevered in prayer day and night. She, as spiritual mother par excellence, leads all to Christ and prayer. She is there with the faithful women who followed Christ and were always there for him; she is always there for disciples. In the power of the Spirit she will be able to transmit to the disciples, and to the Church in its beginnings, what she had come to know of Jesus as she pondered his word and deeds in her heart. She will be a humble bearer of the Gospel of her son, as she was his humble mother. She has known him better than anyone and more intimately. She can recall all Jesus said and did, for she was a most faithful and attentive listener.

By her faith, her hope, her charity and her prayers she is a spiritual nurturer and mother to the Church at its birth and in its first growth spurt. She is ever after her son’s humble representative as she is God’s humble servant. That is above all what she has to teach and to model for us. Where we seek to go she is. She shows us the way that cost her so much to walk and so shows us how to walk with Jesus.

What It Means For Christ To Be Among Us

Adapted from a homily by St. Basil the Great

Once more God has come to our world and dwells among us. He has not come as a divine Lawgiver, who is accompanied by flashes of lightening and loud trumpet blasts. He has not come to a mountain wreathed in smoke and dense cloud and he has not brought stormy winds to strike terror into the hearts of all who hear the uproar. His coming is that of a person of flesh and blood, like our own, and he comes to enter gently into a kind of conversation with us. All that he does is done in a way proper to those who share the human nature he has taken to himself. God is part of our human existence.

Once God worked intermittently and occasionally, speaking to this or that prophet or holy person. Having taken humanity and become permanently and continuously one with us, through kinship with our human condition God has raised all human kind to a condition like his own. Do you ask how can glory come to all humans through a single person, or how human flesh contains Godhead? Consider the way fire enters into iron.

The substance of fire doesn't exclude that of iron or vice versa. Rather the substance that is fire imparts to iron a quality it didn't have before. The fire gives its power to the iron while remaining itself. This sharing in no way diminishes fire. The fire's heat completely fills whatever comes to share in its power. In a like way God, the Word, did not give up anything proper to Himself when, as Scripture says, he dwelt among us. He did not suffer any change in his divinity when he was made flesh. He did not have to forsake Heaven in coming to earth, but caused earth to receive one who also dwells in eternal blessedness.

Let us reflect on the fact that by coming in the flesh, God won a decisive victory over death. It has been lurking in our flesh and was overcome just as a disease is conquered by the curative powers of a medicine, one adapted to a sick body's needs. It is like the light which comes to a dark house and puts the dark to flight. Death had held sway over our human nature but this was done away with at the coming of the Godhead.

As long as night and darkness last, that ice which can form on water will continue to cover its surface. Under the influence of the warmth of the sun it gradually melts away. So it is that until the coming of our Savior death was master. But when the loving kindness of God the Savior appeared, and the Sun of Justice arose, death was swallowed up in victory. It was unable to endure the presence of the True Life. How deep is the goodness of God! How unlimited his love for human kind! Many evils afflict our human condition but are gradually being healed by Christ. We can rejoice with the shepherds and join the angels' song: "*For to us is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord*". The Lord God, our light, didn't appear in divine form lest the weak be startled but came as a servant to set captives free. Simply to restore joy to our lives is a wondrous gift. Let us all lift up our voices in joy—a joy which can abide all our days.