

Holy Family?

I prepared myself for the worst last Sunday, the Feast of the Holy Family. I prophesied a dismal homily on the too-radiant-to-be-believed triad: you know, ‘be holy as Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are holy’, piercing neither the surface of family nor holiness.

Wrong on all counts. My pastor pointed out the disparity between our generosity to family members and to strangers. We write big checks to orphans then all but get restraining orders on family members who ‘trigger’ us. Overly sensitive to those we love so much we hate, many of us are anything but holy in how emotionally stingy we are toward family members.

It’s our nature to defend ourselves when loved ones frustrate us. Or take some disturbing turn that frightens us. Jesus stressed Mary out by ditching the clan for some temple time. It was the first sign of Him distancing Himself from her for reasons not yet clear. To be sure, the analogy breaks down with our families: confusing members are messianic only in their own darkened minds. Yet it can help to remember everyone has a subtext that only God ‘gets’ as well as a noble destiny we may have forgotten.

This holy week I had the privilege of responding to an emergency call from colleagues in marital crisis. That holy family nearly blew up as they walked onto a landmine of familiar suspicions and judgments. But they surrendered together to the Father who calmed the storm; holy peace helped them to hear each other so they could glimpse his or her goodness once more. Another couple met with us to seek wisdom on how to best love a son in the throes of an identity crisis. (It’s hard to love a 36-year-old acting 16.) But these parents are digging deep into the Father’s love for their child and his best. However painful, the only way is down-- on one’s knees--where love and wisdom are distilled. Generous, tempered care for the other’s good can result from such prayer.

Mary shows us the way here. After her anxiety over Jesus’ disappearance, she does something we all can do—she ‘treasured these things in her heart’ (LK 2:51). That word for ‘treasure’ means to reflect, to conceive something new out of the brooding. It provides sacred space for entrusting the beloved to the Father who sees all (LK 2:51); it may also grant one inspired sight. You could say that Mary’s prayer transformed her fear into marvel. May such prayer make our families holy this year too; may we love our members wisely, generously, in 2019.

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