

“No Excuses” (Homily)

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December 31, 2017 – The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph
(Lectionary: 17; LK 2:22, 39-40)

Today, we celebrate the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and most fittingly, Holy Mother Church has given us readings to consider the importance of family—to us and to God. For family is most certainly important to God. If it were not, would the Word of God have contained so many stories of family? So much wisdom about family life? So much guidance about sustaining our great family, the Church? If family were not important to God, would His Son have been born of a woman? Provided with an adoptive father? Would Jesus have bequeathed Himself—body and blood—at a ritual family meal? Would he have assured his mother’s safety with his dying breath? Indeed, family is most certainly important to God. And so, through the ages, many have looked to the holy family—the family called by God to accomplish the incarnation—as exemplar, the *family of families* to be imitated by the faithful.

I, for one, have struggled with this concept, for several reasons.

First and foremost, the holy family is *unique*. It cannot be reproduced. There is only *one* Son of God, only *one* incarnation, only *one* immaculate conception, only *one* virgin birth, and so forth. Certainly, our families cannot hope to be much like the holy family, because God did not call our families to be formed as the holy family was formed: in a unique way, for a unique purpose, with unique help from God.

Then, of course, there is the *experience* of the holy family. Certainly, we would not wish this experience on *any* family! Consider:

- Visitations by angels carrying terrifying messages
- Discovering one’s fiancé pregnant by a third party
- The possibility that one’s beloved might be stoned to death
- A very long, very jolting donkey ride while very pregnant
- Giving birth amidst animal dung
- Unexpected visits by rough shepherds---and three strange foreigners
- Terrifying threats from a murderous despot
- Fleeing hundreds of miles across desert with an infant---while nursing
- Desperately seeking work in a foreign country
- Raising a strange, precocious child
- Being widowed at a young age
- Seeing one’s son threatened by powerful interests
- Witnessing the execution---the crucifixion---of one’s son

Certainly, we would not wish to imitate this life, would we?

So what remains to imitate? If the holy family is unique, and if we would not wish the experiences of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph *any* family, can the holy family, the *family of families*, be a model for us?

I believe it *can*, but in only *one* way, and that way can be *treacherous*, so we must take care.

If we don't, we may stumble. I know, because I have stumbled.

And the way is this: *We can imitate the virtues of the Blessed Mother and good Saint Joseph. We can use their decisions as examples of decisions we may have to make.*

Now, of course, I need not catalogue the virtues of Mary and Joseph for you. We have all heard them extolled throughout our lives, by family and friends, pastors and catechists, Catholics and non-Catholics, alike---so *many* virtues, and so *great*: openness to God, lives of prayer and meditation, deep faith, unquenchable hope, and unfailing love. I could go on and on---prudence, temperance, courage, and justice, and so forth---but I need not elaborate. You have *memorized* these virtues, and *meditated* on them, and, I hope, *taught* them to your brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren.

So, what, you may be asking, is treacherous about this? What could be treacherous about imitating the virtues of the Blessed Mother and good Saint Joseph?

The danger lies in the way we *see* these two, the way we *honor* these two, for we may see them as so greatly *avored* by God that we may lose hope of ever coming *close* to imitating them.

Consider my case: I, among many, perhaps all of you, have the *deepest* reverence for the Blessed Mother. Given the circumstances of my life, she *is* my mother. As well, I, like most Catholics (and many non-Catholics!) have the *deepest* reverence for good Saint Joseph. Given the circumstances of my life, he *is* my father. Indeed, I have *such* reverence for Mary and Joseph that I have put them up on pedestals in my mind and heart, pedestals as real and as firm as the pedestals upon which statues of these two are placed in churches and homes throughout the world, *and this is the problem*. For in doing so, in putting Mary and Joseph on pedestals, *I fall into a trap*: I make excuses for not imitating them, for not imitating their virtues.

I see my pedestal parents as closer to God, more favored by God than I. And in this way I dishonor my parents! I dishonor them by denying their heroic virtues.

"After all," I say to my mother Mary, "how can I *possibly* have *your* faith? *You* who are so *close* to God? *You*, the *Immaculata*?" Similarly, I complain to my father Joseph, "How can I *possibly* hope to love as *you* loved? *You*, who loved *God's own spouse*? How can I *possibly* have *your* hope? *You*, who protected *Hope itself, the baby Jesus*, from harm?"

Do you see the problem? Do you understand the trap?

Do you find yourself---as I do---making excuses such as these? If so, I beg you, open your Bibles again! Read the gospel stories which tell of the holy family, and imagine *yourself* with them. Put yourself in their stories. *Be* with Mary and Joseph. *Accompany* them as they struggle. *Sit* with them in the dung of the stable. *Walk* with them through the dust of Gaza. Understand that their feet touched the ground, and *ached!* *Feel* the pain---*their* pain. *Experience* the terror---*their* terror. Understand that when God called these two, *he did not protect them from suffering. He did not protect them from fear or pain or weariness.*

Mary and Joseph feared as *you* fear. Their hearts ached as *your* hearts ache. Their weariness and your weariness are the same. Understand that you *can* struggle to be like them, that indeed, *God calls you to do this*, and in doing so *is with you, too*---just as he was with Mary and Joseph.

We can have Mary's faith. *We can* love as Joseph loved. *We can* hope as he hoped.

No excuses for me. No excuses for you.

LK 2:22, 39-40

When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.