

HOMILY - HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY – YEAR A
(Sirach 3:2-6; 12-14; Psalm 128; Colossians 3:12-21; Mt 2:13-15; 19-23)

A father passing by his son's bedroom was astonished to see the bed was nicely made and everything was picked up. Then he saw an envelope propped up prominently on the center of the bed. It was addressed, "Dad". With premonition, he opened the envelope and read with trembling hands: "Dear dad, it is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing this. I had to elope with my new girlfriend because I wanted to avoid a scene with mom and you. I've been finding real passion with Barbara and she is so nice even with all her piercing, tattoos, and her tight motorcycle clothes. But it's not only the passion dad; she's pregnant and Barbara said that we will be very happy. Even though you don't care for her as she is much older than I, she already owns a trailer in the woods and has a stack of firewood for the whole winter. She wants to have many more children with me and that's now one of my dreams too. Barbara taught me that marijuana doesn't really hurt anyone and we'll be growing it for ourselves and trading it with her friends for all the cocaine and ecstasy we want. In the meantime, we'll pray that science will find a cure for Aids so Barbara can get better; she sure deserves it! Don't worry dad, I'm 15 years old now and I know how to take care of myself. Someday I'm sure we'll be back to visit so you can get to know your grandchildren. Your son, John

P.S. Dad, none of this is true. I'm over at the neighbor's house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than my report card that's in my desk center drawer. I love you! Call when it's safe for me to come home.

The family is a Little Church; a school of Love

The fictional story above touches on some of the dynamics that can be found in a family. Family is so central to our lives. Many of us grew up within the ethos of a social and religious triad of home, church and school. The feast today combines them all in the family. Family is all three – a home, a little church, and a school of love.

As a home, the complex relational web of a family is the foundation stone of the social fabric of our society. As a school, it is within the family that a child learns to use the word 'we' for the first time. Without that word 'we' there would be no community, no sharing, no togetherness. As church, the Marriage Encounter movement especially speaks of the family as a little Church. It is within the family that faith in a loving, forgiving God is meant to be passed on.

The readings today speak beautifully and meaningfully about family life. The first reading is a commentary on the fourth commandment: "Honor your father and mother." Too often we think of the fourth commandment solely in terms of the obligation of younger children to obey their parents. That is part of it. But there is another essential part of it: the obligation of grown children to ensure that their aged parents are able to live out their final years in comfort and dignity.

Flor McArthy, in his commentary on today's readings, adds that this second element has greater relevance today. Because of the pace of modern life, he states, the elderly tend to be pushed to the margins, if not out of the picture altogether. In our strength it is easy to forget those who are

weak and perhaps a little senile. Under God, we owe everything to our parents. The author of Ecclesiasticus asserts that kindness to parents is especially pleasing to God. That kindness even takes on a deep spiritual meaning, as atonement for one's sins.

McCarthy adds that the second reading speaks of the fraternal love that is the hallmark of Christian community. This love begins in the home. Every family is a small community. St. Paul talks about the harmonious atmosphere that should reign in a Christian household – something that depends not just on the obedience of the children but on harmonious relations among all its members.

This harmony can be achieved only by the practice of virtues such as kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, mutual forgiveness and above all, love. All these virtues refer to interpersonal relationships, and build and foster community. They are not easy to practice. But when they are practiced with consistency, the rewards are great in terms of peace and harmony in the home. The parents should set an example: the love they show one another is the best gift they can give their children.

A scripture note helps us understand the gospel. Matthew sees Jesus as reliving the history of his people. The Gospel story is colored by the story of Moses in Egypt. Just as Moses had to be rescued from Pharaoh, Jesus had to be rescued from Herod. The story also contains echoes of the Exodus. Even though the evangelist's intentions are theological, he does show Jesus, Mary and Joseph as homeless refugees.

The gospel is the flip side of the first reading which spoke of the duty of children towards their parents. Here we see the primary obligation of parents to love and care for their children. The bonds of love that hold a natural family together are modeled for us in the Gospel by a supernatural family in which the child is the Son of God. This unique union of husband, wife and child is the norm for a normal earthly family's Christian life. This passage depicts especially the parent's devotion to the child's wellbeing – all the instructions of the angel are for the sake of the child. Joseph as foster-father serves the child, and fulfills a future prophecy in 2 Corinthians 12:14 “Children ought not to save for their parents, but parents for their children.”

The Holy Family did not have it easy. The birth of Jesus in dire poverty; the danger to his life; the flight into exile; the return to a hidden life in Nazareth – we must deepen our appreciation of the very real challenges and sufferings they faced. Their faith in God, mutual love for each other and commitment to the child Jesus helped them survive. Then came the time for Jesus' public ministry, ending with the greatest suffering for a parent – Mary saw her child die before herself – a terrible death. To say the least, the Holy Family was not sanitized - they did not have it easy.

Nor is it easy for a family today. The family is a very fragile institution today. Many children are born out of marriage. Many are brought up in single-parent families. Almost half of marriages end up in divorce. Many other social pressures are being brought to bear on the family.

It is not that we no longer value the family. Rather, it may be that we have forgotten the disciplines that make it work. The family is built on bonds of commitment, fidelity and self-sacrifice. There is a saying: “One mother can take care of ten children, but ten children cannot

take care of one mother.” Our first and holiest duty is towards our own kin.

The elements of family life that I like to highlight are communication, affection and affirmation. The family is where children need to learn the skills of speaking their thoughts truthfully and sharing their feelings honestly. The family is where children need to see signs of affection by their parents, and learn to show signs of affection themselves in appropriate ways. And the family is where the children’s emotional needs to be loved, to belong and to be valued, are met. If that happens to children, then parents can relax. They are successful parents, and the children are set for life. They will be able to handle whatever challenges come their way.

My father was the reeve of a municipality and used to speak at times of different situations in the area he served. He mentioned one particular poor family on the other side of the river and told us that they lacked ambition and would never get ahead. One day I had to pick up their daughter to go to the provincial 4-H Selections competition. As I entered the yard, I noticed the ramshackle yard and run-down buildings and judged that my father was right. But as soon as we entered the house, Laura, the daughter, went to each member of her family, hugged them all and kissed each one good-bye. My stomach lurched within me as I witnessed this scene. Our family did not know how to show such affection. I probably felt a stab of jealousy and envy, which I immediately repressed with the thought that our family did not need that, that we were right. Only years later did I realize the emotional impact and significance of that moment. Had I been able to decipher its meaning and our own impoverishment as a family in terms of emotional needs not met, our family healing might have started much sooner.

I came across a piece of prose entitled “Children Learn What They Live” that would be appropriate to share here:

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn
If they live with hostility, they learn to fight
If they live with ridicule, they learn to be shy
If they live with shame, they learn to feel guilty
If they live with tolerance, they learn to be patient
If they live with encouragement, they learn to have confidence
If they live with praise, they learn to appreciate
If they live with fairness, they learn what justice is
If they live with security, they learn to trust
If they live with approval, they learn to like themselves
If they live with acceptance and friendship,
They learn to find love and God in the world. (Anon)

The Eucharist that we share now is our family faith meal. This celebration gathers us all into one faith family to share this one bread and cup, and strengthens us to go out and take that love into the world, to help make the whole world into one family.

So, let us strive to make our families into real homes, little Churches and schools of Love.