

HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY – YEAR A (Homily 02)
(Sirach 3:2-6; 12-14; Psalm 128; Colossians 3:12-21; Mt 2:13-15; 19-23)

A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law and a four-year-old grandson. When he began to spill some of his food on the tablecloth and the floor, the couple became irritated with the mess. They set up a small table in the corner where the grandfather ate alone. Since Grandfather had broken a dish or two, his food was served in a wooden bowl. When the family glanced in Grandfather's direction, sometimes he had a tear in his eye as he sat alone. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food. The four-year-old watched it all in silence. One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. He asked the child sweetly, "What are you making, son?" Just as sweetly, the boy responded, "Oh, I am making a little bowl for you and Mamma to eat your food when you grow old." The words so struck the parents that they were speechless. That evening, the husband took Grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table. For the remainder of his days he ate every meal with the family. For some reason, neither husband nor wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled or the tablecloth soiled.

Let us make our families a Little Church, a school of love.

The birth of a first child is a transformative event. Two people in love suddenly move from being a couple (husband and wife hopefully), to becoming not only father and mother, but a family. That is what happened at the birth of Jesus. Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family and explore what this feast means for us as followers of Jesus.

The Marriage Encounter movement teaches that the family is a little Church, a school of love, encouraging us to make our families into little Churches, schools of love. The readings add to this view.

The first reading dwells on honoring our parents by showing them great respect. We are to keep them at the table and not see them as inconveniences or as worthy only of wooden bowls as in that story. To love and care for them is our task as followers of Jesus.

The Gospel roots the experience of Jesus, Joseph and Mary into the history of Israel. It takes on broader dimensions as Jesus becomes the new Joseph who goes

down into Egypt, and the new Moses who takes God's people out of Egypt. The message here is for us to see God's presence and liberating power within our own families, ordinary as they are.

There is also the subtle message that a certain degree of suffering and inconvenience will be part of any family life as we seek to love and care for one another. That was the experience of Joseph as he cared for Jesus and Mary within the dangerous political climate of his day. It was not safe for them to return to Bethlehem so they settled in Nazareth. Again scripture was fulfilled as Jesus became a Nazorean.

It is the second reading, however, that holds much for us to ponder in terms of family life. Here St. Paul eloquently shares with the Colossians the ideals of Christian family life. Forgiveness leaps out as the first quality of family life. The ability to let go of resentments, to understand each other, to apologize for any hurts caused, is a prerequisite for healthy family life.

Paul then stresses the role of the Word of God. A family that can make scripture part of its life, reading the Word together, sharing what that Word of God means to them, praying with the Word of God, will be a healthy family indeed.

An important element of family life that Paul emphasizes is working on relationships. Ideally, a husband and wife should be mutually submissive to each other. That mutual submission is actually a reflection not only of the Holy Family, but also of God as Trinity. In the words of noted author and spiritual writer, Richard Rohr in his book *Adam's Return*, "The family becomes a world that is grounded in mutual vulnerability instead of any need to impress one another or even to impress ourselves. It is the core meaning of the Christian doctrine of Trinity – the very inner shape of God is mutual deference and recognition and not self-assertion."

The ideal role of children is to honor their parents by obeying them, by respecting them and responding to what is expected of them. Humble obedience is the oil that makes family life flow smoothly. The bottom line is that our first experience of the reign of God is meant to come from our experience in our families.

One glaring fact that needs to be addressed in today's world, society and church, is the absence of fathers in the family. A summer student working on baptismal records in the archdiocesan office was shocked to find one page of baptisms recorded where there was not a single father mentioned!

There is a tremendous father hunger in our society today. For children to grow up healthy, they need both male and female energy, the love of both a father and a mother. Children have a natural affinity and relationship with their mothers, who carried them in their wombs for nine months and then nurtured and nursed them for years.

Both children and fathers, however, have to work at establishing a relationship with each other. The father is more removed, more of an external influence than the mother, but an important one in representing the larger world and also the more cosmic presence of God in our lives. A close and intimate relationship with both parents is such a blessing in a healthy family life.

Bob grew up in a work-a-holic codependent family. His father was an extreme work-a-holic who thought one had to earn heaven by working hard. His mother was the adult child of an alcoholic and very fearful. There was little expressed affection and poor communication as he grew up. Feelings were suppressed or seen as unimportant. Lots of buried anger was the end result for him. After both parents died, Bob called all the family members together for a family retreat. They spent a whole day sharing their stories, doing family imaging and praying. The family started to heal, and actually grew much closer together. Some of them got involved in movements such as Marriage Encounter and the Christopher Leadership Course, which all helped their growth. They became a much holier family through this family healing journey.

The Eucharist that we celebrate on this feast of the Holy Family is truly a faith family meal. We gather around the table of the Word and the Eucharist as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let us pray as we celebrate that all our families can experience heal through faith in Jesus and love for one another, and truly become little Churches, schools of love.