

Feast of the Most Holy Family - C

It should not surprise us that we can find reflections on the meaning of family life and what it takes for it to flourish throughout the history of our faith tradition.

Jesus ben Sirach, the author of today's first reading, reflects on family life from the perspective of an old man writing to his nephew about the value of their shared tradition in the face of a different worldview threatening to overwhelm it.

He tells him what to do in order to insure happiness and to ward off regret.

The episode from Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus coming of age and, in a sense, testing the waters of adulthood. Like most teenagers, he's anxious to get on with it and feels himself ready. And like most parents, Mary and Joseph respond from the experience that there's still a lot more for Jesus to learn before he's really ready to leave home, even if that means leaving for "his Father's house."

Generally speaking, St. Paul gets a bum rap when he tries to talk about family life. Things are much more diverse than they used to be. Maybe Paul's admonitions did not even play well when they were first written. I can imagine even some of his contemporaries taking him to task and pointing out, that, as a single man moving about from place to place all the time, he may not be the best person to be offering advice on how to raise a family, or what should guide the interactions between husbands and wives.

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I know, for example, that there are a number of husbands who, after suffering some serious health issues, know they had better follow their wives instructions if they want to get better or avoid a relapse.

The topic “family” is too broad to be summed up in a few chosen readings from Scripture, as wise as they may be. If we follow them slavishly, we can miss the point of what they are trying to get at altogether.

One sentence in Paul’s admonition that did catch my attention this time around was this one: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another...”

Apparently, no one has a corner on the market when it comes to spurring all the members of the family on to a more faithful following of what it means to belong to one another in Christ.

Sure, at some point in the development of the life of the family, mom and dad will take the lead. And just as surely, if everyone lives through the whole unfolding of the various phases of a family’s life, someone else will be thrust into that position, when mom has to be told that she can’t cook anymore for fear of starting a fire, or dad has to turn over his keys to the car.

That’s why it’s so important to practice the virtues of family life—those that St. Paul lists: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience—as well as a myriad of others like paying attention, communicating clearly, refusing to

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jump to conclusions too rashly, and not making unfounded assumptions or ascribing malicious intent.

Family holiness is not about perfection. It is about people living in close relationship with one another and discerning opportunities for their shared Spirits to flourish.

Family members must be alert to cooperate with each individual situation in terms of what it offers.

They must also be confident that their spiritual center is capable of contributing whatever is needed to better the life they share. God would not have given us a family if he were not also willing to give us the possibility of finding the way forward in the midst of it.

This is the right question of every holy family: Not have we reached perfection, but are we ready to act on the call of the Spirit to better our life together?

God does not quit calling us, in the midst of our family relationships, to the life he was in store for us. Even small, careful steps, can help us move forward.

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1. No surprise that all through our history family life has been the subject of reflection.
2. Sirach: an old man writing to his nephew on the importance of keeping the traditions: of honoring one's parents by caring for them in their later years, among others. A firm counterweight to all the sins of our youth.
3. Luke: Jesus, coming of age, tests the water of adulthood; thinks he's ready. Mary and Joseph know he's not. He returns with them and continues the journey to adulthood under their care.
4. St. Paul: might getting a bum rap. Things are more diverse now, for one thing.

Maybe his admonitions did not come across that well then. What does a single, itinerant preacher know about family life, anyway?

Borrows from conventions from the time—conventions that have their limits: when the husband has to submit to the wife for example. (Mom: no salt!)

5. The topic “family” is too broad to be summed up in a couple of well-chosen Scripture passages. Following them slavishly will not work.

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6. Paul does have one sentence I want to keep: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another...”

Apparently, no one has a corner on the market when it comes to taking the lead. Mom and dad in the early phases but could very well become one of the kids at some point: telling mom to stop cooking or dad to hand over the keys.

7. The most important thing: practice the virtues of family life throughout the life cycle: those that St. Paul lists: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience—as well as a myriad of others like paying attention, communicating clearly, refusing to jump to conclusions too rashly, and not making unfounded assumptions or ascribing malicious intent.
8. Family holiness is not about perfection. It’s about living in close relationship and discerning the movement of the Spirit and cooperating with that.
9. Also entails confidence—that God is involved and drawing us all forward into the life he has in store for us. A privileged arrangement—traveling together.
10. Not a question of what is the perfect family, but are we ready to act on the call of the Spirit to better our life together?
11. To be sure, God does not quit calling or drawing us forward. Even small, careful steps can help us answer.