

Holy Family, Year C

I offer two reflections for this feast.

1. The beauty of the Church family

On this feast of the Holy Family, let us reflect on the privilege we enjoy of belonging to the most beautiful family the world has ever known: the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

That there are sinners, like you and me, in this family hardly needs pointing out. Nor should it surprise us. Jesus saw his mission as bringing healing and hope to sinners. It is the same for the Church. In Jesus' day, some sinners welcomed his love, let it turn their lives around, and we know them as saints. Others brought about his crucifixion. When disciples of Jesus sin, we do so in spite of who he is and against his teaching and example. It is the same today with the Church. We sin in spite of the beauty and grace that make the Church what it is.

This beautiful family is the 'Body of Christ' in the world, the 'Temple of the Holy Spirit'. It embraces and consecrates us in the sacrament of baptism. The risen Christ, through the Church, continually pours into our hearts that Spirit of love that binds the heart of Jesus to the heart of God. He promises a bridegroom and a bride to consecrate their mutual self-giving in such a way that they are a sacrament to each other of God's love. When a disciple dares to take up his challenge and 'do this in memory of me', by offering his or her energy to carry on Jesus' ministry in various parts of the vineyard, he promises to sustain them by his love and to make their ministry fruitful. He is there to embrace the sinner and to sustain us as our earthy journey nears its end. At every step of our journey, at every turn in the road, he is there, present in his Body, assuaging our hunger and quenching our thirst.

Think of all the beautiful people who are part of our Church family – and it is the desire of the heart of Jesus that no one would be left out. All are welcome, and we are to play our part in making that welcome apparent.

I give the last words of this short reflection to the great lover, Saint Paul, who wrote to the community in Philippi (2:1-5):

'If then there is any appeal in Christ,
any consolation from love,
any communion in the Spirit,
any movements of compassion and feelings of love,
make my joy complete:
be of the same mind, having the same love,
being of one soul and of one mind.
Do nothing from selfish ambition.
Do not strive after or seek to find your value
in things that are worthless,
but in humility regard others above yourselves,
so that not everyone is focused on themselves,
but each is looking to the interests of others.
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.'

2. Challenges to the way we organise the Church family

On this first Sunday after Christmas, the Church invites us to reflect on family. We are asked also to model our family life on that of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. There is what appears at first to be a shocking statement attributed by Luke to Jesus: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple'(Luke 14:28). What we have here is an Aramaic idiom. 'Hate' in this context does not mean have strong negative feelings against people. It means to choose to love someone else with a prior love. Obviously Jesus is speaking of God. As he said in another place: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and everything else will be yours'(Matthew 6:33).

He is telling us something that is obvious once we think about it. If a wife loves her husband first, she won't love him very well. For to truly love him she must recognise her husband as a sacrament of God. She must respect the profound mystery of his person, such that her encounters with him are sacred encounters. Only then will she be open to the mystery of his person. Only then will she truly listen to his deepest longings and respect him as he should be respected. To love him without this is to be unaware of his depths. Only love in God who is the heart and the beyond of everything is truly love.

The same needs to be said of the husband's love for his wife, or parent's love for their children, or children's love for their parents. It is here that the Holy Family is offered us as model of family life. Today's readings invite us to a deeper appreciation of the sacred mystery that each person is and is called to be. If someone loves you with a profound respect for this deepest part of you, you are indeed loved.

I would like to reflect with you on two significant developments that affect our experience of family. The first is the very different role played by women in public life than was the case even fifty years ago. This change has hugely benefited the community. The social fabric of our society has been greatly enriched by women whose special nurturing qualities, which earlier were exercised largely in the home and local community, are now enriching almost every sphere of public life. This has put women under great pressure and has also impacted on the family. We have much to do in re-organising social structures to welcome women better into public life, while supporting their irreplaceable role in the family. Men and women must work together for our mutual healing and enrichment. Some of us would dearly like to see the Church embrace this movement more wholeheartedly, in the knowledge that organisational leadership is best when men and women share their gifts.

It is interesting in this context to hear Paul speaking of his relationship to the community of Thessalonica as being that of a mother and a father: 'We were gentle among you, like a mother tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God ... As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children'(1Thessalonians 2:7-11). Saint Augustine reminds us that Paul is simply following the example of Jesus: 'Christ exercises fatherly authority and maternal love just as Paul is also father and mother ... through his gospel preaching.'

This brings me to my second reflection. Because of a mistaken notion of the biology of human generation, and because public discourse has, in the past, been largely a male creation, God is almost exclusively spoken of in male terms. Both men and women have suffered from this distortion, and our language must change if our spirituality is to be healthy. This change of language must benefit the family. It is interesting to read the following from Anselm, a twelfth century saint and Archbishop of Canterbury: 'Good Jesus, are not you also a mother, who like a hen gathers your chicks beneath your wings?'

Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth century English mystic constantly speaks of God and of Jesus as mother and father. She writes: 'I saw that God rejoices that he is our Father, and God rejoices that he is our Mother, and God rejoices that he is our true Spouse, and that our soul is his beloved wife' (Showings, chapter 52). 'In making us, God almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord'(Showings, chapter 58). 'As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother'(Showings chapter 59).

She goes on to say: 'We are brought back by the motherhood of mercy and grace into our natural place, in which we were created by the motherhood of love, a mother's love which never leaves us ... Our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be. So he carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be, and at last he died. And when he had finished and had borne us so for bliss, still all this could not satisfy his wonderful love ... He could not die any more, but he did not want to cease working; therefore he must needs nourish us, for the precious love of motherhood has made him our debtor. The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life; and with all the sweet sacraments he sustains us most mercifully and most graciously ... The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us there a part of the Godhead and the joy of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss' (Showings, chapter 60)

On this feast of the Holy Family let us renew our commitment to our own family. This includes a searching of our souls to see if, with God's grace, we can move towards resolving any hurts that keep the family divided. Let us commit ourselves also to work for social and especially church structures that welcome men and women to enrich us by sharing their special gifts. Let us reflect more deeply on the feminine as well as the masculine experience of love as we look to God, our Father-Mother. By baptism we are all brothers and sisters and we are all called to be fathers and mothers to each other as well. We need everyone's gift, everyone's love, for we need each other to be sacraments of the fatherly and motherly love of God.