

When the post-World War II generation known as the Baby Boomers was growing up, the term “family” usually (but not always) referred to that living core of parents and their children whose mutual love sustained them as a unit and, through them, the society in which they lived. Family was idealized in literature, in art and on television with programs like “Ozzie and Harriet,” “The Andy Griffith Show,” “Father Knows Best” and “Leave It to Beaver.” These were followed in the next couple of decades by more modern-day but still idyllic programs such as “The Cosby Show,” “Family Ties,” “Step by Step” and so on.

Today, however, family values are made fun of by programs such as “King of the Hill” “Family Guy,” “The Simpsons” and “Gene Simmons Family Jewels,” to name only a few. Rather than edify or even reflect any resemblance of healthy family relations, these programs ridicule the importance of family life and make light of the struggles inherent in maintaining and sustaining practical relationships.

Obviously, no family is perfect in every way. However, every family is unique and in its uniqueness is loved and held sacred by God. In all its struggles, in all its losses and gains, in every joy and sadness through all their days together, each family unit strikes a note in the musical of life. Sometimes the ties that bind family members are strained. It is often within the family unit that the greatest wounds are inflicted, but it is also within that same unit that our brokenness can be healed.

The Feast of the Holy Family is one of those moments when doctrinal claims and inspiration are at cross-purposes. If Jesus, Mary and Joseph somehow model the ideal family, they also confront us with a unique set of conditions no other family will ever face. Jesus is no ordinary child; Mary is a virginal mother who conceived by the Holy Spirit; Joseph is partner to a woman he shares no intimacy with and guardian of a child that is

**not his.**

**The Holy Family is more mystery than model, and to be told to imitate them would discourage the best of families. Yet, the Gospel account does describe situations that weighed them down from the outset, challenges that confront many families in today's world. The Holy Family can be found in the refugee camps and among the desperate flow of immigrants fleeing violence in their home countries, seeking asylum and economic survival across unwelcome borders. Could Joseph's warning dreams be more like the nightmares to so many fathers who endure in safe houses and shelters, anguishing over what comes next, who can be trusted, will there be food and welcome where they are going? Do the readings give inspiration for them?**

**Families today know pressures as well. For economic reasons, both parents frequently have to work outside of the home, making meals together on a regular basis difficult. The price of real estate makes longer commutes necessary, further limiting time with the family. And those are just some of the pressures on traditional, two parent families. We haven't mentioned single parent homes where these pressures are doubled. And then there are "blended" families where stepparents and step-children are constantly testing the boundaries of their relationship adding to the tension within the home.**

**The status of the family today causes a lot of hand-wringing, especially in the church. There are fewer and fewer traditional families. We are right as Christians and as good citizens to promote the welfare of the traditional, two parent family.**

**The family is the cornerstone of the church and of society. Our world is only as strong as the families that make it up. At the same time, we must recognize that in today's society when bodies mature more rapidly and adolescence lasts well into the twenties,**

**people are going to make mistakes resulting in out-of wedlock births and divorce.**

**A wise spiritual director once said that God is not found in the “ideal,” but in the “real.” The traditional family is an important ideal. However, God is not found in ideal families or in ideal people, but in real families and in real people. As painful as our past may have been and as much as we may wish we could go back and fix our mistakes, God does not give us the option of turning back the clock. Rather, he is spending his grace on us in our real lives and in our real families as we find ourselves today.**

**God’s grace is offered to families that are “blended” as well as those that need to be mended. Once we realize that families, as long as they are made of human beings, can never be perfect, then it has important implications for our lives as individuals and as a church.**

**First, as individuals, we know how resentments and grudges can ruin families. Can each of us today bring our hearts before the Lord and ask for the grace to forgive any other family member who ever hurt us? Can we leave our resentments at the foot of the altar and ask God to relieve us of that burden? Can we recognize that our parents were probably doing the best they could and let go of the anger we have been shouldering all these years? Once we are able to do that, then we can live together in “heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” as Saint Paul calls us to.**

**Secondly, for us as a parish, we have to recognize the pressures that families face and ask ourselves, how can we be a more family friendly community? In our worship and our hospitality, are we sensitive to the different types of families in our parish and careful not to stigmatize anyone, especially children? What can we as a parish community do to support families with all the challenges they face?**

**Families are never perfect, even when they are the ideal, traditional family. They are all marked by joy and pain, mistakes and good choices. The Holy Family—Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—knew the pressures of family life. The difference was that they experienced God’s presence even in those difficulties. Even with all the challenges of daily life in today’s society, we can experience God’s presence with us and teach our children to recognize him as well. If parents can continue to impart this sense of God’s abiding presence to their children, then we have fulfilled our mission as a family, no matter what our family may look like.**