

Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Sirach 3:2-6,12-14; Colossians 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

The church's tradition is to truly celebrate its feasts, so we celebrate the Incarnation for eight days. We are now in the octave of Christmas. During this octave, we focus on many different things; one of them is the feast of the Holy Family. One of the things I believe the Incarnation tries to teach us is the sacredness, the goodness, the holiness of human life. When God decided to become one of us, he was trying to tell us that we are so much like him. When people encountered Jesus, they met God - God incarnate. One of the ways I used to imagine the mystery of the Incarnation was that divinity was hidden, distorted somehow, to look like a human being. But the more I ponder it, it seems God has manifested to the world an image of what he looks like. When you look on divinity, it doesn't look that much different from humanity. God became man, St. Thomas Aquinas said, so that man could become God. When we reflect on this great mystery of God becoming one of us, we must recognize that we are so like him: We are so good and holy.

Now we know that sin is a reality. One of the things that Jesus taught us is that whenever we encounter sin, the one tool we have to deal with it is forgiveness. We are constantly invited to meet our weaknesses and imperfections, and everyone else's, with this disposition of forgiveness. We must continue to accept ourselves, and others, even though sin is a part of us. This attitude is based on the simple fact that sin is a very small part of what we encounter. What we are to discover is something so much like our God that we should be in awe of it; what an incredible privilege it is to have life. We also know there has never been a culture more well-informed than we are today. One of the shadows, though, of the great gift of being in touch with the entire world is that we often hear about negative things. After a while, people begin to live in fear. Someone who came to talk to me over the holidays spoke about the inordinate amount of fear they had in their life because everywhere they looked there was something that was potentially evil. They worried about their children being away from them because every time you picked up the newspaper, there was another story about a child being molested or taken from their parents. I think it's an enormous challenge today to believe and to trust in the goodness of human beings. Yet I have to believe that the good outweighs the bad. Loving acts of kindness, acts of heroic generosity, acts of forgiveness, are happening by the millions. Instead of hearing about those, we often hear about horror stories. That's one of the reasons why people today often struggle to believe in humanity.

This feast of the Incarnation says the most extraordinary thing about humanity: it talks about how close human beings are to the divine. We are made just a little bit less than the angels, who are very close to God. One of the things the feast of the Holy Family speaks of is not just a traditional view - mothers, fathers and children - but the wonderful family we call humanity. We need to sense its goodness and power, and work with it. In this feast, we see those who are called to be parent figures. Sometimes this is literal; sometimes the parenting is in the role of giving life - that's what a parent does. One of my

favorite gestures when I baptize a baby into the Catholic faith is to invite everyone present at the baptism to trace in silence the sign of the cross upon the child. That's the sign of our redemption, the power over everything that might destroy the child. It's not simply the priest who marks the sign of the cross. Everyone has the role of bringing to this child - who will be part of a network of family and friends - a way of seeing, a way of life, a way of faith. When we recognize that, it's exciting to share life in the community.

We're constantly called to parent - to give life to someone. We also need to recognize that when sin enters in, we can end up robbing people of life. The first reading from Sirach invites us to honor those who gave us life. We need to love and care for those who have parented us. When you give life to those who have given it to you, there's a wonderful cycle in which life replenishes itself. The tragedy is that people aren't always able to parent well. In the reading from Paul, we see an emphasis on forgiveness. All of the work of recovery I've ever been involved in that tries to deal with the damage sometimes resulting from family life always seems to come back to this fundamental idea: The only way out of negative experiences of family for us is forgiveness. If we wallow in a disposition of thinking that we're victims, that our life is always going to be less because of these bad experiences, we'll never get to the place we are called to be, the place of full life. If we haven't been parented as well as we hoped we could be, then we must be forgiving. If things haven't been all we wanted them to be, then we should take on the disposition of a parent figure, and do that as effectively as we can.

There's a marvelous image in the gospel passage of a parent figure - Joseph, the patron of the universal church. That's a very interesting title. Those who chose that title for Joseph had to have something in mind. We know one fundamental thing about Joseph's graced life: He took care of Jesus and Mary. He was a unique figure: Whenever there was danger for those he loved or if there was something going on with those that he loved that he couldn't fathom, an angel always spoke to him in a dream. I think Joseph carries the title of patron of the entire church not simply because he cared for the Holy Family but because of the way he cared. Joseph was radically open to listening to a voice from beyond, from the God who created him. If we really want to do this work of giving life to one another, if we want to be a parenting figure in the world, we need to be in touch with the parent - the father and the mother of all life. We need to be open to the message and the teachings, so grace can fill us, enabling us to do the task. As well as being people called to forgive that which hasn't been as it should be, we are called to do the best job we can in this wonderful role of giving life to others. Joseph is a wonderful image to focus on - a man who not only listened to this voice deep in his unconscious revealed in a dream - but also someone who acted on it. He took Jesus and Mary wherever this voice called him.

As we continue to dwell on the Incarnation, we are asked to dwell on the image of family life and to reflect on the beauty of life. Nothing is sadder than to see people who have lost hope and an appreciation of everything around them. There is so much around us today that makes us feel like victims, that makes us feel the world is not what it's supposed to be. We may feel things are out of control. Fear is the absence of love, the absence of grace. When we're in a disposition of seeing the world in a way that can only create fear, anxiety and worry, when we have a desire to control things so that we're not hurt by that which is out there - then we know we are off-center. When we're in a disposition of recognizing the beauty, the goodness of things, we're in the place of abundance, the place of love. The opposite of love is fear. The opposite of living in the peace of the kingdom of God is living in this place of anxiety and worry. As we reflect upon the feast of the Holy

Family, let us simply trust in the family that God has created, this community you and I are living in. When we see it as privilege to be here, we see it as filled with secrets and good places to go. We sense there is something unfolding bigger than our own individual lives that we are participating in. When that whole process works for us, then we get a feeling of what the incarnate Christ came to establish in the world - a kingdom of great love and a kingdom of great peace. We need to tell everyone the marvelous good news that our God has been born into this world, and that this world is very, very good.

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