

The Holy Family (B)
(Genesis 15:1-6.21:1-3 / Luke 2:22-40)
27.12.2020
Schools of Love

Whether we had a family or not, whether it was experienced as a place of inclusion or a place of rejection, whether we are single or married, whether we have children or not, family is undeniably an inescapable reality in our lives. For better or for worse, and for everything in between, family shapes our personal identity and impacts the way we relate to ourselves, to others and to God.

Family matters because it is the first place where we learn what it means to be a human being. The family is the primal school of our growth in humanity. This is what St Luke means when he tells us that, with Joseph and Mary, Jesus “grew in maturity.” In the context of those who form our family circle, we learn what it means to become a mature human being.

Let us insist on this point: the family is a good school insofar as it allows us and encourages us to grow in maturity. A human family should help all its members to become more and more human. Parents and children should find in their family the environment which frees them for their ongoing growth in humanity, and prepares them for a journey which will include many changes and repeated detachments.

In our families, as was the case in the family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus, there should be room for misunderstandings and disagreements, because they can contribute to our growth in maturity. It is wrong and dangerous to imagine that in order to be holy our families must become less than human, that they must coincide with the lifeless and pious images of the Holy Family presented to us. The sacramentality of the family lies in the fact that, in their ordinariness, our flawed families are made able to point to what is divine, to God. We have to be careful not to project onto the family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus a perfection, a holiness that is incompatible with our humanity. The glory of God is revealed when we become truly human not when we act the angel (cf. Pascal, *Pensées*, n. 358).

Since the beginning of humanity, what it means to be a family has changed a lot, adapting itself to new cultures and religious traditions, and it is changing in our own time. Not all the changes are good but life is about change and so we have to be careful to discern what is essential and what is not in our approach to family life.

As Christians, because of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, we are experts in what it means to be a human being, what makes a human being humane. I am not claiming that we have always shown our expertise in the best possible way, of course!

At Christmas we are given to see that our growth in human maturity is the good soil, in fact it is the only soil at our disposal, in which our growth in divinity can flourish. By embracing our humanity as he did, Christ revealed himself to be the best master in the art of becoming human.

Regularly, in the course of history, Christians have expressed their concerns that their vision of what a family should be was threatened by new developments in society. It is important to be reminded that we, as Christians, are not supposed to defend just one fixed form of family, but that we are called to promote a culture of love and care in family life, care for one another and care for all humanity and creation.

The most dangerous threats to our families do not come first from outside, from our governments and the laws they legislate democratically, but from within our families, from the way we live our family life. Our families are threatened by domestic violence, the culture

of secrecy and fear; our families are weakened when we refuse to forgive, to welcome others with their emotional pain, and when we love conditionally. All these attitudes hurt people in their desire and their ability to enter into healthy human relationships and to create new families. To the contrary, patient and generous care, unconditional love, mutual respect and attention, a culture of dialogue and openness are the interior principles of vitality of all families. It is important to say that this vitality is not only for the family itself but for the Church and for society.

Pope Francis, in his last book, speaks of the family as “the first society where the person is formed as a member of something larger.” (*Let us Dream*, p. 46). If we promote families where all the members can grow in maturity, in strength and in wisdom, it is because we want the Church and the society to be stronger and wiser, more mature in their dealings with all the challenges and crises that come their way. I do not want to be too simplistic but we have to acknowledge that the immaturity of some of our political leaders, our inability to dialogue fruitfully and our feelings of insecurity which are inclined to make us violent are often rooted in our first schooling as children in our families.

Between an irretrievable past and an uncharted future, it is urgent to focus our attention on the present and to ask ourselves what kind of education children receive in their homes? What values are sown in their minds and what hope is instilled in their hearts?

The Holy Family was the best school of family life. There Jesus grew in maturity, there Joseph and Mary taught him the way of love he needed in order to accomplish his mission as a man among his brothers and sisters in humanity. According to Pope Francis “the spiritual stature of a person’s life is measured by love (...). All of us, as believers, need to recognize that love takes first place: love must never be put at risk, and the greatest danger lies in failing to love (cf. 1Co 13:1-13).” (*Fratelli Tutti*, n. 92)

If, as Pope Francis writes, “the spiritual stature of a person’s life is measured by love”; we can say that the fruitfulness and the quality, and ultimately the holiness of our families is also measured by love, by careful, respectful, and tender love.

As we all think today of our families, let us pray that we may all “grow up in every way into Christ” and “come to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:15.13). He is love made flesh so that we may love and make of our families the schools of love the world longs for.