**Homily for the Feast of the Holy Family**

**December 27, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14 (Whoever honors his father atones for sins.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 128 (Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.)*

*Second Reading: Colossians 3:12-21 (Let the peace of Christ control your hearts.)*

*Gospel: Luke 2:22-40 (Jesus is presented in the Temple.)*

Today, as we contemplate the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the readings help us to reflect on our own experience of family. The sage words of Sirach call to mind the complexity of family life, especially as children grow up and parents age. St. Paul, in his advice to the Colossians, focuses on the *mutuality* that is so critical to all healthy family relationships. And, he also reminds us of an important truth that we often overlook, namely, that the consistent practice of Christian virtue is the key to *all* harmonious relationships, inside and outside of the family.

Too often, we save our most *un-Christian* behavior for the people we love most, our own family. One reason, I suppose, is that we tend to take for granted the people we see every single day. “Familiarity breeds contempt,” as the old saying goes. And then there’s the more practical reason – if we treat our friends and co-workers the same way that we treat our family members, we may not have any friends or a job for very long. When we know that we are loved unconditionally, we sometimes act in a manner that puts that love to the test. We tell ourselves, “At home I just want the freedom to be myself.” But, what we really mean is, “At home I can be a selfish, insensitive jerk and get away with it, because my family loves me.” Outside the home, that sort of conduct can have serious consequences. But, within the family, although our bad behavior actually causes *more* hurt, all of those hard feelings generally give way to forgiveness and reconciliation. That’s why we cherish our families so much, despite all of their flaws and dysfunction.

Only the last few lines of that Colossians passage that we heard today speak about family life, specifically. Most of it deals with the Christian community, in general. Paul recognizes that every community has its problems, even Christian ones. There will always be hurt feelings, divisions, frayed nerves, and conduct that will try the patience of even the most saintly among us. So, Paul offers a solution – let every member of the community put on the whole gamut of Christian virtues: “heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” He urges Christians to bear with one another and forgive one another, reminding us: “as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.” “And, over all these” virtues, he says, “put on *love*, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts.” How blissful would every community and every family be if we actually did that?

The last part of the passage sometimes riles people up, because Paul tries to apply his teaching to relationships within the typical family of his day, which was much more hierarchical than we are accustomed to today. In Paul’s society, fathers were granted complete dominance over their wives and children, and children were expected to obey their parents without question. So, the distinctively *Christian* aspect of Paul’s teaching is its *balance*. Wives and husbands should exhibit Christian virtue *toward each other*, and likewise for children and parents. Societal norms in that culture did not require such mutuality within the family, but Christian norms *do*.

Even as family relationships evolve over time, the need for mutual love and the consistent practice of virtue within the family does *not* change. In fact, all of us need to keep discerning how to show love and practice Christian virtue with one another as time passes. The easiest phase, at least in terms of clarity, is when we’re small children. All we have to do is obey, and all our parents and older siblings have to do is take care of us and teach us. As we grow older, we must learn to contribute more to family life, not only by doing chores and being more responsible for our own care, but also by offering emotional support to others. We no longer just *take*, but we also develop the capacity to *give*. As we start to become more independent, during the adolescent years, all of our family relationships need to be reevaluated. We still depend on our parents, but not in the same way as before. And, at this stage, we may take on greater responsibility for younger siblings, too. Things get very complicated very quickly. As young adults, we need to start thinking about the care of our parents. The words of Sirach come back to us: “Take care of your father when he is old… Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him… Kindness to a father will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins.” Care of elderly parents can become a real burden, especially if we are trying to raise our own families at the same time. But, this too is part of the mutual love that is right at the heart of family life. Eventually, we come full circle, and elderly parents become dependent on the very children who once depended completely on them. Each of these stages of family life brings new challenges and new graces. In each one, we discover new ways to give and receive love.

Unfortunately, the Scriptures offer us no stories about the Holy Family navigating their way through these different stages of family life. But, we know that they must have experienced them, too. I wonder how Mary and Joseph dealt with baby Jesus when he got fussy at the synagogue on the Sabbath. How, do you suppose, they responded to his temper tantrums when he was a little boy? And, can you even imagine how insufferable Jesus could have been as a teenager? Remember how *we* thought that we knew everything at that age? How did they convince the Son of God that he still needed to listen to his *merely human* parents? Maybe the toughest challenge of all for Mary and Joseph would have been the same one that every other couple experiences – balancing parenting with the need to maintain a healthy marriage. That’s hard enough when you’re not raising the Savior of the world.

If the Scriptures were not silent on these matters, I’m sure that the example of the Holy Family would have much to teach us. However, we can take comfort in the knowledge that they were a *real* family, with many of the same challenges as us. So, when we turn to them in prayer and ask for their intercession, especially for family problems, we can trust that they will understand and sympathize with our struggles. Perhaps, with their help, *our* families can become a little bit holier, a little more peaceful, a little more Christian.

Holy Family, pray for us!