

# LESSONS FROM THE HOLY FAMILY FOR OUR FAMILY

The following reflection was written by a Holy Cross priest, Fr. Jim Thornton:

Too often we think of the Holy Family as being the *only* Holy Family: Mary, Joseph and Jesus. But are not all of our families called to be holy?

Too often we think that the Holy Family did not have any problems. We presume that they had perfect communication, that Jesus always did what Mary and Joseph wanted him to do and that when he didn't, his parents understood.

And then we read today's Gospel. Saint Luke recounts an event in the life of this special family, which is a model for all families. And yet - I suspect that family therapist would have some things to say about the dialogue between mother and son. Let's look at it quickly.

After Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus (who is in his early teens), Mary lets him know that she is disappointed in his behavior. Then she asks, "Why have you done this to us?" Doesn't that question shut off any dialogue between the son and his badly treated parents? Of course, we all understand her feelings. Indeed, many of us have experienced the same dialogue in our lives (both as children and as parents).

Jesus' answer is quick and strange. "Why did you look for me?" (What else were they to do?), and "Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" (You should have known that I do the Father's will and you shouldn't second guess me.)

Those who were involved in this family encounter report that Mary and Joseph "did not understand what he said to them." Jesus, however, returns home with them, obediently, to grow in wisdom, grace and age!

When the questioning between parents and son is over, however, each still seems to be dissatisfied. Neither Mary, Joseph nor Jesus have gotten answers to the questions they posed. They all seem to be at a loss for words. Now and then we discover that people whom we know and love act differently from what we expect. Even in a close-knit family, people can cause suffering and at the same time, be acting in accordance with the will of the Lord. The suffering we feel is often due to the fact that we are tempted to exercise ownership rights over others - and this always causes tension. We speak of "my" wife, "my" husband, "my" child, "my" parents. Even though we wish for their happiness with all our hearts, we are upset that they may find happiness outside of us - or in spite of us. The possessive instinct, the need to dominate others and make demands on them shows up even in our family life.

But note Jesus and Mary react in the situation. They ask questions, but no response is demanded. Each gets beyond self: the son by choosing to obey his parents; the parents by patient acceptance.

## HOLINESS

A risk in honoring the Holy Family today is to focus merely on the family unit. Though the family is important, the overwhelming message of today's readings is how to live in holiness.

In today's first two readings and psalm are described the virtues of everyday holiness: honoring one another, caring for one another in charity and kindness, walking in the ways of God, mercy, humility, patience, forgiveness and the like.

All lives consecrated to God are equally holy. That holiness, following the will of God, is not always easy. So, Simeon told Mary. But when we live in holiness, we too shall be filled with wisdom, with the grace of God.

## STEPFAMILIES

"Where do I belong?" and "Where do I fit in?" are the questions asked by many stepchildren. Children have the ability to adjust to two sets of rules or two ways of doing things as long as they are not asked to choose which is better.

It is important for parent and stepparent to talk about rules for the household, rules for behavior of the children and the consequences for broken rules. Once the adults are clear about the rules, they need to be communicated to the children in the family by the biological parent.

Authorities recommend that at the beginning, discipline come from the biological parent. This means that parent and stepparent decide on the rules together but that the biological parent announces the rules and enforces the consequences. Later, after relationships have developed, the stepparent can become more involved. Adults also need to understand that there is a difference between "parenting" and "discipline". Parenting has to do with things such as nurturing ("I love you."), transmitting values ("It's important to do the best you can."), giving positive strokes ("You really did a good job."), maintaining appropriate boundaries in the family ("Your mother and I are talking now about a grown up decision."), and setting appropriate limits on children's behavior ("You can plan after the dishes are done.") Discipline has to do with enforcing consequences when values, boundaries and limits are not observed.

Flexibility on the part of the adults in one household can help to establish a "parenting partnership" with the other household. If this can happen, adults and children benefit. Often this parenting partnership cannot be established until feelings about the divorce and remarriage have settled down, but it is a goal worth working for.

Often a stepparent is thrust into the role of "instant parent." With no previous experience, this person is asked to play a knowledgeable parent role in the household. Biological parents grow into their parenting roles as their children grow.

Stepparents are often expected to adjust instantly as though parenting is an inborn skill. It is not! For biological parents, the bonding process that happens means we are more tolerant of our children's personalities and behaviors than someone who doesn't know them so well. This is normal. The reverse is also true. Children are bonded to (and thus often more tolerant of) their biological parents.

Parents can assist the stepparent by helping them to "get to know" their child. They can show them the picture albums, run the home movies, tell the family stories and help fill in the gaps. Some children will enjoy being a part of this process. The painful part for the stepparent may be the presence in the history of the child's other biological parent. Be aware that your acceptance of this parent will help this child be less resistant to you. You can be reassuring to the child that while you have an adult role in this household, you will not try to replace his or her other parent. Many stepparents find a satisfactory role in simply being a "helper" to the biological parent. This can work well, especially where stepchildren are elementary school age or older.

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## **Reflection Questions**

What spoke to you most in the above article? What did you find yourself saying "yes, yes" to?

2. What, if anything, did you disagree or struggle with?

3. What are some other stepparent issues for you which the above article does not deal with?

Patricia Sanchez, tells the following two stories.

*A young woman about to be married had come to Kurshan for counseling; when she told the Rabbi that she hoped she*

would not make the same mistakes her parents did, he pressed her to elaborate. The woman explained that each summer her parents traveled to Europe while she remained behind with a nanny.

One year, when the girl was 11, the housekeeper suddenly quit just shortly before the annual trip to Europe. Upset that their vacation might be jeopardized, the parents quickly found a replacement. A few days before their departure, the girl noticed that her mother had wrapped the family jewels and silverware and placed them in the safe. Since this had never been done before, she asked why. Her mother explained that she could not trust the new housekeeper with the family valuables. Though certainly not intended, that insensitive remark so shocked and just the little girl that she never forgot it. Wasn't she a family valuable? Didn't she have more value than knives and forks?

According to one of his biographers (William Manchester, *The Last Lion*, Little Brown and Co., Boston MA: 1983), Winston Churchill's feelings about his family were intensely warm and profoundly affectionate. He regarded his home as an independent kingdom with its own laws, its own customs, even its own language. "Wow!" was their customary greeting. When Churchill entered his front door, he'd yell "Wow!" In answer, his wife and children would call out "Wow! Wow!" Then the door would close and the embracing would begin.

***Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you will help them become what they are capable of becoming.***

**John Wolfgang von Goethe**

***When the heart is ready***

***God will show the way.***

**St. Julie**