

**HOLY FAMILY – 2010**  
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Even if all the stores begin their “after-Christmas” sales today, we in the Church continue our celebration of Jesus’ birth. In fact, the Christmas season only began yesterday and continues up to January 9 with the feast of our Lord’s baptism. So if you don’t have your Christmas cards or letters all sent out yet, you have two whole weeks of the Christmas season left to do it. That has been my excuse every year, and it will certainly be again this year, I assure you!

There is so much richness to Christmas, so many directions from which to approach this mystery of the divine Word that was made flesh and dwelled among us. Today, on this feast of the Holy Family, we remember the fact that this baby born in Bethlehem was born and raised not in isolation from the human race, but in the context of a family just as the rest of us. Obviously, this was a most unique family: Mary, wife and mother, was sinless from her conception and her child was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and not by a human father. Nevertheless, Jesus grew up in a family and so we have that common ground with him. We know the family is the fundamental building block of human society and culture; as Pope Benedict has said, it is “the privileged setting where every person learns to give and receive love.”

A quick overview of the Bible will reveal countless references to the family, its vital role and how those relationships are to be lived out. Our first reading today from Sirach (from the Old Testament wisdom literature) speaks of the honor and respect to be given to father and mother, echoing the fourth of the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses. St. Paul reminded the Colossians in our second reading about the love and gift of self that husband and wife are to make to one another and the love and respect that is to flow between parents and their children. The Scriptures contain so many other similar passages, and even uses the language of family to describe our relationship with almighty God himself. Remember how Jesus taught us to pray and refer to God as our “Father” and how we are privileged to be the children of God. And when Jesus entrusted the care of his mother to the apostle John while dying on the Cross, the spiritual motherhood of Mary embraced not only St. John but the rest of us as well.

But the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is the perfect model and example of family life; and on this, their feast, they are given to us so we can strive to follow them. We can’t do so perfectly, of course—none of us is the second Person of the Trinity as is Jesus, and none of us have been sinless from conception as was Mary. But the grace of God is always available to help us as individuals and as family to grow in holiness and therefore to become more like that holiest of Families.

And our second reading gives us some very helpful and practical suggestions toward achieving that end. This reading from Colossians is often chosen for wedding celebrations, and a closer look at it makes it easy to see its relevance to married couples and families. Three ideas in particular come through loud and clear in this reading; the first is Paul’s constant call to gratitude. Did you notice how many times it comes up in this rather brief passage? “Be thankful...singing...with gratitude in your hearts to God...giving thanks to God the Father through [the Lord Jesus].” We are all called to holiness, and a major part of holiness is acknowledging that all we have comes ultimately from the providence of God. Therefore, we need to express our thanks to God and, because God so often helps us through others, we need to thank others too.

Families, are you grateful for what you have, and do you express that gratitude individually and together as family? One of the really beautiful kinds of prayer here is when parents help their little ones remember all the good things they have and the importance of saying ‘thank you’ to God. And that doesn’t stop as the children grow up (at least it should not). Teenagers, do you remember to thank God and to thank your parents for all you have? You might not always like what your parents do or decide, but that should not diminish one bit the thankful attitude you ought to have. Parents, do you thank your children for the ways

they contribute to the good of your family? Spouses, do you thank each other for the sacrifices and love offered by each other? Even if there is disagreement (maybe especially when there is disagreement), there is always reason to be thankful.

St. Paul also speaks about the importance of forgiveness, urging the Colossians to “forgiv[e] one another...as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.” Forgiveness does not mean ignoring the wrong or the hurt or pretending that it wasn’t a big deal after all. To be sure, forgiveness is not always an easy thing to do. But it does mean refusing to stay stuck in bitterness or resentment, not pushing for revenge or getting even, but rather wanting to rebuild the trust and the relationship. Sometimes it is indeed a long, hard process—but it has to begin with at least the desire to move beyond the hurt.

Husbands and wives, do you try to forgive, or do you find it easier to hold a grudge against each other and ‘make them pay’ for how they hurt you? Parents, do you express your forgiveness when the kids misbehave or when they disappoint you yet again, or is punishment all you can think about? Children of whatever age—six to sixty and beyond—can you bring yourself to forgive your parents when you realize they are not perfect, or do you instead remain bound by the chains of a lifelong victimhood? Listen again to Paul’s words: “if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.” It all goes back to the Lord’s Prayer, doesn’t it? “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Do we really mean what we say in that most familiar prayer, or do we not?

Finally, St. Paul emphasizes the utter centrality of Jesus Christ: “...let the peace of Christ control your hearts...let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Just as Jesus is central to the life of the individual Christian, so he is at the heart of the Christian family. Parents, do you show your children by your example as well as by your words that Jesus is truly your Savior and your joy? Do you lead your family in prayer, whether at the dinner table or at Sunday Mass? Youngsters—pre-school through high school—do you have any idea at all just how much Jesus loves you and cherishes you...even more than your parents do? That is why he wants you—every one of you, young and old—to be joined ever more closely and intimately with him. And that is why he gave us the sacraments, especially the Eucharist where we are nourished by Jesus word and by his Body and Blood.

God calls us all to holiness, to become more and more like his Son. Striving for holiness helps us become more like Jesus, and that only deepens our sense of true peace and lasting joy. The Holy Family is the example and model of how all families are called to live so as to come to that peace through growth in gratitude, a willingness to forgive, and an ever more profound love for and dedication to Jesus Christ. May the prayers of Jesus, Mary and Joseph help us to imitate their example and come to their eternal joy.