Children

Now that Christmas is over, do you have anything to look forward to? Is there anything coming up that will make you happy and excited, or do you think that’s all over with now that Christmas has come and gone?

Vacation will be over and school will be starting again in a week or so. Are you looking forward to going back to school? (Let them answer.) Pretty soon, you will be reading stories and doing math and taking tests again. Does that make you excited? But before you do that, you’ll have to take all the Christmas clothes you got that don’t fit or don’t match and spend five hours with your mother in the clothing store trying on different sizes and colors. Are you looking forward to that? Now that Christmas is over, what are you looking forward to?

Of course, there are some good things to look forward to as you think a little further ahead. In just half a year, summer vacation will be here, and you will have lots of time to play. And sometime between now and next Christmas, you’ll have a birthday party - those are two good things to look forward to, right?

Think a little further ahead. In just a few years, you will be old enough to get a driver’s license. Won’t that be nice? Further down the road, you can look forward to finishing school, finding some work that you like, perhaps getting married and having children. There’s a lot to look forward to in life, isn’t there?

The Bible tells us that a week after Jesus was born, His mother and father took Him to Jerusalem, where they met a man named Simeon, who talked with them and gave them a blessing. Now Simeon was very old, so he may have felt he didn’t have a lot left to look forward to in life. Or he may have been content to look forward to his retirement, to taking it easy, visiting with his grandchildren and enjoying his memories. But the Bible says that Simeon was actually looking forward "to the consolation of Israel," which means he was looking forward to the coming of Jesus Christ. He wanted to see Jesus face to face, to know the Son of God in the flesh and draw near to Him. When he did this, Simeon felt his life was complete.

What are you looking forward to? You can look forward to school and growing up, and as you get older, you can look forward to grandchildren, retirement or many other good things. But Simeon reminds us that there is much more to seek in life, and we ought not set our sights too low. We can look forward to knowing God more and more as we grow older, to growing closer to God in every way we can. We can look forward to knowing Jesus, and to living with Him more closely as the years go by. Like Simeon, we can grow in spirit and wisdom because we are looking forward to something much larger than ourselves. So, if ever you should be asked what you are looking forward to, tell them you are looking forward to knowing your God, to living more closely with your God, and to drawing so near to Him as to see Him face to face. Amen.

Adult

We Americans are a competitive people. We have this drive to always want to be better than someone else. As a result we spend a lot of energy comparing ourselves, or our situations with those with whom we work, live near, etc. In many ways this is healthy. I want a doctor who does everything she or he can to be better than every other doctor. The same can be applied to every service orientated position, or even to any person we work with or for.

However, we would be wrong if we were to apply this natural competitive attitude to our families. It is neither just nor wise for us to compare our families to our neighbors. Yet, so many of us do this. "I wish my marriage was as happy as theirs. I wish my children got along as well as theirs. I wish our family was as strong as theirs." This is wrong because, first, every family is a unique relationship of singular individuals. It is impossible for two families to be identical. Second, every family has challenges which usually are not apparent to the eye of the envious neighbors.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. In our natural competitive attitude, we are tempted to look at the Holy Family as an ideal we cannot realize in our families. But, Jesus, Mary and Joseph had their share of struggles. The trust which is fundamental to a marriage was challenged by the pregnancy. Joseph must have felt terrible when he had to bring his wife to a stable to have the child. Living in a foreign land, Egypt, away from family and traditions, was far from ideal. Still, the Holy Family made it through the difficulties of their family life for one reason only: they had great faith. Joseph had faith in the angel of his dreams and treated the pregnant Mary in an honorable way. He had faith that God would help him protect the child, and he moved the family to Egypt. Mary had faith both in the angel and in God's working through Joseph. Jesus, having emptied himself of his divinity, had faith in his parents to care for him. Some of the pious Christian works of the second and third centuries didn’t understand this. The apocryphal gospels, which have never even remotely been considered Sacred Scripture, would present the child Jesus performing miracles to help his family even in everyday chores, like changing rocks to bread so Mary would not have to bake. (By the way the apocryphal gospels also had Jesus doing distinctly unchristian actions like beating up the local village bullies.) The child Jesus didn’t need to perform miracles. He had all the miracles he needed in parents who cared for him.

The Holy Family conquered their struggles through their faith-life. This must be the primary concern of our families. For example, so many single parents waste energy wishing that their marriage had worked out and their children could be with both their parents. It does no good to long for that which is not probable. Instead, the single parent should focus on establishing a strong Christian home. Or so many parents wish they had the financial resources of their neighbors to be able to provide so much more for their children. What children need is a Christian home, not the things that the neighbor’s kids have.

The readings for this Sunday present some aspects of a Christian home. The first

reading from Sirach says that children need to respect their parents. At first it refers to young children as it notes that mothers and fathers have their authority from God. Then it refers to older children when it says that children should take care of their parents when they age. Little children learn respect for their parents from the respect they see their parents giving each other and the respect their parents have for their grandparents. I have always believed that the way you treat your parents will be the way your children will treat you. If your relations with your parents are motivated by respect and love, and are evident in your kindness to them, your children will have learned this aspect of Christianity and will treat you the same way as your years mount.

The second reading deals with the interrelationships of the family. Paul tells the Colossians and us to deal with each other out of kindness, to be patient with each other, to forgive each other continually, not to let out pride determine what we say and do to each other. If we strive to live this way, than as a family we can pray together not just in Church, but in every aspect of our lives. "Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord." Paul goes on to mention the roles of a family in his epoch. At that time the equality of women was not recognized. In the Roman empire women were seen as property that needed to be protected by their fathers or their husbands. The respect given to a woman was different from that given to a man. That's why we have the phrase, wives be submissive to your husbands. Closely followed by husbands love your wives. The heart of this reading is that husbands and wives must respect each other. This same line of thought continues with children being told to respect their parents, and parents being told not to nag, to continually find fault, with their children.

A few years ago one of the finest men I have ever met died of a massive heart attack on Christmas day. One day about ten years before this, he spoke to me about his daughters who were in their early twenties at the time. He said to me, “My girls are really good kids. Yeah, they both made mistakes and had babies before they married, but that doesn’t change the fact that they are both good kids.” Those are the words of a father who was disappointed, true, but not to the degree that it changed the deep respect he had for his children. My thought is that the reason why the girls were such good kids and why they both went on to be good mothers and wives, was because they were treated with respect by their father, and mother for that matter, and they returned this with respect and deep love. By the way, the gentleman passed away after opening up a gift that the families of the two girls gave him on Christmas Day. God bless him and God bless all parents who never let anything diminish their respect for their children. And God bless children who receive and return their parents’ love. That is what Colossians, the second reading is about.

Today’s Gospel is acted out almost every Sunday in every parish. Mary and Joseph went to the temple holding Jesus. Simeon and Anna made a fuss. This happens in our parishes also. Couples come in to the church holding their newborn child. There joy is indescribable. “Look who we have with us,” they say before they ever open their mouths. Most priests, like me, make believe they are surprised even though they may have seen the expectant Mom every week. I love seeing the babies, and I

enjoy making a fuss. And I love seeing the huge change in the parents who present their first child. One young couple told me something that I know all of you realized when he came home from the hospital with that first child. They said, “You know, we can’t come and go and do the things we did before we had the baby, but we have so much more now. Life was great before, but much better now.”

Parents, we all love seeing how much you love your children. We love the fact that you all are determined to provide the best for your children. Please remember: to be the best parents you can be, remain grounded in the Lord. Make prayer a part of your home life. Pray with your children at bedtime and pray for them after they fall asleep. Teach your children respect. Let them witness your respect for them, for each other, and for others and demand that they respect others, including you.

Do your best, and trust God to do the rest. May all our families be Holy Families.

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 This year it has been impossible to experience Christmas without constantly thinking of the wars that are going on in Israel and in Ukraine.  In Bethlehem, the traditional Christmas crib has been changed into the image of a baby on a pile or rocks.  We certainly have seen plenty of images of piles of rocks, in Ukrainian cities and. In a terrible way, throughout Gaza.  At the same time, we have been hearing about hostages and seen images of family members tearfully talking about their fears for their loved ones.

     So this feast of the Holy Family underscores the place of family in our lives.  On the one hand, we have to take family for granted because it’s the closest framework of our lives; on the other hand, when family members are threatened or torn away from us, it fills us with fear and drives us to grief.  We realize how we cannot take family “for granted.”

     Family is not some organizational invention, although some people sometimes make it sound that way.  Family is the basic way human beings become human.  The very frailty of children demands the constant care of their parents.  The very love of parents shows itself in the birth of new life.  In our flesh and bones, in the deepest outlines of our hearts, family has been chiseled.

     Family has love and commitment built into it.  This is why any divorce feels like a tragedy.  This is why conflict between parents and children seems intolerable.  This is why the image of seniors virtually abandoned in nursing homes feels like betrayal.  Family is such an instinctual part of our lives that it demands that we commit ourselves to it.  We all smirk when we hear mobsters refer to themselves as “family.”  But they certainly have understood the commitment part of family reality.

     Our Gospel has Mary and Joseph bring Jesus, aged eight days, to the Temple to satisfy the practice of ancient Judaism.  But this is far more than a ritual Mary and Joseph are carrying out.  No, this is St. Luke’s way of saying that, from his earliest breaths, Jesus was committed—to the vision of his Father, to the vision of the Kingdom of God, to a vision of a new human family bound together in universal love and joy.

     As a Church, you and I are the visible sacraments of this vision of God.  Through our lives as disciples, joined together in Jesus, sharing in his unending banquet at every Mass, we are attempting to reveal God’s vision of a worldwide family of love to the world.  It begins with belonging and with our commitment to belong to others, to care for them, to serve them.

     Our mission today is to stand as a counterimage of the images of violence and division that so pervade our world today.  Our mission is to reflect toward each other the commitment God has made to us in the birth of Jesus and the human family to which he belongs.