

Today while we are still in this beautiful Christmas Season we celebrate a very special feast day, The Feast of the Holy Family: Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

It is a feast that is celebrated throughout the Catholic Church worldwide and there are some interesting customs that have developed over time related to this feast day.

For example, today in many families, members will gather round the door to their home and bless each other, tracing the sign of the cross on each other's forehead. This recalls their baptism day when the priest greeted them at the door of the church and gave the very same blessing. As you bless the member of your family you are entrusting that person to the care and protection of God.

The practice of writing the initials "JMJ" at the top of a letter or personal note is associated with this feast (if you went to catholic grammar school you will remember that all of you homework and tests had to have these initials at the top of the page). The initials are intended to remind the writer and the reader to pray to the Holy Family.

Many couples will quietly renew their marriage vows today.

Many families will pray the special consecration prayer to the Holy family placing their family in the protection of the Holy family. (You can actually find a copy of the consecration prayer in this week's bulletin which is found on the parish website: www.holy-family-church.com).

You might want to try one or more of these practices with your family today.

Devotion to the Holy family goes way back to the 17th century but the actual Feast Day was approved by Pope Leo XIII in 1893 for a very important reason.

During that time (about 1760 to 1840) the world was experiencing what we know as the "Industrial Revolution". It was a time of great growth in new products, industries, mass production and factory work. But it was also a time of great challenge and change for family life.

Work hours were much longer leaving less family time. Children entered the workforce as "cheap labor". Family size became smaller and extended families began to live further and further apart. Families were encouraged by the world to focus on gaining wealth and things.

So in 1893 in response to all this and in an effort to counteract the decline in family life, Pope Leo approved the Feast of the Holy Family. A few years later in 1921, Pope Benedict XV formally placed the feast day on the Church Calendar as an annual feast.

Now, each year the church holds up before us the Holy family of Nazareth: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and says: “Learn from them”, “Model your families after them”.

And when we look closely at the Holy Family we see the fullness and beauty of a family life guided by God.

We see times of great joy and love, like the moment Joseph and Mary both realized God called them for a special purpose and the angels visit and the dreams were all real! And like that moment of great joy when they witnessed the birth of Jesus.

But we also see times of hard work and trials and sufferings for the Holy family.

Mary had to tell Joseph she was with child. Then having to tell her parents. Joseph even planned to divorce Mary until God spoke to him in a dream.

We know the Holy Family was uprooted from their home and had to flee to Egypt because Jesus’ life was in danger from King Herod.

Moving to a new place, new people, things that place stress and strain on any family (if your family has gone through a move you know that feeling).

Other Gospel passages show us a whole range of challenges faced by the Holy Family. We are told Jesus is lost for three days, we see a frantic search by his parents, we hear the stress and anxiety and anger in Mary’s voice when they find Jesus “ Why have you done this to us?” We see a bit of tension and conflict in Mary’s exchange with Jesus. A communication problem between parent and child.

Joys, love, misunderstandings, stress, and change – the Holy Family experienced it all! They are a model for us because they lived through what we are living now. So we look to this family to see what kept them strong, together and present for each other through both the joys and the struggles.

And we find the answer: They knew God was with them. They loved God, they trusted God, and they listened for God and out of that came their love for each other and their love for those around them. They show us God is with us- all the time.

When God chose to dwell among his people, his starting point was the family. Jesus just didn’t drop in from the sky. God placed Him in a family, to grow and experience and journey back to eternal life together.

The final line in today’s Gospel reminds us when Mary, Joseph and Jesus returned home to Nazareth “ the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom”. That happened within a family! When we reflect on the fact that for every one year of His public ministry, Jesus spent 10 years in family life, we see the priority and importance God places on family life. There will always be something competing for our time but through this feast day God reminds us to make family time a priority.

So we look to the holy Family for guidance. Guidance for our immediate families, our parish families and our neighborhood family. And we learn some important things:

Above all the Holy Family points to Jesus as the center of family life. They tell us to have the courage to be who you are meant to be. When you feel God calling you to something- maybe a new job, a move, a new relationship, a religious vocation-don't let fear stop you from believing and trusting God has a plan for you. The holy family believed, trusted.

Mary and Joseph remind us if we have tough choices to make; if we are going through a difficult, confusing time; if you think no one will understand- don't carry these things alone. Trust in others, especially your family and those closest to you. Trust in their understanding, their help, and their love. God put them in your life for a reason.

The holy family teaches us it is important to make sacrifices. They show us life is not all about us. Sometimes we need to do things we didn't plan on doing, or don't want to do- because it is for the good of someone else. If you are a caregiver or a parent you know how difficult but how important these sacrifices are.

Mary and Joseph show us we can believe in miracles. Big ones! Like Jesus changing jars of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana or Mary's appearances at Fatima and Lourdes. But they also show us we can believe in smaller everyday miracles- the grace to look at something differently - to accept something hard- these are all miracles!

And Jesus, Mary and Joseph remind us that true family love, the love of Jesus, requires that we bring that love to others, especially those in need; the poor, the sick, the lonely, the depressed. The Holy Family shows us that true love involves entering into the lives of others. Being willing to feel that person's pain and being there to help, to comfort, to show you care - to remind them God loves and cares for them. How many times did we see Jesus do this during his earthly life? We saw Mary do this as she walked along the road to the crucifixion with Jesus. Today is a perfect day to pick up the phone and all that person in need.

Finally, Mary urges us to take time out of our busy lives to pray and reflect on things. To think about the events going on in our lives, in our families and try to see their purpose. To look for God's presence in these every day events. Take time to ask " How has God spoken to me today?" "What is God calling me to do next?"

This is what Jesus, Mary and Joseph did. Its how they found direction, found love, found meaning and purpose as individuals and as a family.

So today on the feast of Holy Family (Our parish feast day), we are called to celebrate, promote, and cherish family life. We are called to take these teachings

about family and put them into action in our individual families, in our parish family and beyond.

I came across an article on a catholic website that listed four principles that individual and parish families can follow to grow stronger. It is a short but important list, here it is:

The first is called the "Snowflake Principle"- people are like snowflakes, no two are alike. God loves variety and so should we. Families celebrate each other's differences and bear with each other's faults.

The second principle is the "Elbows and Toes Principle"- you can't rub elbows with the same people day in and day out without sometimes stepping on each other's toes. Strong families learn to say, "excuse me" " of course" " I'm sorry" " I forgive you". Tension is unavoidable in family life- what we do with it is what matters!

Third, the "I'm Nobody Principle"- We need to have a sense of humility and a sense of humor about ourselves and know we are not the center of the universe.

And the fourth principle is called the " Remember to forget Principle"- When Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, was reminded about a serious insult someone once made about her, Clara replied " You know, I distinctly remember forgetting that". We need to let go, really let go of anger and grudges.

Today on the Feast of the Holy Family we celebrate and give thanks for our individual and parish families- with all the joys and challenges. And we remember to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and the Holy family of Nazareth for those examples and opportunities to live even better family lives. God bless you.