

Generations
Holy Family (B)
(Gn 15; Ps 105; Lk 2:22-40)

The readings today repeatedly present the image of the very elderly holding a newborn: there is Simeon and Anna with the infant Jesus, and Abraham and Sarah with Isaac. The Feast of the Holy Family not only emphasizes the “nuclear” family of father-mother-children, but also calls attention to the role of the generations, necessary for the handing on of faith and the accomplishment of God’s plan of salvation. The Responsorial Psalm proclaims, “*The Lord remembers forever his covenant which he made binding for a thousand generations, which he entered into with Abraham, and by his oath to Isaac*” (Ps 105:8-9).

The Holy Bible is full of genealogies – lists of people who lived a long time ago. Why is it necessary for the most important book of God’s revelation to be filled with page after page of obscure and unpronounceable names of unknown people? It is important because this is precisely how God accomplished His plan of salvation in the time of the Bible, and how He continues to bring to fulfillment the salvation of the world in our time. It is accomplished through the generations of the family.

While we may each know a limited set of names pertaining to our particular (recent) genealogy, God sees at once the entire connected list, and the role of each individual within the whole.

Every new child is significant in the eternal plan, and every birth is to be celebrated, but it is the special cases, the extraordinary births, which call attention to the true miracle of every new life. Prior to Christ’s virginal birth, the greatest miracle child in the Bible was Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah. His name, “Laughter,” signifies the joy of elderly parents who now have hope and a future. But it especially signifies the hand of God who confounds human planning, since the very elderly Sarah laughed when she was informed by the angel that she would bear a son (Gn 18:12).

There are several lessons to draw from the Scriptures on the family. The first is that God’s providence exceeds human sin and weakness. The Fall ruined many aspects of man’s relationship with God, but it has not prevented God from continuing to work good for the human race through the family. Children are a blessing which was not lost due to the Fall. And though man is sinful and weak, and flawed, God does not fail in bringing forth children, even in human failure.

“God writes straight with crooked lines.” Prior to conceiving Isaac according to God’s power and providence, Abraham and Sarah had another child, Ishmael, through illicit means. God was not pleased with Abraham’s effort to

“circumvent” the limitations of his marriage to Sarah, and their condition of infertility. Even the great Abraham had to grow in faith and obedience, and repent of sin. Likewise, St. Joseph also had to be counseled by the angel regarding Mary’s unique pregnancy, and his unique vocation to fatherhood by way of legal adoption. Again and again, man has to surrender his will and preference to the requirements of his circumstances, and those of the children sent by God.

Man is fallen, and God has to work His salvation through man’s fallen condition marked by sin. To accomplish this, God establishes His Law in man’s life. This is a second important lesson. The law is given to protect and safeguard man from the danger he is to himself. The law establishes boundaries – walls – within which the family is safe, and which allow God to fulfill His plan more easily from one generation to the next. The law both teaches and protects. Thus the Gospel shows Mary and Joseph presenting their firstborn son in the Temple “*according to the dictates of the Law.*” By living in obedience to God’s law, the Holy Family of Nazareth increase in strength, wisdom, and grace (Lk 22:40), and bring God’s great plan to fulfillment.

The laws pertaining to marriage are among the most important, since the family is established on marriage. Marriage is an institution set up by God in human nature. It is a structure of society. It is governed by laws, both divine and human (civil), the human resting upon the divine. The laws pertaining to marriage prohibit adultery and infidelity. They require a permanent and unconditional commitment of the couple to each other and their family. The institution of marriage is established through a formal act, an irrevocable covenant between the couple and God, executed through solemn vows, and witnessed officially by the Church which imparts God’s blessing.

The law of marriage is necessary for the good of the family, and it is all the more important given man’s propensity to sin, and his weakness in times of difficulty and sacrifice. Young couples need to understand that what the world proclaims today regarding marriage – essentially rejecting all divine law – is not only wrong (a lie), it is harmful (detrimental) to the family. The laws of marriage are designed not only to protect the well-being of the nuclear family by providing the right context for raising children, but they also provide for the larger continuity of the family through the generations, something necessary for salvation. Marriage gives strength, structure, stability – for generations! The “breakdown of the family” does not only affect the nuclear family, but endangers the sacred heritage handed on “*for a thousand generations*” since the time of Abraham. The violation of the institution of marriage has negative consequences lasting generations. God will therefore look to those families who respect and obey the demands of the Law.

Another lesson from the Scripture highlighted in the example of Isaac, is that the child is always God's choice, more than the parents. The family serves God's plan, parents are servants of God with regard to their children, not masters. The same truth is taught in the Gospel by the Law which required Joseph and Mary to consecrate their firstborn son to God in the Temple at Jerusalem. Here the example of Jesus, and the mysterious prophecies spoken by Simeon and Anna, also illustrate what is true for every child: this child belongs to God, is a sign from God, and whose life will lay bare the thoughts of many hearts.

We live in a society famous for its "family planning" "clinics." There could not be a greater demonic misnomer. They are family *prevention* agencies. The "contraception mentality" of the modern world that embraces abortion, voluntary sterilization, and artificial contraception as tools of family life, is utterly foreign to the biblical teaching on the family, and directly opposed. Man is called to serve God in a responsible way as stewards, cooperating with God in the sacred act of procreation; they are not morally permitted to oppose or "prevent" the sovereign will of God with regard to the child. We work "with" God and nature, never "against."

Another great horror of our society is genetic engineering, the use of farming techniques on human beings. Researchers and lab technicians create human embryos in glass dishes, and then proceed to experiment on them, discarding them in the drain afterwards. Infertile couples look to these technologies to create the child they want. Some couples go so far as to choose the sex and genetic characteristics of their child, discarding those "samples" they do not like. Man has no right to transgress the sacredness of human life, which is God's domain. Even in difficult cases, man must submit and "defer" to God this choice and decision of a child. There is only one place where a child may be conceived, and that is the womb.

The Feast of the Holy Family has much to teach us in our particular family situations, including the difficult cases. This is the blessing that has remained despite the Fall, and even though there is always the risk of pain and imperfection, it is God's chosen instrument for the world's salvation, and His miracles are not lacking, even today.

"The history of mankind, the history of salvation, passes by way of the family. The family is placed at the centre of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love" (St. John Paul II, Letter to Families, 1994).