



1 January 2019

Dear Fathers, Pastoral Assistants and Parishioners,

Happy New Year! This is the time of year that seems to hold out hope that things in the future can be better than in the past. Our news media invite us to remember the previous year – who died and who was born, what leaders came to power and which ones fell from leadership, what natural (or human-made) disasters have befallen us over the past year, and what might we anticipate for the next year, 2019.

This is also the time to make resolutions. If we've been longing to turn over a new leaf, to make some decisions that we believe will bring greater prosperity or happiness to our lives and to those dear to us, the beginning of a new year seems the ideal time to do so.

Of course, there is nothing about January 1st that makes this the only occasion to take a decisive step for the better. This can happen any time of the year. Even human wisdom will urge us to make whatever decisions are called for at the time that seems most appropriate. Such decisions as these should wait for nobody.

The Feast of the Holy Family

Last Sunday, the Scripture readings for the feast of the Holy Family really touched me. If you recall, the first reading from the first book of Samuel spoke of Hannah, once barren but assured by the priest Eli of the temple in Shiloh, that she would give birth to a son. Lo and behold, this happened. When her son Samuel was weaned, Hannah returned to the temple and gave her son to the priest, to be raised in the temple. She had a keen awareness that her son was really a gift from God, and that he belonged to God more than to her and her husband Elkanah. In the second reading, St. John tells us that we are “children of God.” The gospel of Luke told of Jesus being lost in the temple for three days after Mary and Joseph were already almost home. They returned to Jerusalem and found him in the temple, speaking with the temple officials. Jesus' answer to their concern might seem to have a harsh tone: “don't you know that I must be about my Father's house?!” Jesus didn't belong to Joseph and Mary; he belonged to God. Despite that, he returned with them and lived many more years in Nazareth, obedient to them.

I recalled an incident from my own life. I must have been no more than about 7 or 8 at the time. While mom was focused on ironing, I sat not far from her and asked, “Mom, where did I come from?” Without skipping a beat, or so it seemed to me, my mother told me that I came from God. God gave me life, and then entrusted me (as also my siblings) to her and dad. We were on loan, you might say, to our parents, and at some point, they would be held accountable for how they raised us and treated us. I still recall the profound impression that had on me. I belonged to God, to whom my father and mother were also accountable. Hmmm.

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If we consider the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus as in any way a model for our own families, perhaps it is especially in this way. Children are a sacred trust. They don't "belong" to their parents. Only in a certain way might we think of ourselves "giving life" to a child – the pattern for this had already been established in nature by the One who put the laws of nature in place. This leads me to consider several teachings that are self-evident, even if they are not always honoured:

- Parents have the primary responsibility and right to raise their children. It is not schools or day-care centres or the government. It is parents, who have brought their children to birth. This right and responsibility can only be taken from them if there is clear and evident risk.
- There is no greater human endeavour than to raise children. Jobs and careers, vacations, sports and entertainment should not have priority over time with our children, especially in their earliest years which are so formative of character and values.
- We must remind children, from a very young age, that they are "children of God". They should know early on that there is a God, who loves them unconditionally. It isn't enough to tell them this; they must experience it. Take your children to church from the day they're born. I've had parents tell me they don't bring children to church who don't know how to behave. But they will only learn how to behave if they come.
- Family life is not always easy. The Holy Family had to deal with travel to Bethlehem while Mary was about to give birth, then escape as refugees into Egypt until the death of Herod. The ideals of life, any life, are often only fleeting moments.
- Children will very naturally take on our beliefs, values and characteristics. Children are great mimics. They will say and do what they see and hear others say and do. As the saying goes, "the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree".
- We must let children go, at the right time and circumstances. Mary and Joseph had to accept that Jesus' mission was to "be about the Father's business." Letting go is not always easy. But it's the only way that a person matures and becomes responsible.

Having said all of this, I think of the time a venerable old monsignor had given a very fine sermon on the joys and challenges of married life. At the end of the Mass, he stood at the church entrance, greeting his parishioners as they left. He couldn't help overhearing an elderly widow of the parish, who had raised a large family of nine children, mutter to a fellow parishioner as they descended the church steps, "I wish I knew as little about family life as he does!"

Now that New Year's is over, we are left with the feasts of Epiphany and the Baptism of Jesus before moving into Ordinary Time. Life takes on a more familiar air, and we return to customary occupations. Let us not lose sight, the year long, of the festive joy that marks the coming of the Messiah. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux reminds us, His coming is not only a past event in Bethlehem, nor a future event in the Second Coming, but a daily event as He comes into our lives daily, bringing us new life, love and freedom as His disciples.



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