

Holy Family  
December 31, 2017  
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## Reflection

It's easy to see that times at church are a family's principal connection to God. Our lives are centered on the sacraments, and they are the highlights of our time on earth. Families gather for baptism, first communion and confirmation. Sometimes children wear remarkable baptismal gowns, handed down over the generations. At first communion, they arrive in tiny suits and dresses. Once children are grown, families come together again to witness their marriages. Or maybe their ordinations. Either way, photo albums are filled with these occasions. Even those who don't come to church regularly want to be there, experiencing the love and hope that connect them to past and future. As the years pass, families draw close less often; many only see each other at funerals. And these are preceded by the most tender and intimate moments, of the anointing of the sick, witnessed only by the privileged few.

Today's Gospel describes the presentation at the temple. Like young parents of today who blow the budget at a baptism, Mary and Joseph made the offering of the poor: "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Baptism has a communal nature that reaches beyond the families involved. And we see an image of that in Simeon and Anna.

Sir 3:2-6, 12-14  
Ps 128  
Col 3:12-21  
Lk 2:22-40

They received consolation by encountering Christ; holding him in their arms; speaking with Mary and Joseph just as we are called to do through prayer. The temple would always play a key role in the life of Jesus. We remember his parents finding them there, because he had to be in his Father's house. He returned each year for passover; was tempted to jump from its pinnacle; and spent his final days within its walls cleansing, healing and teaching. But I want to focus on the short words at the end of the passage. "When Mary and Joseph had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

This is about all we know of his hidden life; the thirty years before he began his public ministry. The catechism tells us that "During the greater part of his life Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings: a daily life spent without evident greatness, a life of manual labor (531)." He grew in body, reason and will, with strength, wisdom and obedience. It was time spent with his human family that made him ready to serve God's family, the Church. Considering his "hidden life allows everyone to enter fellowship with Jesus in their ordinary life (533)." It's within our families, with its work and pleasures, that we first come to know God's blessings.

At home we learn to endure and forgive. The family home is a domestic church, where we begin to pronounce our prayers and flesh out our faith. A family is a communion of persons, a sign of the Trinity. Having children, raising and educating the young, participates in the creative work of God the Father. Each of us partake in the sacrifice and prayer of the Jesus the Son. We grow in holiness through the grace of the Holy Spirit, as we bear each other's failings with patience, becoming gentle and tender. And Mary helps us in our vocation of love; more than a sentiment, but a duty as well. Children have a responsibility towards their parents. The first reading says to "help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives." And it goes both ways. Paul says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart." He would have wives subject to their husbands, and husbands loving their wives. But virtue is demanded of all: "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience." And it comes from God when we strive to do his will. "Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you."

Maybe our family lives are messier than that.

For this Eucharist, we thank God for the relationships that demand and reward, and pray for the particular graces that we will need in the coming year.