

The Holy Family
December 29, 2013
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

It is clear from all three readings from Scripture today that the role of the father within the family is that of a servant-leader. This is perhaps best expressed in our Gospel, which recounts the messages Joseph received from the angels and his attendant obedience as he preserved Jesus' life from the designs of evil tyrants, first fleeing to Egypt to avoid Herod and then settling in Nazareth in order to avoid Archelaus. St. Joseph certainly led his family, but his headship was dedicated to the good of each member of the family. And the manner by which he fulfilled his service was obedience to the commands of God.

St. Joseph then serves as answer to those of us asking twenty centuries later how family life has become so disordered. The locus of disorder is disobedience, and in this we may be tempted to see first the disobedience of wives and children. Such disobedience is certainly a problem. The natural order of the household, reflected in the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, is variously treated in many quarters today as an imposition from which to be freed, or an anachronism that needs to be universally undone, and as a threat to one's personal integrity that must be overcome. In other words, the traditional family is seen by many to inhibit freedom rather than guarantee it.

Thus, spousal independence and rebellion against parental authority are not frowned upon but actively encouraged, while at the same time fathers are presented as being wholly incapable of restoring order. The modern family therefore devolves into an aggregation of individuals each doing his own thing, the tragic consequences of such narcissism being minimized in order that the triumph of radical - individualism may be extolled and glorified.

The disobedience I have just described is a threat, to be sure, but it could not have gotten this bad without fathers abdicating the very role God gave to St. Joseph. That is, in the natural order the obedience of the wife and children is derived from the obedience of the father. When the father is obedient to God's commands, so then will the wife and children obey the father. We cannot lament the disobedience of women and children until we lay it at the feet of modern men, whose monumental disobedience of God's commands is the principle source of modern social disorder.

Imagine for a moment how the Nativity narrative would be different, and all of salvation history compromised, if Joseph had abandoned Mary before Jesus was born. After all, more than forty percent of American fathers do not marry the mother of their children. Imagine if Joseph had refused to leave Bethlehem for the safety of Egypt because he didn't trust that God would provide for him there. Distrust in God's providence today has issued in a birthrate so low that the future of Western civilization is at risk. Imagine if St. Joseph did make it to Egypt but then refused to take his family back to Nazareth because he had taken an Egyptian mistress. The number one reason today for marital dissolution is still adultery, and our divorce rate stands in this country at fifty percent.

The reason things worked out for the Holy Family, of course, is that Joseph was obedient to God's commands. Salvation history came to fruition because St. Joseph took Mary as his wife, sheltered his family in Egypt, and returned home when God told him to. American family life isn't working out

today because too many men don't marry the mother of their children, thus compromising their ability to protect and provide for their offspring in the manner that St. Joseph protected and provided for Jesus. Disobedience has tragic consequences for the disobedient and all those the Lord has entrusted to their care.

Identifying disobedience, specifically the disobedience of men, as the cause of our social dysfunction does not answer the question of why we are disobedient. The reading from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians provides the answer. In his section on family life St. Paul places obedience within the context of gratitude. He says, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Our obedience to God's command, in other words, is to be undertaken in a spirit of gratitude for that command. The law of love is not an imposition, an anachronism or a threat, but the very means by which our salvation was accomplished. The requirement that we love as God has loved us should be met with thankfulness that God has entrusted so beautiful a responsibility to us. Moreover, we ought to be grateful that the Lord has provided the manual that teaches us how best to love, that we don't have to stumble about in the dark but can walk confidently in the light.

When we recognize the law of love for the blessing that it is and then give thanks to God that we are able to participate in the redemption of the world, we cannot simultaneously desire to do those things that contradict God's love. Gratitude for God's law and hatred of God's law are mutually exclusive modes of existence. And they bear their respective fruits. When we hate God's law, we sin against it and thus deprive ourselves of peace, joy, and the reconciliation that proceeds from the altar of the cross. But when we give thanks for God's law, our natural impulse is to fulfill it; and we then reap the harvest of righteousness that flows from hearts united to God's will.

The current crisis in family life was thus precipitated by a loss of gratitude and the beginning of a fruitless effort to establish a manner of life different from the time-tested one God gave us from the beginning. Men imagined they could lead without serving, and their disobedience of God's command to love meant that the women and children soon followed suit. As a result, both leadership and service are compromised. How do we restore the order that was lost, or more precisely, the order from God that we squandered?

We begin by cultivating a spirit of gratitude in our own children, gratitude for what we have given them, to be sure, but gratitude first for what God has given the world. That gratitude must begin before our redemption in the blood of the Cross; it must begin with the natural order established in the creation of the world. And in the beginning God created the family, one man and one woman united for life in a faithful and fruitful union. Until our gratitude for this order shines forth in our hearts, in our words and in our deeds, we will not regain the social order lost over the past half-century. But great works begin small, so we can start a revolution simply by saying thank you to God for ordering the world as He did and by encouraging our neighbors to do the same.