

Homily for December 28, 2008  
Holy Family Sunday

### Introduction

Typically, on this feast of the Holy Family each year the tendency is to idealize family life, almost to the point of unreality. At the same time we know that the truth about families is quite different. Some years ago I heard a family therapist invite her listeners to begin with ourselves and move outward to sisters and brothers, parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and stop at the first dysfunctional (to put it delicately) person. She assured us that we would not get very far from ourselves. (I mentioned this little exercise to a close relative of mine whose response was "Well, not in our family!!! Little does she know.")

I

The same can be said of Jesus himself. You may remember that the beginning of Matthew's Gospel lists Jesus' genealogy. Seventeen verses of the 1st Chapter in that particular Gospel contain name after name of Jesus' forbears, many of whom, according to Scripture scholars were pretty unsavory characters - bad actors - even villains. That was Jesus' background. It serves to underscore the absolute normalcy of Jesus' arrival on the human scene. We know, too, that the Savior's immediate family and its circumstances point to the same humanness:

- he was conceived in the body of a single woman
- he was born in extremely humble circumstances
- it was the poor who first understood the significance of his birth
- and as today's Gospel indicates, he grew and became strong just like everyone else.

II

These humble and normal beginnings, together with a spotty genealogy do not take away from the value that Jesus' example places on family life. It does say, though, that there are really no perfect families. We all have our divisions, skeletons in the closet, dysfunctions.

III

So on this feast of Jesus and his family life it is worthwhile to look at families and recognize again that they come in all kinds of configurations. There is of course the traditional, nuclear family - mother, father, children. We celebrate and honor them and all they do to build their relationships. In addition there are the single moms and dads who make equally or even greater efforts to see to it that their children are loved and nurtured. We celebrate them as well. Then there are often surrogate parents, often grandparents who skillfully and lovingly take the place of absent or incapacitated parents in the lives of their grandchildren. And the single men and women of so many families - unmarried aunts and uncles - so often provide further bonding among their relatives. Finally, we cannot forget on this feast day the family of humankind, God's sons and daughters throughout the world - our sisters and brothers. In a particular way we need to remember people

in places like Iraq, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and all other places where families are shattered by violence, poverty and attacks on the environment.

What is crucial in all of these dimensions of family life is that love be present among family members, especially with regard to the little ones. There is no substitute for this in their lives. (As I come into contact with the young men who are applying for life in the Franciscan Order, it is all too apparent that those who have not received this love have the most difficult time in living our way of life.)

### Conclusion

Let me conclude by telling you a story. It's really an Our Lady Queen of Peace story and I believe it places an exclamation point on this day's homily. Last summer a young woman asked me if I would ever be willing to baptize the baby of a same sex couple whom she knew. When I told her that I'd be happy to perform that ceremony, she then tentatively asked if it might be possible that it take place in the home of the two men, because one of them was dying of cancer and would not be able to make it to church for the baptism. Again I told her that it would be no problem to baptize the baby in their home. And so it happened. I must say that it was a moving experience for me. The two parents of the baby obviously wanted their child baptized before the sick partner passed away; they gathered a number of their friends for the occasion and we actually had the ceremony in the bedroom of the dying man. There was enormous love evident there that day, along with the pain of the one man's impending death. Above all, the two parents were deeply grateful, in addition to be amazed, that a Catholic priest would "deign" to offer this service in their home. For me it was never a question - a "no brainer" as they say.

Above all, it was clearly an Our Lady Queen of Peace moment. This is the kind of community we are. So on this Feast of the Holy Family we give great thanks to God for our parish family.