

Sunday December 27, 2020

Feast of the Holy Family Reflection

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Not much is ever said in the Gospels about the Holy Family leaving it wrapped in mystery but also in familiarity. Mary, Joseph and Jesus would have had jobs and daily chores to attend to, just like us. They needed rest, recreation, physical sustenance and the comfort of a loving home, just like us. This is the deepest of truths, that all three would have lived together in this simple crucible where Mary and Joseph would have had to grow in virtue and perfection at the service of a child who became the man known as the Son of God.

The Church teaches that Mary was conceived immaculately and was sinless. Sinless does not mean perfect. It means that she never disobeyed God in her thoughts, words and deeds. Nevertheless, she too would grow in perfection as she witnessed the loving obedience of her Son to her, his stepfather and his almighty Father in heaven. Indeed, the sinless one would learn by living an intimate relationship with God himself, first in her womb, then in her arms and through life, and finally, on the cross.

The Church also acknowledges too that Joseph was her most chaste spouse. He had to be heroically chaste if Mary were to maintain perpetual virginity. Did they share the same bed? I doubt it because even in normal circumstances Jewish men must sleep elsewhere to prevent accidentally touching their wives during their monthly cycle—doing so would make them ritually impure. Thus, it would make sense that Joseph slept separately from Mary. Of course, this is an assumption on my part.

Other than this, life in the home at Nazareth would have been quite normal...food prepared, the home maintained, clothing laundered, and things mended. They most likely lived in a one room house and had a walled courtyard where they had a few animals. A set of stairs lead to a grass roof where they would sometimes sleep on hot summer nights. Aside from the normalcy of life in the Holy Family, none of them could be called normal. Indeed, they were all extraordinary in their unique ways; Jesus was God and the Gospels recount how extraordinary he was.

During our journey through Advent, the Gospel narratives bear witness to the characters of Mary and Joseph. Mary, at the tender age of fourteen accepted as God's will that she would conceive and bear the Son of the Most High. Her fiat is summed up beautifully in the Magnificat of Luke's Gospel. After the annunciation, she visited her cousin Elizabeth and helped her to prepare for a son, John the Baptist. Mary performed a duty of charity. She would spend the rest of her life pondering the mysteries of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Meanwhile, Joseph, upon discovering Mary was with child, retained a deep respect for her and did not want her disgraced. When the Lord revealed to him in a dream that he should accept Mary as his wife, Joseph too obeyed.

In this Sunday's readings, we discover that both parents were obedient to the prescriptions of the law—Jesus was circumcised, presented in the Temple and the customary ritual sacrifices carried out. It probably was never entirely clear to either parent what it meant to have a child who was the Son of God. The ritual sacrifices were sin offerings...Jesus did not need them, neither He nor His mother, had ever sinned. Just like His own baptism, more than thirty years later, it too was a simple expression of obedience to the demands of the law.

Joseph will then take his family into exile in Egypt, again in response to God's revealing word in a dream. His obedience saved Jesus' life from the maniacal King Herod and we never hear about Joseph again. Mary, however, would continue to find a place in Jesus' ministry. She appears at the wedding in Cana (requesting Jesus to help when the wine runs out), at the foot of the cross (where her heart would be pierced by the sword as the prophetess Anna had foretold), and at Pentecost, amidst the disciples as they receive anointing from the Holy Spirit.

As we celebrate the mystery of Christ's incarnation, it is important to remember that He too had a family. Parents nurtured, supported and cultivated His humanity as He grew in the Spirit, loving and serving His Father in heaven.