

Are We Ready to Act on the Call of the Spirit to Better Our Life Together?

One of the best known quotes of the Peanuts cartoon character, Linus is: "I love humankind; its people I can't stand." By actually saying it out loud, Linus seems to hit a chord in all of us: it's easy for us to love the whole world, but it's hard as *blazes* for us to love certain human beings! That's one of the reasons today's Feast of the Holy Family – placed in the midst of our celebration of Christmas – is so important.

The purpose of the Feast of the Holy Family, wedged into our Christmas celebrations, is *not* primarily to focus on Christian families or to celebrate "Marriage and Family Life," but rather, to point out that Jesus was born fully into the human condition – he was born an infant, he needed a family to take care of him, to teach him, share faith with him, to enable him to grow and develop: day-by-day, year-by-year; just as we do....

And the human condition of the Holy Family was less than perfect, less than ideal. As we would say today: Jesus was born into a pretty 'dysfunctional family.' If we put together all the Gospel stories of the Holy Family, we see that they paint a picture of a troubled family, with relationships often tense under the pressures they faced: we find a betrothed man, feeling deceived; a young woman, bewildered and apprehensive at finding herself pregnant and not married; a husband taking his family into exile because of a warning in a dream; a child who strays from his parents in a big city and is lost for days; a son who is misunderstood by his mother and who rebukes her at a wedding reception; a family who doubts the very sanity of this "wayward son," and the list goes on... .

I think, if we're honest, most of us – despite the 2000 year difference of cultures and customs and ways of life – find it a bit more real to identify with the 'dysfunctional Holy Family' as compared to a 'perfect' family of some sort of "Leave it to Beaver" mold. We all know what struggle in family life is all about:

- a son's battle with substance abuse;
- a daughter's relationship with an abusive boyfriend;
- a couples long work of counseling to keep a marriage together;
- a child's wild and often destructive partying;
- an unfaithful partner;
- a painful, heartbreaking divorce;
- a child's being at the helpless victim of bullying at school;
- a father's sudden job loss;
- a single parent's unemployment insurance or food stamps being cut;
- a mother's illness that throws the entire family into a tailspin;
- a same-sex couple's being rejected and condemned by family and even, church;
- refugee families forced by violence to leave their beloved homeland to begin life anew in a strange country;
- and the list goes on... the human condition....

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Brothers and sisters, the Christmas season draws all of us to focus on family: perhaps memories of the past, dreams for the future, and – sometimes – the pain of our present situation. In preparing my thoughts for today, I asked myself how our Advent and Christmas reflections about getting in touch with our hearts – our spiritual centers – might fit into our present situation as family? Being in touch with our spiritual centers is *being open* to the light, being in touch with our spiritual centers defies darkness, defies the *status quo*, defies hopelessness! What might that say about our present situation family?

Let me use an example from the play: “*Dublin Carol*” by Conor McPherson. The main character, John, is an undertaker and an aging alcoholic who is trying – with little success – to downshift from benders and lost weekends, to steady, but not overly destructive, drinking. John begins Christmas Eve in deep depression and darkness, sitting in his office with his assistant Mark, who is showing signs of following John’s drunken ways. While sipping on a mid-morning beer, John reminisces, in excruciating detail, about how his drinking has cost him his entire family: wife, son, and daughter. In the midst of his crying in his beer, there is a surprise knock on the door and there stands his daughter, Mary, who he hasn’t seen in 10 years. Mary begins by confessing that she never stopped loving – and hating – him! She then shares that her mother – his ex-wife – is in the hospital dying, and offers to return at 5:00 pm to bring him to the hospital to see her. After spending the afternoon pacing the office, as the clock moves toward 5pm, John washes his face, combs his hair, puts on his coat and sits in the chair to wait. As a nearby church clock chimes 5 o’clock, the lights go down and the play ends.

We don’t know what John ultimately does; will he take off his coat, drink some more and refuse to visit his ex-wife in the hospital? Or: will he take the opportunity to make amends and partially repair his broken family relationships? Might this be the beginning of John recognizing his powerlessness over alcohol and taking some steps toward healing? The opportunity has presented itself – the actions are up to John.

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My sisters and brothers, with grace – with God – all things are possible. On that Christmas Eve, in his heart-of-hearts, John – despite his brokenness – was wise enough to know the possibility of spiritual awakening. Somehow he smelled hope, no matter how disastrous his past behavior, he was building his courage to take a chance at reconciliation.

When we are in touch with our spiritual centers, grace that begins bubbling on the inside, in our spiritual centers, moves to the outside with new vitality and action; and our spiritual centers, our hearts and souls – where grace: *the spark of the divine that’s written within us and among us* – can transcend our mental conditions and our seemingly hopeless situations. A beautiful core Catholic teaching proclaims: no person or situation is unredeemable! My sisters and brothers, the presence of grace in our centers means that everyone is capable of surprising actions. Although families are notorious for putting one another in boxes, the graced-center of any person may break out of those boxes and bring forth words and actions of love, a moment of light, a change of heart.

I was talking with a friend on Christmas Day who shared that he went to Midnight Mass in his parish and was so moved that on his way home he stopped at a 24 hour drugstore and picked up a Christmas card and gift for his daughter, from who he had been estranged for many years. Before he was able to deliver the gift, he got a text from his daughter at 6 o'clock on Christmas morning: "Dad, I love you and we're dropping by Christmas afternoon." The card and the gift were there waiting!

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My brothers and sisters, the Holy Family of Nazareth and our faith in Jesus who is present in our spiritual centers – our hearts, remind us that family holiness, *human* holiness, is not about perfection, nor is it about premature judgments of failure or self-complimentary judgments of success.

Family holiness is about people living in close relationship with one another and discerning opportunities that may come when we least expect them, for our shared spirits to flourish. Sisters and brothers, there is a certain immediacy to this discernment, for time makes and unmakes possibilities. The decision to go or not go to the hospital that Christmas Eve is probably John's last opportunity for some act of amends and reconciliation with his wife....

So brothers and sisters: life is short. As we move into 2014, let us pray for one another that we may be awake and aware and alert to cooperate in situations of grace that may be in front of us. Let us pray for the confidence that our hearts – our *spiritual* centers – are *capable* of contributing whatever is needed to better the lives that we share together. Here is a question for every family seeking to be 'holy,' a question that we may want to bring into the New Year:

*Are we ready to act on the Call of the Spirit to better our life together?*

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Amen!