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The family of God

Mary McGlone | Dec. 29, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Devotion to the Holy Family has a reasonably long history in Catholicism. It first appeared significantly in 17th-century France and was brought to the New World by Jesuit missionaries and French settlers and governors. In those early years, one would find two typical depictions of the Holy Family: one featuring St. Anne, Mary and the child Jesus, the other picturing Joseph, Mary and Jesus. The devotion received official status in 1921 when, under Pope Benedict XV, the feast was inserted into the general calendar of the Roman rite. The Vatican saw the devotion as a way to counter the breakdown of the family being experienced in Western society. Today, when the feast usually falls on the Sunday after Christmas, it extends the celebration of the Nativity, putting new emphasis on the humanity of Jesus and on the gift of divine life offered to all of us.

The feast invites us to imagine realities of Jesus? early life that our Gospels barely hint at except for incidents that would bear on his adult ministry. Imagining the ?hidden life? of Jesus, it seems obvious that his parents were his first instructors in the faith. As he heard the stories of the heroes of his faith tradition, he saw their reflection in his own family experience. Abraham and Sarah were surely the models for his relatives Elizabeth and Zachariah. The women of the Hebrew tradition, Judith, Esther, Miriam, Hannah and others, were the predecessors of his own brave and blessed mother. How could he miss the parallel between the great Joseph and his own dreamer father? As Mary and Joseph shared the stories of their tradition with him, they also helped shape his religious imagination. Perhaps we can hear echoes of their teaching in his parables and rejoinders.

Feast of the Holy Family
Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14
Psalm 128
Colossians 3:12-21
Luke 2:41-52

If telling the traditional stories shaped Jesus? imagination, how much more did he learn from the example of his parents? prayer life? How much carpenter Joseph must have appreciated Psalm 127, which orients all human labor to God? ?Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build.? We can see the clear parallels between Mary?s Magnificat and Jesus? teaching about the poor and hungry, the rich and the proud in his Sermon on the Plain. Both Mary and Joseph gave him witness of a life centered on the humble prayer, ?Thy will be done?.

If Jesus did indeed perceive the parallels between the historical figures of Israel and his own family and the people of his time, he found in that a clue to understanding the great mystery of his life and identity. His tradition introduced him to an understanding of God as the One who remains involved in human history through

the agency of people of faith. That awareness was a necessary prelude to what was probably a gradual awakening to his own unique identity as incarnate Son.

There is no doubt that Jesus came from a fine family. Although we might call them ?normal,? we can hardly consider them ?conventional.? In the stories we have received, we find Mary questioning the angel of God and then accepting the vocation to be a mother before she has a husband. Her spouse, not unlike her, takes the word of an angel as permission, even as a mandate, to override the law that demanded he should at the very least abandon his plans to marry the pregnant Mary. Thus, Jesus? own family experience taught him that the will of God cannot be limited to the rules and traditions handed down from the time of Moses, an attitude reflected in his own unconventional and open approach to family. In the midst of a culture based on intense family loyalty and blood ties, Jesus did not hesitate to teach that celibacy for the sake of the kingdom was also a virtue (Matthew 19:12). He was able to extend his understanding of family and clan to include all who do the will of the Father (Luke 8:21). He even extended his ministry to people outside the Hebrew tradition, curing the daughter of a Canaanite woman and a Roman centurion?s servant (Matthew 15:21-28, Luke 7:1-10).

Early devotion to the Holy Family saw Jesus, Mary and Joseph as an earthly reflection of the Trinity, calling them the ?created trinity.? This points out that what makes human beings images of God are loving relationships. As we celebrate this feast, we are invited to contemplate the potential of our own relationships and families, natural, created, extended and extraordinary. This feast celebrates the way we choose to bond ourselves to others in love. This is how we live in the image of the Trinity, and such love is both our earthly vocation and our eternal destiny.

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