

You've probably started to pick up a pattern in my preaching—that I like to point out the many ways that Holy Mother Church teaches us, especially in the liturgy. And so, once again, the Church has a lesson for us as we continue moving through the Octave (the 8 days) of Christmas. And it's a lesson that is sorely needed in our society. December 25th is not the end of the Christmas Season; rather it is only the beginning. By the way, the Christmas season doesn't officially end until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which falls on January 8th of this year.

The Octave of Christmas gives us an opportunity to spend 8 Days reflecting on the mystery of Christmas. In other words, we get to examine the Christmas story from many different angles. And on this Sunday during the Octave of Christmas, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. This feast is important for every one of us because all of us are called not only to honor and revere the Holy Family but also to imitate their holiness in our own families.

Now this may seem like an impossible task—to imitate the holiness of the Holy Family. After all, the Holy Family is made up of Jesus, who is God, Mary, who was conceived without original sin and remained sinless throughout her life, and St. Joseph, a man who is revered for being righteous and filled with virtue. How can we hope to imitate such a perfect family? This

holiness is what the readings today are helping us to live out in our own lives and in our own families.

The first reading from Sirach reminds us of the 4th Commandment: Honor your father and your mother. I have often reminded children in the confessional that God shows us the importance of the 4th commandment even by the way He placed it within the 10. The first three commandments teach us about our relationship with God. And what comes next after honoring God? Honoring our parents. Sirach reminds us that the obligations of the 4th commandment don't end when a person turns 18 or moves out of the house. For all of our lives, we have the duty of honoring and caring for our parents. And if we are faithful to this commandment, the Lord assures us of His blessings for us.

But as important as it is to live the 4th commandment, there is more to imitating the holiness of the Holy Family. This is what St. Paul addresses in his letter to the Colossians. He calls families to love one another. And he describes this love in a beautiful way. Unfortunately, St. Paul's teaching on the love of the family is often drowned out by one of the most misunderstood phrases in all of Scripture: "Wives, be subordinate to your husbands..." I have heard from more than a few people—men and women—the discomfort and even anger that these words can elicit. When these words are taken out of context or when they are used as a

pretext to harm or abuse women, that discomfort and anger is more than justified. But as Catholics, we are called always to read Scripture in its context, and so it's worth referring to chapter 5 of Ephesians, where St. Paul uses the same phrase but expands his explanation.

In Ephesians, St. Paul uses the word "subordinate" not just for wives but for everyone, too. "Be subordinate to one another out of love for Christ." This immediately can help us to rule out a few things that St. Paul does not mean by the word "subordinate". First, being subordinate is not involuntary. No one should be forced to be subordinate to another. It is something that we choose. Second, being subordinate does not mean that one has more power or worth or dignity than another. And third, being subordinate does not mean that one gives up their right to be respected and to be treated with dignity.

So what does St. Paul mean when he uses the word "subordinate"? I think St. Paul is using this word as a synonym for love. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us that to love is to will the good of the beloved. When we love, we choose to put aside our own needs and our own desires so that we can provide for the needs and the desires of the one whom we love. When we love, we subordinate our wants and desires to the one that we love. We direct ourselves to their good more than our own. This is what it means to love. This is why St. Paul continues with the command for husbands to love their wives, for children to obey their parents, and for fathers to

avoid provoking their children. This is the kind of love that St. Paul is calling for in the Christian Family.

Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,
heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,
bearing with one another and forgiving one another...

And over all these put on love,
that is, the bond of perfection.

This is what it means to be subordinate to one another. This is what it means to love one another.

Finally, in the Gospel we find that there is one more step required if we wish to imitate the holiness of the Holy Family. Not only must we obey the 4th commandment, not only must we be subordinate to one another and love one another; but we must also, as a family, be subordinate to God, we must love God just as He has loved us. We see this in the mystery of the Presentation of the Lord. The Holy Family brought the infant Jesus into the temple for His purification, "just as it is written in the law of the Lord." To suggest that there was any need for Jesus or Mary to be purified is ridiculous. Mary is the perfect creation of God and Jesus is God Himself. Yet, the Holy Family obey the commands of the Lord. And in their obedience, they experienced the presence of God. The encounters with Simeon and Anna were assurances to

Joseph and Mary of God's presence in their lives. They were sources of grace to strengthen them for the road to come. In their obedience to laws and precepts of their faith, the Lord rewarded Mary and Joseph and He strengthened them for their vocation.

So it is with us. All of us are called to be subordinate to the Lord, to submit ourselves to His plan for us. This means making our families a place of prayer together. This means remembering always the importance of the Mass and the sacraments. And when we do, when God becomes the center of our lives and our families, His grace will strengthen us to face the joys and the sorrows of life. His grace will make our families holy!

This feast lays out for us the way to imitate the holiness of the Holy Family: honor your father and mother, make the family a place of love where the needs of others come before our own, and keep God and His commands always at the center of our families. These are the steps to holiness and happiness in our families. Let us pray for the grace to follow this path of holiness. May the Holy Family of Jesus and Mary and Joseph intercede for us to the Father that we may follow their example, that we may have a holy family.