

# YEAR of SAINT JOSEPH



*“Show yourself a father, and guide us in the path of life”*

**REFLECTION - AUGUST 2021**

## **The Holy Family**

I can't relate to the Holy Family. Mary was completely without sin, Jesus was God and Joseph was a saint. That doesn't sound a whole lot like my family!

Thoughts or comments like these can easily arise when trying to engage with the subject of the Holy Family. Yet, in this Year of St Joseph (which has dovetailed nicely into the Year Amoris Laetitia Family), the Church is encouraging us anew to draw grace and strength from the fully human, grace-filled family life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

If we desire to draw closer to this little family of Nazareth, then, we may need to explore some of the unconscious assumptions that can create resistance in our minds and hearts.

We may assume, for instance, that being able to resist sin perfectly (or with growing perfection in the case of Joseph) makes Jesus, Mary and Joseph "unrelatable". But is it our sins that "make us human" or that help us feel close to and connected with others?

A little reflection, assisted by Church teaching, will reveal that in fact the opposite is true. Sin makes us "less than human". It robs us of our true humanity and of our capacity to connect with others. It demeans and demoralises us and turns us in on ourselves.



To the extent that the members of the Holy Family were able to resist sin and selfishness, they were able to be fully human. The Holy Family can inspire us by their example of being richly and warmly present to each other, to their extended family, to their community and to the world they found themselves in.

The fact that Jesus, a holy man and preacher, was so comfortable in the company of outcasts and sinners bears testimony to the hospitality and compassion expressed in the family home at Nazareth. Their neighbours would have known them as "good people", people you could go to in a crisis, people who wouldn't judge you or look down on you or air your dirty laundry. Jesus learnt in the family home to be compassionate, accepting and merciful.

The fact that Jesus loved to share meals, to tell stories and to attend celebrations shows that his home life was rich and celebratory. The fact that his stories are full of images from domestic life – cooking and cleaning; from agriculture – sowing and reaping; from business – debt collectors and employers; and from nature – the lilies of the field; indicates that his parents encouraged a grounded, well-rounded appreciation of all aspects of human existence.

The fact that Jesus, while gentle and humble of heart, was also free in speaking his mind, calling out hypocrisy and expressing his grief, anger, joy or affection, bears testimony to a home environment which "held space" for robust conversations and the healthy expression of emotion.

We can also make the assumption that there would have been something other-worldly or superhuman about the Holy Family. But there is simply no evidence for this.

The fact that we know next to nothing about the details of Jesus' first 30 years of life denotes that those around them noticed nothing "novel" or "exotic" about the Holy Family of Nazareth. In fact, the Gospel of Thomas, in which the child Jesus was depicted performing supernatural feats, was rejected by the early Church as inauthentic.

The Holy Family were not superhuman; they were fully human and extra-ordinary. They didn't have a crystal ball that told them how their life would turn out. They had to live and grow through space and time like the rest of us, trusting that God is good and that ultimately he has everything in hand. They had to exercise faith. They had to choose hope and they had to learn how to accept and appreciate the gift of each other's unique personhood just like we do.

Nor did resisting sin mean they were free from temptation, discouragement, doubt, fear, misunderstandings, hurt, anxiety, stress or grief.

They had many trials to endure: an importunate pregnancy, social disgrace, homelessness, fleeing an oppressive regime, on the run for their lives, precarious employment. Did they need to rely on the kindness of others, on charity, to make it through? Jesus was later to declare that "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head". Was this another lesson learnt from his parents' stories of their early married life?

The story of Jesus being lost for days during the extended family pilgrimage home from Jerusalem shows that, like us, the Holy Family could not read each other's minds. Despite the purity of their love for each other, Mary and Joseph still could not fully understand each other during their life on earth and nor could they fully understand their son.

The human reality of their essential separateness as individuals as they strove to build communion as a family would have produced all the same frustrations and anxieties that all human beings experience in relationships. And God has willed it this way.

The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* beautifully articulates the complexity of what it means to be human and it is good to reflect that every member of the Holy Family, being fully human, would have experienced these complexities.

In every human person "many elements wrestle with one another... on the one hand, as a creature he experiences his limitations in a multitude of ways; on the other he feels himself to be boundless in his desires and summoned to a higher life" (GS 10). Every person "remains to himself an unsolved puzzle" to which "only God fully and most certainly provides an answer as He summons each person to higher knowledge and humbler probing" (GS 21).

Every person has "a secret core and sanctuary" where he "is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths" (GS 16). By his innermost nature, man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential (GS 12). Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself (GS 24).

Thus Jesus, Mary and Joseph had to undertake the same fundamental human task we all do of growing in self-knowledge and self-possession and of learning how to freely give themselves

to each other and enter into communion with one another and with God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 357). This all took time, patience, forgiveness, understanding, humility, growth in maturity, life experience, openness and learning skills of trust and communication.

The Holy Family are much more like us than they are different from us and they have much to teach us about what it means to be fully human. Let's draw close to these good people, who learnt through trials and sufferings and joys how to walk humbly with God and to trust in his provident goodness.

Let the Holy Family encourage us, that as we open the ordinariness of our lives and relationships to his grace, God can bring about his saving plan.

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