

It's no accident that we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family in the Octave of Christmas. This timing is intended to remind us that just as Jesus took on our human flesh in order to sanctify it and eventually redeem it, so he did with the human family.

Some theologians speak of the hidden life of Jesus—that period between the infancy narratives and much later when he emerged as an adult—all those years between. Today's Gospel gives us a glimpse of that period of Jesus' life, when he was twelve years old, the age when a Jewish son would begin to take on a new level of instruction in order to become a son of the Mosaic Law, what we would eventually refer to as a *bar mitzvah*.

The gospel tells us that the family had gone to Jerusalem for the annual Passover feast, one of the three annual feasts that Jewish men that lived in Judea were expected to attend in Jerusalem. On their way home, they got separated. Part of the confusion that would have led to this, is that in these caravans, the women and men traveled in separate cars. But nevertheless, children could travel with either parent, and so Joseph perhaps thought Jesus was with Mary, and vice versa.

We can only imagine their sudden sense of panic, when they learned of his absence, racing back toward Jerusalem, a whole day's travel, and still not finding him until three days had elapsed. At last they found him, with undoubtedly a mixture of relief and anger: *"Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety."*

In response he gave a mysterious answer that on the surface sounds dismissive and perhaps even disrespectful: *"Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"* St. Luke tells us *they didn't understand*, and that *Mary kept these things in her heart*, as though to continue pondering it all.

All of this tells us a few things about the Holy Family. First, they were not without problems. They had plenty. Secondly, despite the fact that Mary had initially been informed of God's plan by the angel Gabriel, and despite the fact that Joseph had received messages from God in his dreams, they were still trying to figure this all out, and perhaps also to trust.

But finally, it also tells us something about Jesus. As I mentioned he was twelve years old, entering a new stage of his religious instruction, of becoming a son of the Law. St. Luke tells us that returning home with Joseph and Mary, he *advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man*. Again, even Jesus, in his humanity, had to grow in his faith. Sometimes we think he was just hard-wired with it.

So, what does this tell us about ourselves, in our experience of family? If family life for the Holy Family was challenging, it's no surprise that it is for us too. While all of us experience at least some level of dysfunction in our families, some of us have families that are deeply divided and disconnected, and some of us carry painful memories and bear living wounds associated with our families.

But family is an institution of God's making—not merely a construct of human society, as it's sometimes proposed—so therefore it cannot be dismissed or abandoned as an institution. Our challenge is to lift it up as best we can, to what God intended it to be, to redeem it. Again, Jesus was born into human flesh, but also a human family, to redeem it.

It was in the context of their Jewish faith that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus learned and worked their way through their struggles and difficult decisions. Therefore, we must also bring faith into our homes, the domestic church, to invite God to be a part of our family life.

That is why, perhaps especially in our culture, we must make our domestic church a place of prayer, a place of God's peace, cultivating His presence in our homes. There's the saying: *the family that prays together, stays together*, and statistics prove it.

Second, parents, your children are learning their values from you, by your priorities and decisions. Show them that prioritizing faith is not just when it is convenient or an obligation, but that it's instead something that gives meaning and joy to their lives.

Let us hold this desire to redeem and elevate our experience of family, especially as we, a parish family, brothers and sisters, gather at this table to partake in this meal given to us by our brother Jesus, here in our Father's house.