

Cherishing the Gift of the Family

For families, this has been one tough year.

Many haven't gotten together indoors over the holidays, and many others have been separated out of concerns of not wanting to pass on an illness to someone. Hopefully with a Covid vaccine rolling out we can finally see some more normal times in 2021.

As for many families, this Christmas is rather bittersweet for me too. I won't be seeing as many family as I'd like to. And as I look at the ornaments on my trees, many from my grandparents, and the manger I have, given to me by my Godmother, I'm reminded of people I won't see again until I pass on from this world and enter eternal life.

But for all of the pain that both Covid and death bring, one of the things we are reminded of us that we are forever linked to our families, both those who are living and those who have passed on to be with God forever.

This weekend, we celebrate that as we mark the Feast of the Holy Family.

I've certainly learned much from school and life experiences and still have much to learn, but as I look at where I am at in life I realize a big part of it is because of what loved ones have shown me. My mom and dad taught me the value of patience and the true meaning of love by taking time with me growing up to help me with homework, to work hard for the family, and to help their parents as they aged with home maintenance and other tasks they couldn't do as easily any more. They taught me the importance of prayer by praying with me while growing up, and they taught me the importance of giving the gift of time by investing plenty of that with me.

No family is perfect – even Jesus caused Mary and Joseph a lot of anxiety by disappearing as a boy to spend time in the Temple without letting them know. But families are so important in forming us.

Sometimes we can take families for granted; often in confession what comes up are the family struggles many of us have, from the siblings fights to blowups over this or that to sometimes the more serious things like resentment and grudges. Hopefully a silver lining from the pandemic is to remind us of the importance of our connections to one another. As a new year dawns, and hopefully less use of words like “virtual” and “social distancing” but real events with real people, maybe a great idea is to build bridges, work past any grudges, and help your family life to grow even stronger. There are so many little things we can do over a lifetime. When we are growing up, we can listen to our parents and give them the benefit of the doubt, doing our part to help around the house. We can help aging relatives with needs such as shoveling and lawn cutting and also stop in to visit from time to time. Or, if there's a family rift, we can pray for healing and extend an olive branch, mindful of the fact that we are only here for a little while and it's important to work for healing and reconciliation rather than waiting for someone else to make

the first move. The pandemic has been especially hard on assisted living communities; as they open up again, maybe make an effort to visit people in your family who may be living in assisted care or try to call them. We can also continue to pray for loved ones who have gone before us, making peace, for if someone passed on and words were left unsaid, our connection with them still continues. And finally, we can give the all-important gift of time by having a family meal, or setting aside time in during the week or on the weekend for family time which means conversing rather than texting with one another, something I hope we value more than ever once “normalcy” returns.

When you think of our Lord growing up and the 30 years that are largely unrecorded, how much he must have learned by “advancing in wisdom and age before God and man” (Luke 2:52) from what Mary and Joseph taught him. Our families can drive us crazy sometimes, and over the years from fighting over a video game controller to fighting over who said what at the reunion to who got what in a will, rifts emerge. But so often when we look at what divides us, we realize how petty it can be, and if we think about it, we realize what one of the greatest gifts can be found not under the tree, but in the people who fill our lives around that tree every Christmas. What a blessing the family is.

Have a blessed Christmas Season and a wonderful New Year – may it be filled with many more wonderful memories to be made with your loved ones.

God bless,

Fr. Paul