

Homily for Holy Family Sunday
December 31, 2017

Holy Families

One of my favorite past times is playing the piano. I am not the kind of person who can just sit down and play by ear. I am a note reader and most enjoy playing classical music. One of the things I like to do is listen to a master pianist play a composition. This inspires me in turn to begin learning the score. Now I will never be able to play it like the concert artist, but I can, little by little, work on a movement from say, a Sonata by Mozart. Although it won't be note perfect, I can make progress and take satisfaction in recreating a decent interpretation of what Mozart had communicated by the notes, phrasings, and tempo markings he heard in his head when composing the music in the mid to late 18th century.

Three character traits are needed to learn a musical score; a character that is obedient, docile and resolute. By obedient, I mean the character of the musician needs to be one that delights in the actual notes the composer had written so as to be true to the original intention of the musical mind that created the composition. The musician's character also needs to be docile, that is it needs to be willing to rework a fingering and phrasing in order to come under the authority of the composer and thereby re-present what he intended. Thirdly the musician's character needs to be resolute to become ever more proficient at playing the music well. This is where practise and perseverance are so important, because without a resolute character, what is written on the page will never come to be communicated by me sitting at my piano. Without resolve the beautiful instrument (I am fortunate to own a Steinway – the Lexus of pianos) that has been entrusted to me would just sit there and never be played.

I have taken time at the beginning of this homily to talk about musicianship because I think interpreting a musical score is a lot like being a Christian. Jesus said that his disciples are to be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect". This does not mean to be perfectionistic but rather to attain to the goal for which we were created, which is to reflect as fully as possible in this life what it means to be made in the image of God. This is where the comparison with music comes into play. More often than not, I do not fully reproduce the intention Mozart had in mind when he wrote his Sonata in F Major. I could listen to a pianist on Spotify who plays it way better than I ever will and be either discouraged and give up, or say, I am going to keep exercising the resolve to be obedient and docile in my practise to play as well as I can.

Within the life of the Church we look to the saints as those who lived their lives in such a way as to increasingly embody the character of what it means to be made in the image of God. They are like the concert pianists. This isn't to discourage us from living the Christian life. Rather it is to inspire us to carry on, and however imperfectly, to be people who want to cultivate obedient, docile and resolute characters as we grow in holiness.

Today the Church doesn't have us just think of holy individuals; today we think about the Holy Family. Now will our families be as holy as Joseph, Mary and Jesus? No, they won't. - Just as I will never play the piano like a great artist – but let us not be discouraged that we can't attain to the holiness of that blessed trio. Rather let their examples inspire us to develop our familial character and individual characters so they are maturing in an obedient orientation toward the good, docile in wanting to follow every indication of God's will and resolute in being prompt to adhere to the will of God, even though difficulties and obstacles arise that require sacrifice.

We read of the Holy Family's obedient orientation toward the good repeatedly in the Lucan Gospel appointed for today. Listen again to these clauses taken from verse 22-25 of the passage:

according to the law of Moses,²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord

Here is clearly expressed the obedience of the Holy Family. Their lives were orientated toward the good as laid out in God's written word. They come to the Temple for the Presentation of Jesus when he is 40 Days old. We see again when Jesus is 12 years old the Holy Family adhering to the Law of God as they attend the Passover Celebrations. You will remember that upon their return home to Nazareth, they realize Jesus is missing and on the third day find him in the Jerusalem Temple. Upon questioning him about his absence the pre-teen answers:

“How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?”

We hear expressed Jesus' obedient orientation toward the good. He had been taught by the example of Mary and Joseph to always will and do the good. The greatest good was to know and do the will of God, a virtue Joseph and Mary modeled and one expressed by Jesus' explanation here.

Added to the virtue of an obedient orientation, we see in the Holy family docility of will that follows every indication of God's will. This is expressed in the prophetic words Simeon speaks:

“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Although the fulfillment of these words would be 30 years in the future, each day Jesus learned the way of docility in that Nazareth home. This we read at the end of today's Gospel:

And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

True strength is directly proportional to the character trait of docility. For docility can also be called 'the Fear of the Lord', which is an attentiveness to living each day in the presence of

God. What is the fruit of docility? It is wisdom. To be wise is to live circumspectly and carefully – a quality always at play in the Holy Family.

It was because he knew how to be docile in relating to Mary and Joseph that he could then be docile before the Father when in the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed: “Not my will but yours be done Father”. Then the full weight of Simeon’s words would be experienced by our Saviour and our Lady.

We also see in Mary and Joseph a character that is resolute. We read:

And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth.

Having just heard words from Simeon and Anna that spoke of our Lord’s unique vocation we are told the Holy Family returns home. So the fact that he is the Messiah, the fact that he is the long-awaited Savior, doesn't cause them to think, “well we have to do something different.” No, their vocation is to family life. So they return to their homes and they begin to live out an ordinary but holy family life as they await the fulfillment of the words of Simeon and the words of Anna, as the child grows and becomes strong and filled with wisdom.

It is in the events of our daily lives where we most need the resolve to persevere in living a life characteristic of those who have been chosen by God. It is in the experiences of sick children, the routine of meals, extra-curricular activities, school, mortgage payments, accepting the foibles of one’s spouse and willingly admitting our own, that we learn the kind of holy resolution characteristic of those who desire to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

May we be resolved in 2018 to cultivate holy families where we look to Mary, Joseph and Jesus not only as our model, but as those who can encourage us to obediently love the good and the docility to grow in wisdom.

Such character traits not only allow for the harmonies of Mozart to emanate from my piano, these same traits enable families to live together harmoniously and graciously.

Mary, Joseph and Mary, pray for our families, that they will become ever more holy throughout the coming year.