

Our Lord chose to be conceived outside the course of nature: by a virgin, by means of a singular miracle. But he chose to be born into a context that was very much within the course of nature: he was born into a human family, comprised of both a mother and a father. Thus he also arranged that his virgin mother should have a spouse, Joseph, who became his foster-father. In this way Jesus reaffirmed God's plan for family life, upholding what was established in the beginning: the family, in its most basic form, consists of a father, a mother, and children.

Jesus upheld this same vision of family life later, as an adult. Some Pharisees came forward to test him, asking if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason; after all, Moses had allowed divorce.¹ But the Lord responded, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?... What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder."² This was not the reply that they expected; it was not the teaching they wanted.

The Church has reasserted this teaching down through the centuries, to the present day, even in spite of widespread rejection (as is happening now), or great opposition and political pressure (as happened, for example, at the time of King Henry VIII of England). It's a teaching that has been unwanted, at least by some, in every age. It has also been challenging to live out in every age, which is part of the reason why it is so often rejected. We human beings tend to default to what is easiest. But living as a family – for as wonderful as it can be – is certainly not easy.

Families that live according to God's plan are capable of great goodness. The Church teaches that the family is the fundamental "cell", the fundamental "unit" of society.³ For that reason, there's a spiritual battle, because we have an enemy of goodness, one who does not want us to be good or help each other to be good; one who does not want our society to be built up. Look at the world today and see if that is not the case! In every family there is the cross. We often forget about this spiritual element when confronting our family troubles.

But if there's trouble in our families, we should take heart, for Christ's own family life was far from the idyllic image that is so often portrayed. First Joseph experienced the temptation to divorce;⁴ then there was no room for them in the inn and Mary had to give birth in a cold stable;⁵ then there was the prophecy of Simeon that we heard in the gospel, about the sword of sorrow that would pierce Mary's heart;⁶ then Joseph and Mary had to take their newborn and flee to Egypt, to escape Herod's sword.⁷ Later, they would face great pain when they thought that they had lost Jesus during their pilgrimage to Jerusalem.⁸ Later still, Joseph would die, leaving Mary a widow. Finally, she would have to stand by the cross, with all its unspeakable agony.

In spite of the at-times terrible troubles and agonies, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were faithful to God's plan along the entire way. They persevered in their state in life during dark moments, and they rejoiced during the times of joy and peace. When we look at family life in our nation today, we see that it is often very far from this ideal. But the only way that we will ever

¹ Matthew 19:3.

² Matthew 19:4-6.

³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2207.

⁴ Matthew 1:19.

⁵ Luke 2:7.

⁶ Luke 2:35.

⁷ Matthew 2:14.

⁸ Luke 2:41-51.

get back on the right track is if each one of us decides that in our family we will take the Holy Family as our model. Remember the words of Joshua in the Old Testament: “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”.⁹ Let’s not wait for there to be some great cultural paradigm shift; let’s rather start living what we’re called to live – today.

Perhaps in your family things have gone terribly wrong. We should never despair or give up! We are capable of making very big messes; we can also be the victims of very big messes; in any case, God always has a way forward. I stand ready to assist any family that is in need of support and guidance. The Church is an expert in humanity and has a very rich teaching on family life, rooted in the teaching of the Lord himself. Holy Mother Church always has a remedy! With the Holy Family as our model and goal, let us go forward together. The family is capable of great goodness in our world today: may the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph help us to live this out.

⁹ Joshua 24:15.