

I know several families who repeat the same ritual the day after Christmas. Everyone sleeps in as late as they want. They stay in their pajamas all day. Doing housework is off limits. If there's wrapping paper and boxes lying around the house they leave it and only pick it up the next day. No one cooks. Christmas leftovers are the order of the day. The day is spent watching movies or football.

What a glorious way to celebrate the days of the Christmas Season and to be together as a family.

With Christmas day in our rearview mirror, it isn't uncommon for folks who normally go to daily Mass to skip it that day and stay at home with their families. If you don't attend Mass on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December you miss the commemoration of St. Stephen, the first martyr of the newly formed Catholic Church. To most, it seems odd that the Catholic Church would position the martyrdom of St. Stephen on the day after we celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. But the juxtaposition of these two days is intentional. On December 25<sup>th</sup>, we are reminded that God became like one of us and was born among us. On the following day, we are reminded that Jesus came to this world to give up his life for us so that our sins would be forgiven and in order for us to be given a share in his everlasting life. Life with Christ only happens when we die to self (figuratively for most of us, and in the case of martyrs, literally) and are baptized (or literally "immersed") into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That's a complex way of saying that we are to be imitators of

Christ in all things. Living like Christ immerses us into his Kingdom and his everlasting life.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of our Messiah and Savior. Who isn't moved by the innocence, goodness, and the beauty of a newborn? Newborn babies reduce us to tears and inspire us to act like little children ourselves. For these reasons, even pseudo-believers and those whose belief in the Divine is shaky, find it easy to participate in Christmas remembrances. But the commemoration of the martyrdom of St. Stephen reminds us that following Christ and identifying with the Christian faithful is serious stuff indeed. Being a Christian isn't for the faint of heart. It is not something to enter into lightly. It isn't easy. It demands, not just half of our mind or heart, but our entire being. As Christ offered his life on the cross for our sake, we are commanded to do the same. And it is in giving up our lives in, with, and through Christ that we are grafted to him for all eternity.

As you've no doubt discerned from the prayers and readings today, the theme for this Sunday is family – and in particular, the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. These readings and prayers don't give an idealized image of family life nor do they indicate that the life of the Holy Family was easy. Instead, the image of family presented to us reminds us that living as a family is tough stuff, indeed. It wasn't easy for the Holy Family. It isn't easy for us. But living as the family God intends us to be is possible only when we live like Christ, when we sacrifice for others like Christ, when we tolerate and even forgive one another like Christ.

The image of the Holy Family given to us in today's gospel passage reminds us of just how challenging things were for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Joseph has yet another dream where an angel appears to him. He is informed that the King of their country wants to kill their newborn baby because he perceives him to be a threat to his ability to rule over his subjects. So Joseph, Mary, and their newborn child flee to Egypt. They flee to a country that had been hostile to the Chosen People for centuries. Despite any apprehensions he may have had and the long memory of ill-treatment by the Egyptians toward the Chosen People, Joseph immediately brings the Holy Family to that land. More than likely, the Holy Family was not given a warm reception in Egypt. But they made do. They carried on in faith. A few years later King Herod dies, and Joseph has another dream. Once again, an angel appears to him telling him he can return to his native land. But he cannot stay in or near Jerusalem because the same threat to them is present in the person of Herod's son who is now the ruler of Israel. So they head to the northern part of the Kingdom and settle in Nazareth. Presumably, they live there in relative peace until Jesus starts his public ministry some decades later.

Today's first reading from the Book of Sirach (which was written about 200 years before the birth of Christ) also describes the difficulty of family life. It mentions the tension which often exists between parents and children. It refers to the struggle for dominance, obedience, and authority among all members in a family. It even acknowledges how parents and children might experience and deal with issues like dementia and cognitive decline among our elderly. While written centuries ago, this

reading seems to touch on family issues and struggles which affect us to this very day.

With these issues common among all families and even in the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, how are we to cope and live out our familial responsibilities? The passage we hear in our second reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians serves as an excellent roadmap.

Notice in the scriptural depictions of the hardships which the Holy Family faced, none of them cried out, "why me, Lord?" Rather, they simply trusted God and did his will (even when awful things were happening to them and all around them). We are blessed as individuals and as families when we do the same.

St. Paul is specific as to how we should act. After we are baptized with water, a white garment is placed over us. St. Paul reminds us that the white garment is a sign that we have put on Christ. As precious as that garment might be to us and as grateful for the new life it represents, St. Paul says it is more important to put on *these* things: heartfelt compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience. We must bear with one another (even when or especially when folks irritate us). We are to forgive each other, since the Lord forgives us completely. And we are to love one another, for love is what binds us together and what makes us perfect (Col. 3: 12-21).

If you or members of your family seem to be at odds with each other or someone in your home is always getting on your last nerve, then reflect on how *you* can better embrace and live out those qualities which St. Paul sets before us. Again, the

scriptures don't ever remark that the Holy Family cried out, "why me?" Joseph didn't blame Mary for their predicament. Mary and Joseph didn't blame the child Jesus for all the trouble and potential threats they faced because of him. Rather, in all those difficulties, they saw that God the Father was present with them. And they continued to live out those qualities of compassion, kindness, mercy, and love in all things and at all times. That's what made Jesus, Mary, and Joseph a **Holy** Family. That is what makes us and keeps us holy as well.

Amen? Amen!