

An elderly man in Oklahoma calls his son in New York and says, "I hate to ruin your day son, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are getting a divorce; 45 years of marriage... and that much misery is enough!" "Dad, what are you talking about?" the son yells. "We can't stand the sight of each other any longer," the old dad explained. "We're sick of each other, and I'm sick of talking about this, so you call your sister in Hong Kong and tell her!". Frantic, the son calls his sister, who explodes on the phone. "Like heck they're getting divorced," she shouts, "I'll take care of this." She calls her elderly father immediately, and screams at him, "You are not getting divorced. Don't do a single thing until I get there. I'm calling my brother back, and we'll both be there tomorrow. Until then, don't do a thing, you hear me?" she yelled as she hung up the phone. The old man hangs up his phone and turns to his wife. "Okay", he says, "it's all set. They're both coming for Christmas and paying their own air-fare."

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy FAMILY.

During this time of year, we tend to sentimentalize the Holy Family – they become figures of plaster and paper, not flesh and blood. But we forget: they weren't that different from us. They were holy, yes. But they were also human.

The story of the Holy Family is the story of life not always turning out the way you expected. It's the story of a teenage mother, conceiving a child before she was married.

It's the story of an anxious father, confronting scandal, planning on divorce.

It's the story of a family forced to become refugees, living as immigrants in the land that once held their ancestors as slaves.

As we heard in today's gospel, it's the story of a missing child, and days of anxious searching by his parents.

But there is even more.

A couple days after Christmas, we mark the feast of the Holy Innocents, the children slaughtered by Herod. The joy of Christ's birth is suddenly tempered by tragic reminders of what the Incarnation cost.

This family was holy. But it was also human. We need these reminders. Especially now.

I would like to draw our attention to the final words of the Gospel. "Jesus returned to his hometown with his parents and he was obedient to them. He grew in wisdom and stature." One of the authors, Bruce G. Epperly relates stature with largeness of heart, which is at the heart of a growing and healthy faith. According to him, "Persons of stature have large images of God and God's presence in our lives, and see God's work as cosmic rather than simply focused on the earth and human beings. Persons of stature in religion, politics, and business, look beyond their own interests and the even the interests of their country to the good of the whole. What happens to others is almost as important as what happens to them!"

The entire Holy Family – Joseph, Mary and Jesus grew together in wisdom and stature. They saw themselves as walking and moving on God's landscape, where one is always at the beck and call of His plan – always willing to be surprised by God. They grew in stature- with the largeness of heart, looking beyond their own interests and even the interests of Bethlehem or Nazareth. Their calling as a Family had impact on the whole universe and every one and everything that lived on it.

The question to families today is: Do you as a family, parents and children grow together in wisdom and stature, with the largeness of heart? Do you see yourselves as walking and moving on God's landscape, where you are always at the beck and call of God's pan?

I am not sure if you have heard this story. One of the boys called his father on the phone and said, "Dad, John (his brother) and Cathy were getting a divorce. Divorce, yelled the Father. Why? I believe they are not happy, said his son. "Happy? What has that to do with marriage? Do you think your mom and I are married because we are happy?"

This takes us to a real question today facing families is: Are you called to be happy or are you called to be holy?

God's primary goal for marriage is holiness. That's why we call it Holy Matrimony or Sacred Matrimony.

A married person who considers holiness and Christlikeness as the ultimate objective of marriage approaches the relationship with a completely different mindset than one who believes marriage is all about personal happiness. When holiness is the goal, the person sees trials as opportunity for growth instead of hindrances to their own happiness or worse yet a sign that their marriage isn't working.

The woman's husband had been slipping in and out of a coma for several months, yet she had stayed by his bedside every single day. One day, when he came to, he motioned for her to come nearer. As she sat by him, he whispered, eyes full of tears, "You know what? You have been with me all through the bad times. When I got fired, you were there to support me. When my business failed, you were there. When I got shot, you were by my side. When we lost the house, you stayed right here. When my health started failing, you were still by my sideYou know what?" "What dear?" She gently asked, smiling as her heart began to fill with warmth. "I think you're bad luck."

The Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is called HOLY FAMILY. They continued to grow in stature- the full realization of the Imago Dei, the Image of God.

The trouble—even for contemporary Christians—is that we often approach marital and family issues in an individualistic way. In the cornucopia of Christian marriage self-help books, the guiding questions seem to be along the lines of "What can I get out of this?" or "How can I cope in this marriage?" rather than "What are we forging together?" or "How can our marriage make us each more like Christ?" It's not that God doesn't want our marriages to bring us deep satisfaction and happiness, it's just that marriage is bursting with opportunities for deeper spiritual growth—opportunities we may be missing if we're not asking all the right questions.