

Do you remember what your life was like when you were 12 years old? I don't really remember much about it. I was in 6th and 7th grade. I remember my best friend at that time and the fun we had at sleepovers and making home videos on our families' camcorders. This was the time when we had our first girlfriends, not because we liked the girls for their own sakes, but because it was the cool thing to do. Indeed, it was the beginning of becoming conscious of the standards other people set for us – that society sets for us – and trying our best to live them out. I remember that for my friend's 13th birthday, he got a pager from another friend. What was a 13 year old going to do with a pager? Nothing, right? But it was an important status symbol.

And that's how we lived our young lives, thinking about things that would make us popular, idolizing pop stars and people with glamorous lives. I remember around the same time growing up with a family who threw an elaborate party for their teenager's birthday. I remember going home that night and feeling an intense desire to be part of their family. Of course, this was simply the naivety of a teenager. But, similar desires were with me as I grew older. When I was studying theatre in college, I keenly remember a period, albeit very short, when I felt that I needed to be famous for my life to have meaning.

And I stress that this was a short period in life, because it didn't take long for the vanities of that lifestyle to catch up with me. At the age of 24 I was tired. Tired of chasing something that wasn't giving me fulfillment or peace, because this wasn't what I was made for. I wasn't made to strive after fame. I wasn't made to accumulate possessions. I was made for one thing, and one thing only: God.

By the grace of God, I had parents who had exposed me to Him from an early age. I didn't know much about Him, but I knew He existed and that He was greater than all the passing pleasures of life. And thanks be to God, He put a couple of good priests into my life to reveal more to me the depth of His being: that He was kind and merciful; that He was loving, and that He had a plan prepared for me since before I was born, a plan

that would satisfy the restlessness caused by trying to fill a God-shaped space in my soul with things that could never fill it.

And so, I began to discern this plan. Priesthood. Could it really be for me? Could I make such a radical shift from seeking to be famous, to being a servant? I'll never forget being on a discernment retreat with the Dominican friars and going to St. Dominic's Church in San Francisco. As I sat in a pew in the immense nave bathed in colored light from the stained glass windows, I began to weep: "what do you want from me?" That was one moment in prayer among many similar ones in which I heard that if my life was going to make any sense at all, I needed to obey God and His plan for me. And if I was going to do this, I was going to need help.

My 5 siblings were supportive from the very beginning of my discernment. My parish community was incredibly encouraging as well. My parents...they were hesitant. Needless to say, there were a lot of questions. "Where was this path going to lead?" Would they see their son again? I'll never forget the day we drove to the seminary together to move in. I'll say it was reluctantly joyful. Maybe this wasn't the path they had envisioned, but it was the path God was leading their son on. And perhaps, it would have been appropriate to have said something to them like, "why are you worried, don't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" As Jesus says to Mary and Joseph today.

I think we hear the words "Holy Family" and we think of an impossible standard. Two saints, one of which is without sin, and God. It makes for a nice painting, the three of them next to each other like a posed portrait – there is one at my parents' house. And yet, this is not what it means for them to be the holy family. I shared a piece of my vocation story with you, because it represents what makes a family holy. Not that the members of the family never sin, but that God and His will are at the center of their existence, and that the members of the family make worshipping God and praying together a priority in order for them to discover God's plan for each of them, the plan – the vocation - that will give their life meaning and peace.

This is what Mary and Joseph did with Jesus. They prayed with Him, they taught him about God, and they brought Him into God's presence in the Temple, because they knew that doing God's will was the only way for any member of their faith-family to be truly happy. 12 years earlier they had been in similar circumstances, when the Angel Gabriel appeared to both Mary and Joseph and said, "God has a plan for you. It won't be easy, but you can do it if you trust Him. Sure, you can go do something else that might give you some pleasure, but it won't give you peace like God can give to you."

And so, today, Mary and Joseph see their son beginning to have a similar experience. The Father is calling Jesus closer to Himself in order to reveal to Him his vocation and mission. And in the process, they see that Jesus is responding. He knows what He must do. He must be in the Father's house – He must do the Father's will. And what is this? To love humanity out of its fallen state of sin.

And how does he do this? The "must" of Jesus statement to his mother coincides with something He will tell his disciples later. When Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus assures them that "The Son of Man *must* suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised." He willingly chooses to suffer for us because He loves us, which is why He would say to His disciples on the night before he was to die, "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"

It's no wonder Mary and Joseph did not understand the full weight of Jesus' statement to them. And yet, they continued to walk with their Son, allowing God to deepen their faith and understanding. And Mary would need it too, as she walked with her son to the cross, and stood by him in his moment of greatest need. Which is where we see the fullness of what it means for this family to be called "holy."

You know, I never realized this until writing this homily, but above the icon of the holy family in the hallway of my parents' house is a crucifix. I think the two images cannot be separated, for Joseph and Mary taught Jesus perseverance in prayer and patience during trial. They taught Him how to give himself away as a gift to God for

others, just as they had done years earlier, and in doing so, they taught Him how to fulfill his mission of love.

That's why we celebrate this family today because we're all called to be holy like them, which doesn't mean we must be sinless, but that we embrace the mission and vocation to love God, to listen to Him, and to follow him, so as to love one another and help each other to carry our crosses. As St. Paul tells us today, to be holy, we must "*Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all of these, St. Paul says, "put on love, that is, the bond of perfection."*

You want to find meaning in life? You want to find fulfillment? We must learn to love, which is a difficult and costly mission. But we cannot be holy without love. We cannot create holy families without loving God and each other. And this begins here, in this place, where we let God love us first. As St. Paul says, "*let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*" You've heard the saying, "the family that prays together, stays together."

But maybe you're thinking, "Fr. Mario, you don't know what it's like. My family isn't holy; my family doesn't love." I know we all have troubled families. I know we all have family members who have strayed away or who seek to fill their lives with things that will never satisfy them – possessions and popularity. Sometimes that family member is our self. I would know that; I was that guy. But Jesus, Mary and Joseph teach us that life is a journey, that loving is a vocation, and that nothing is impossible for God if we seek to do his will, and to be in his house. If we present our troubled families to him in prayer, he will make us grow too, in wisdom, age and favor before him. And if the troubled times persist, even unto the cross, He will help us all the more with the grace we need to carry out that mission and vocation of love – the same mission and vocation as the Holy Family of Nazareth.