

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph
December 27, 2015

Devotion to the Holy Family has a relatively brief history in Catholicism. It first appeared significantly in 17th-century France and was brought to the New World by Jesuit missionaries and French settlers and governors. In those early years, one would find two typical depictions of the Holy Family: one featuring St. Anne, St. Mary and the child Jesus, the other picturing Joseph, Mary and Jesus.

The devotion received official status in 1921 when, under Pope Benedict XV, the feast was added to the general calendar of the Roman rite. The Church saw the devotion as a way to counter the breakdown of the family being experienced in Western society.

The feast of the Holy Family invites us to imagine certain realities of Jesus' early life that our Gospels barely hint at except for incidents that would reflect back on his adult ministry.

If we consider what has been called the "hidden life" of Jesus' youth, it's natural to imagine that His parents were His first instructors in the faith.

As He heard the stories of the heroes of His faith tradition, He saw *their* reflection in His own family experience. Abraham and Sarah were surely the models for His relatives Elizabeth and Zechariah. The women of the Hebrew tradition, Judith, Esther, Miriam, Hannah and others, were the predecessors of His own brave and blessed mother. How could the young Jesus miss the parallel between the great Joseph son of Jacob and the dreams of His own beloved stepfather?

As Mary and Joseph shared the stories of their tradition with Him, they also helped shape His religious imagination. Maybe we can even hear echoes of their teaching in His parables.

Now in today's Gospel, Jesus has made the annual journey to Jerusalem to attend Passover ceremonies with His parents. Though He was only 12 years old, Jesus seemed ready to make the transition between childhood and adult faith.

By demonstrating His great understanding of the Law and the Prophets in the temple, He showed he was ready to take on greater responsibility. He knew His heavenly Father and was willing to follow. So each of today's readings teach us what is required for that kind of adult faith.

The first reading from the Book of Sirach gives us an in-depth look at honoring our parents, while the reading from Colossians gives an overview of all we are to become. First we learn that paying consistent heed to the fourth commandment throughout our lives will reap untold benefits in our spiritual maturity.

The path to an adult understanding of any commandment, though, isn't an easy one; we need to walk through good times as well as bad, always deepening our trust in God. As we age, our adult faith is tested. If we choose to deepen our faith, we become the person described in Colossians – someone clothed in compassion and love and peace.

But what does adult faith really look like? The Gospel reading teaches us that adult faith can be both unexpected and daring.

We also learn from the example of Mary that we need to ponder all the events of our lives in order to understand the ways of God.

In staying behind in the temple with teachers and elders, Jesus stepped outside *accepted* practice. He should have been following his parents' home, but He found a higher calling.

We'll never know for sure in this life, of course, but maybe somewhere in His journey toward Passover with His earthly parents He began to understand that he is the beloved Son of

God. He stayed in the temple to further explore this new understanding, leaving His parents first to worry and finally to reflect on His unexpected actions.

As adolescents and young adults, each of us experienced growing pains as we defined who we were separate from our parents. This psychological definition of ourselves usually has a beginning and an end. Spiritual identity and maturity, however, aren't so clear-cut. Each day our actions either define us as spiritual adults or spiritual children.

Are we living the commandments in depth or do we adhere to a superficial understanding and bail out when the going gets tough?

Do we listen to the voice of God within us? Are we brave enough to step outside of what the world calls normal when required?

The courage to listen and respond to God's word is greatly needed in our world today. When events in our lives startle and surprise us, do we have the courage to ponder them as Mary did?

It's so tempting to react rather than to respond. Today is a day to renew our confirmation promises, to expand our understanding of our spiritual lives and embrace all of our adult spiritual responsibilities. It's a tall order, but with the help of God we will succeed.