

## The Feast of the Holy Family

It is the Feast of the Holy Family. Our first reading from the Book of Sirach is both wise and consoling in its admonitions. It teaches us to love and honor our parents even when they are old and their minds fail them. Recently in the paper there was an article in the paper about the elderly in Japan. Many of them still live independently in huge apartment blocks, and sometimes some of them die there and are not found until days later. We understand that, I think. Neither they nor we now live in a society made up of little villages in which people are born and die. No, we live in a mobile society. Children grow up and move away. Parents sometimes follow them, moving with them or near them. But other parents stay where they are and maintain contact by visits or phone calls or whatever other means now available to them. So the bonds are kept.

Of course the bonds are kept, you might be saying to yourselves. But we also recognize the fact that that is not always the case. That was the point of the article in the paper about the elderly in Japan dying alone and not found for days. Their bonds with their children had become tenuous. There was little or no contact. That is sad, to be sure. And of course for those without children that sad situation

is almost a given. For when we are old, our friends are mostly gone. If there are no children, there may be no one left to call or visit.

Many of us have already experienced the time in our lives when our parents suffered from dementia and could no longer be left alone in their homes. So the options were either full-time help at their homes or a nursing home. The first option was often not a real option, at least for a long period of time, because of the expense involved, and the second option was sometimes fraught with guilt because of earlier made promises to them that we would never put them in a nursing home. Maybe the situation is changing today because full-time help at home is becoming more possible through government programs. However, even given this option, it is often a toss-up as to which place is better for them: home with help or a nursing home. And then our faith has to kick in. Whether they are at home or in a nursing home, we must continue to care for them, for that is what love is, and love is the overall commandment.

But how that love can express itself when there is a great distance between parents and children is a difficult problem. It will have to be by frequent calls to inquire about them and as frequent visits as

finances allow. But when loved ones in a nursing home suffer from dementia, it is possible to say that visits can be less often or even eliminated, because they do not remember these visits. What do we use as counsel in that situation? A sentence we read just now from Sirach may help: “Even if their minds fail, be considerate of them; revile them not all the days of their lives; kindness to a parent will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins—a house raised in justice to you. In other words, visits to them are a kind of penance removing our own sins.

There is a world of difference between our relationships with our elderly and with our children. A baby, a child brings forth love in us. It is easy—at least for 99% of us—to love children. Children are life. Children are our future. Grandparents tell us constantly there is nothing like being a grandparent. And we all know the joy of a couple with their baby. That is why it is shocking to read the Scriptures and hear about the hearts of fathers being turned towards their children. In Luke the angel Gabriel says to Zachariah that his son will come in the power of Elijah “to turn the hearts of fathers toward their children.” Luke is here building on the OT Book of Malachi which talked about Elijah the prophet returning and turning the hearts of fathers to their children. Were they turned away from them before then, as this quote seems to imply? We

know that can happen between parents and adult children. But can it happen between parents and their young children? Unfortunately it can and does happen in our culture. Men father children without having a permanent commitment to the mothers of these children and then feel little or no obligation to care for them. There we are confronted with the breakdown of what we celebrate today, the human family.

On this feast of the Holy Family, let us pray for families and for our care of our old and our young. Our second reading for today from Paul's Letter to the Colossians 3:12-18 tells us how we are to act so that our families will survive and prosper. Let me read it to you once again.

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 these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. 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. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.