

Since tomorrow is New Year's Day, I got to thinking about New Year resolutions; which reminded me of the son who called his parents to wish them a happy New Year. The dad answered the phone and the son asked, "Well dad, what is your New Year resolution?" The dad replied, "To make your mother as happy as I can all year long." When his mom got on the phone, the son asked her the same question. She replied, "To make sure your dad keeps his New Year resolution."

Most of us make New Year resolutions. We resolve to lose weight, or work out, or quit smoking. The list goes on and on. Sometimes, we're able to keep them and sometimes they don't last very long. Either way, we acknowledge changes we want to make. The calendar flipping to a new year provides us with a great opportunity to reflect on what is truly important in our lives.

I think that's why the Church made today the Feast of the Holy Family. For the past few weeks, we've intensely focused on the coming of Jesus Christ. Today, the Church, in her wisdom, invites us to take a step back and look at a larger picture - the Holy Family. This feast comes on the first Sunday following Christmas, and at a time when I think most of us – after the parties and cooking and visiting and obligations and expectations and disappointments – have started to have about as much "family" as we can take. Right about now, a lot of mothers and fathers are looking forward to their kids going back to school. But then comes this feast to remind us of what it means to be a holy family.

It's easy to think that our families could never compare with the holiness of the Holy Family. There's a temptation to idealize them – to turn them into cardboard cutouts or figurines like we have in our Nativity scene out in the narthex. It's true this family was comprised of extraordinary members. But as much as this family was holy, it was also human. One of the things that made them so remarkable is that they were so unremarkable. They weren't rich or

influential. Their last names weren't Gates or Rockefeller or Trump. They were just Jesus, Mary and Joseph: the carpenter's family; from a place called Nazareth.

This is a family that we can and should relate to. When we look beneath the serenity of the Nativity scene, we see tensions, discomfort, and difficulties. They had to live in the same world we do – with deadlines to meet, bills to pay, and setbacks to overcome. More than a few times, their patience and their love were tested.

This was a family, after all, in which the father planned to divorce the mother after finding out she was pregnant. And think about how difficult it must have been for Mary to give birth in an animal shelter because Bethlehem was so crowded. Think about the smells, the noises, the dirt, the scratchy straw. Think about how hopeless Joseph must have felt when he failed to secure them a room in the inn. Then the family had to flee to Egypt because Herod wanted to kill Jesus.

This was also a family in which the young son, when he was twelve years old during a trip to the big city, disappeared for three days without telling anyone. Since we don't hear about Joseph after this, we must presume that he died before Jesus' public ministry began. The Holy Family experienced the great pain of the loss of a parent. And Jesus' public ministry must have taken its toll on Mary as hostility grew between Jesus and the Jewish authorities with the culmination being the saddest moment of all when Mary watched her son tortured and die on a cross.

What kept the Holy Family together and sane throughout all these trials and tribulations was love for each other and God. Through it all, this was a family that loved, and prayed, and

trusted in God. At one time or another, every one of them – Mary, Joseph, and Jesus – actively surrendered themselves to the will of God. They trusted in God’s plan for their lives.

We can learn from today’s second reading from Saint Paul’s letter to the Colossians about how to form a healthy and holy Christian family – a family like the one from Nazareth. Put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness. And most importantly love. It’s all that simple – and all that difficult. Notice that Paul doesn’t say that a holy family looks peaceful all the time or is perfect in every way. Families without frustrations do not exist. Holy families are families that despite the frustrations choose to love and forgive one another, over and over and over again.

I’m sure the Holy Family had moments when living those virtues seemed hard, or even impossible. But they placed their trust in God. We could do nothing better than to follow that model. When we experience the difficulties of life with trust that God is guiding us and protecting us, we are holy in the same way that Mary and Joseph were holy – by imitating the same compassion, commitment, courage, sacrifice, and joy that Mary and Joseph experienced. The essence of what we see in the lives of the Holy Family is a relationship of love – loving God and loving each other. And isn’t that what we’re all called to do? When we pray together as a family, when we forgive or seek forgiveness, when we treat others with compassion, or when we help people in need, we are holy because we are living lives of love.

And like Mary and Joseph, we can have Jesus as a part of our families. All we have to do is invite Him in – even into the ordinary and mundane moments of our lives. In Christ, we have all become members of a Holy Family. The Son of God, given in care of Mary and Joseph, became part of the human family. That makes us all a holy family, sealed in blood and ratified by

God's eternal promise of salvation. God's presence sanctifies the human family, even in its struggles.

Having God in our lives doesn't necessarily make life easier. It's not going to magically make the difficulties go away. It's not always going to be smooth sailing. We all have crosses to carry and sometimes they are quite heavy. With Jesus, however, life can be more joyful despite the hardships, because we know in our hearts our journey doesn't end with the cross. Because of Jesus, our journey leads us to our heavenly home.

Mary and Joseph are not cardboard cutouts or images from last week's Christmas cards. They're an enduring sign of love and trust in God's plan for their lives. The Holy Family portrays not the perfect family but God's perfect promise – the promise that death has been defeated.

Brothers and sisters, ultimately in life, our vocation, as Christians, is to be holy. When we're choosing our New Year resolution for 2018, we don't have to worry about resolving to be perfect. Let's resolve to be holier. Let's try to love each other and God a little more each day.