

**The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph**  
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In the Nicene Creed, which we recite together almost every Sunday, we express our faith in many things-- the oneness of God, the divinity of Christ, his saving death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit, final judgment, eternal life. We also affirm the Church, that it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Of these four “marks of the Church”, the one that probably causes the most question is that the Church is holy. It's so easy to find flaws, even grievous sin, in the Church. Is it really holy?

But when we say the Church is holy, we don't mean that every member of the Church is a living perfected saint. We mean that the Holy Spirit is living in the Church, in its members, and is working to make them holy in various ways-- in the truth that is taught, the Sacraments that are celebrated, the example we see and the work that we share.

Today we call the family holy, and we may have the same reaction as when we call the Church holy. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were a holy family, certainly, but not my family. I know them all too well! But the family is holy in the same sense that the Church is holy. Not because every member is perfectly sinless, but because the Holy Spirit is working through the family for the sanctification of its members. But let's not equate holiness with perfection.

We may think of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as having been perfect in every way. After all, Jesus was the Son of God incarnate. Mary was sinless from her conception. Joseph was a righteous man who was ready to make any sacrifice to support and protect his wife and her child. Safe to say that they were sinless in so far as they would never have knowingly and intentionally violated God's holy will. But still that leaves a lot of room for the kind of human limitations that go with being human, setting up opportunity for all kind of foibles and folly.

Joseph must have been keenly disappointed when he learned that his betrothed wife was with child, and not by him. His first reaction was to assume Mary had sinned, and to divorce her. He had to be told by an angel otherwise, just as he had to be told that Herod posed a danger, and when it was safe to return home from Egypt. This doesn't mean that Joseph was less than intelligent, just that he had to stumble around in a fair degree of ignorance, as we all do.

Mary never intentionally committed a sin, but she came close to presuming on her motherly influence at Cana, when she pointed out to Jesus the depletion of the wine.

How ordinary their lives were is evident in today's Gospel. It took Mary and Joseph three days to find their twelve-year-old, and the temple was the last place they looked. Of course, we always find what we are looking for in the last place we look, but they obviously checked a lot of other places first, all the kinds of places that a typical twelve-year-old boy might be in a big city. And he heard from his mother just the kind of wounded indignation that we all have heard from our mothers-- "how could you do this to us?" And what Jesus said in reply was dangerously close to the kind of remark that would have landed my twelve-year-old self in hot water. Tone of voice is everything in such situations. I could have said the exact same words as young Jesus said and it would have come out of my mouth sounding quite different.

Were any of these foibles and folly sinful per se? No. It was the members of the Holy Family going through what humans go through in family life; learning patience, respect, consideration.

So, is your family holy? Yes, in the sense that God is using it to make you holy. God has placed really close to you, unavoidably close, people who are the means of your sanctification-- the people who demand your consideration, depend on your generosity, try your patience and need your forgiveness.

But family life isn't all challenge and difficulty. It also gives us a taste of the rewards of holy living-- love, trust, intimacy, joy.

So, enough of this lesson. It's time to give you your homework. Sometime today, spend a little time thinking of each member of your family, and consider how that one is a blessing. Keep in mind that a blessing isn't necessarily something you are enjoying at the moment. A blessing is anything that God is using for your spiritual benefit. So, consider how each one-- your sister or brother, your husband or wife, your son or daughter, your mother or father, grandparent, grandchild-- consider how that person is challenging you to love like you've never loved before, or perhaps how that one is loving you like you don't deserve. Then thank the good Lord for that one who is, in his or her own way, a blessing.