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Holy Family, Year A, Catechist

Submitted by lectionaryadmin on Thu, 07/18/2013 - 20:00

Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for this session read all the readings.

Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14

Psalms 128:1-2, 3, 4-5

Colossians 3:12-21 [or (short form) 3:12-17]

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Was there a particular reading that appealed to you? Was there a word or image that engaged you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need for the session.

The Word in Liturgy

The Feast of the Holy Family is a modern addition to the universal calendar of the Roman Church (since 1921, when it was placed as the First Sunday after Epiphany). Like many feasts added in modern times, its emphasis tends to be more on a doctrinal theme than some specific action of God or event in the life of Christ. Its contemporary character is also shown by the way it seeks to instruct and inspire through an obvious appeal to sentiment and emotion. The relocation of Holy Family Sunday to the Christmas season is an even more recent adjustment to the calendar, stemming from the reform of 1969. Situated so closely to Christmas, today's celebration cannot help but resonate with overtones of the incarnation. By highlighting the family as the context into which Jesus was born, today's liturgy underscores the fact of his full humanity. We proclaim that the Word made flesh sanctifies everything that he has taken upon himself: our full human nature including, today, the reality of family life. The family, made holy by virtue of Jesus' life with Mary and Joseph, becomes a source of holiness for every Christian. The fourth commandment, today's doctrinal focus, is crucial to both Jewish and Christian understandings of family life, and thus is a suitable teaching to reflect upon on this feast.

The Book of Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) is part of the Wisdom literature, written most likely during the second century (circa 180 B.C.) in Jerusalem by Joshua Ben Sira, a member of the scribal class. Today's reading is considered by many scholars to be a commentary on the fourth commandment. The author's concern lies with the quality of relationships that must characterize family life. His suggestion that filial piety "will be credited to you against your sins" (v. 14) should be regarded as a way of offering encouragement to the reader to show reverence and care for one's parents, not as a guarantee of divine forgiveness. However, the comment does support the sense of today's celebration that family life can be a source of holiness when lived within God's commandments.



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Today's Gospel reading belongs to the specialized literary form known as "infancy narrative." The author's concern is not primarily to supply historical details from Jesus' childhood (although it is obviously important to him to establish Nazareth as the place of Jesus' upbringing), but rather it is to proclaim to the reader the theological truth of Jesus' identity as Messiah, Son of God and Savior. Using a technique known as midrash, and surely familiar to his Jewish audience, Matthew skillfully weaves together a series of allusions to people and events from the Hebrew scriptures designed to show that Jesus is the new Moses and the new Israel of God, called out of Egypt. Joseph, an interpreter of dreams—as was Joseph in the book of Genesis—guides his family with divine help through perils to safety. Jesus, in his human destiny, recapitulates the entire history of the chosen people.

The connection of this text with today's feast and with the doctrinal theme chosen for our catechesis must not be overstated. It is clear that Jesus' reverence toward his parents is not the direct point of this passage. But as one fully human like us, Jesus' way to holiness surely would have included observance of this commandment of the Law.

Catholic Doctrine

The Fourth Commandment: Honor Your Father and Mother

The idea of law in the Old Testament derives from the companion notion of divine election. Israel is chosen by God because of divine love. Thus, the commands of God are not meant to be a burden, but a light, a guide. The most commonly used Hebrew term for law is *torah*, which means instruction or guidance. There are many laws given in the Old Testament, but the Decalogue is considered the foundation of all other commandments and instructions.

The evangelists indicate that when Jesus is asked which commandment is the greatest, he responds with the twofold instruction to love God and to love one's neighbor, much as did Rabbi Hillel. (See Mark 12:29-31, and parallel versions in Matthew 22:34-40 and Luke 10:25-28.) While Jesus himself embodies the New Law and the New Covenant, he does not seek to abolish the old. Indeed, Jesus specifically preaches that he has come to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17). His attitude toward the law is thus one of reverence and respect—even if his contemporary critics accused him of not following all its prescriptions. The portrait painted in the New Testament is that Jesus not only fulfills the law but follows it more closely in its intent than those who claimed to follow it and who, in turn, criticized him.

Jesus upheld the responsibility enjoined by the fourth commandment (Mark 7:10-12). This commandment, in its original context, addressed adult Israelites concerning the needs of their aged parents. The aged were not to be judged on the basis of their functionality but on their intrinsic worth as human beings. The fourth commandment not only addresses adult children in their relationship to their aged parents, but also extends to the relationship between young children and their parents, and, by extension, treats a broad range of issues related to the individual's submission to proper authority (CCC 2199).

Catholic teaching on the fourth commandment enumerates the duties of family members. Children are to respect their parents (CCC 2215) and obey them (CCC 2216). Parents are to provide for their children's education (CCC 2221), regarding them as God's children and full human beings (CCC



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2222). Through the grace of marriage, they also bear the responsibility to evangelize them (CCC 2225).

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