

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Holy Family  
December 27, 2020

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Holy Church is our teacher. She gives us St Luke's lovely account of the birth of Christ. St Luke was a physician, but he was also a careful historian, and an artist with words. His description of the Nativity has provided the basis of countless expressions of faith in performing and fine arts, everything from lyric opera to school nativity plays. But then, in the days after Christmas Day we have more things to consider in connection with the birth of Christ.

There is St John's *Prologue*. "The Word was God and the Word was made flesh." This is a different approach to the same Truth. You don't make a stage play or painting out of this material! John's *Prologue* is what we might call a "theological impact statement." And then for the next three days we are given examples of witness to Christ. Those examples put theology into action in a variety of ways. One of them will be the life you and I will emulate. **Witness** is the English word for *martyr*, and we are presented with St Stephen, a martyr in will and deed, St John the evangelist, a martyr in will and not in deed, and the Holy Innocents, martyrs not in will but in deed. These holy days after Christmas Day show what St John's *Prologue* had just told us: the world does not know who Christ is, but anyone who does accept Him, He empowers to become the child of God.

But the teaching Church is not finished! Today, on the Sunday in the Octave of Christmas, we have still more instruction. It is the Solemnity of the Holy Family. The Church reminds us the Saviour was born into a family as a sign the family is the basic unit not just in society but also of Heaven. Love never does exist in a vacuum. *There must be someone to love.* And we cannot imagine Perfect Love, originating and expressed eternally in the Holy Trinity, would come into the created order and remain outside the love of a family.

Any family that contains the Christ Child, His mother, and St Joseph, will certainly deserve the title "The Holy Family." In the lessons given for this day we are instructed this family devoutly observed the religious practices of the Church even when by all standards this family was uniquely exempted. At Candlemas we see the Christ Child being presented *to Himself* and the perfect purity of the Virgin Mary *being purified*. But this family did not insist on exceptions. It observed all the rituals and requirements of faith. The lesson must not be lost on us.

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Fifty years ago, a document of the Second Vatican Council called *Gaudium et Spes*, already saw great dangers assaulting the dignity and integrity of the family. Those dangers were named: the plague of divorce, free love, and contraceptive practices. The Church saw the growing economic, social, and civil climate as severely disruptive of family life. And no one believes things have become better for family life in the past fifty years. Several weeks back, looking for a Christmas card for my wife I picked up one which expressed my thoughts, until it became clear it was for a woman to give to her wife!

The Church defends the family because this unit is our first school of holiness. Almighty God does not bring us to life and place us on a deserted South Seas Island! He places us in a family. This is the first place we have opportunity to put into practice the faith we are learning to profess. Later on we do this in a wider forum. But it all begins in the same way Our Lord chose when the Word was made flesh.

We are not to compare the idyllic scene portrayed on Christmas greeting cards to our own more mundane and anxious family life. The Gospel tells us what the Christmas cards do not: disruptions of family life, birth in emergency and crude situations, efforts to kill the baby, exile in a foreign land, and St Joseph's early death. No family, however holy, is exempt from the ordeals of human life.

When Our Lord grew up many of His teachings were put in the form of parables on family life. God was making known to us the mysteries of His love, not just in parables we can grasp but in parables we must *enact*. That explains why Our Lord's teaching is so powerful and hits so close to home. Jesus gives us the friendship of the Holy Trinity in a way which makes it hard for us to worship Him as our Divine Lord if we are being false in our own selves to the importance and obligations of the human family.

By His wonderful birth at Bethlehem, Our Blessed Lord has sanctified the life of the home. He intends the family as the first place we grow in the knowledge and practice of His love, for the fulfilling of His will that we share one another's burdens.