

Solemnity Holy Family Nikolaas Sintobin SJ

In 1988, a film was released in France that became a blockbuster. Children from two families turn out to have been swapped at birth. This is the starting point of a delightful satire. The viewer discovers two completely different families. One family is very chic. Nice house, well-mannered parents, the father has a decent job, the children receive an exemplary upbringing, the parish priest is a friend of the house. The other family is everything you wouldn't want as a decent person. They live in a sheltered flat, they live on petty theft, their vocabulary is as coarse as it can get, the mother is an alcoholic, the eldest sister flutters from one boyfriend to another, etc.

As the film progresses, the viewer gets to know both families better and better. You find out that reality is more subtle than appearances. The exemplary family turns out to be far from perfect. Their distinction is sometimes a cover for fear and hypocrisy. The disadvantaged family turns out not to be so horrible at all. There too, there is joie de vivre, and behind the swear words, there is also love. At the end of the film, it is no longer so clear which of the two families is more exemplary than the other.

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family. Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus. The Church calls this family holy. It is an example to be followed. What is it exactly we have to follow? What does their example consist of? The answer to that question is not easy.

What we just heard in Luke is special. Jesus is described as an obedient boy. At the same time, we read that he runs away from his parents. And not just for a moment. His absence lasts four days. Joseph and Mary, for their part, return home after the Easter celebration in Jerusalem. They do not even notice that their only child has stayed behind. That is not what you read in the handbook for model parents.

Nor is the history of this holy family what you would wish for your best friend. Joseph learns, just before his marriage, that his fiancée is pregnant by someone else. The birth itself takes place in appalling conditions. The child is barely born or the family has to flee to Egypt. Immediately afterwards, all young boys aged two and younger in the neighbourhood are murdered. All this information is extreme. The least one can say is it makes clear that holiness is not a synonym for perfection or for "everything by the book".

What exactly is the holiness of Joseph, Mary and Jesus about?

In the infancy gospels we notice one common trait in all three: their trust in God. Mary says yes to the messenger of God, even when he asks her something impossible. Joseph too manifests this openness and availability. In turn, he says yes to the angel, three times, no matter how difficult the circumstances. About the young Jesus we learn that He has a special connection with his heavenly Father.

To summarize, the holiness of this family has nothing to do with conformism or sterile exemplarity. It is not about supposed human perfection. It is rather about radical faith in God. About awareness and discernment. Daring to trust in God and do what He invites a human being to do. Not only when it is beautiful and easy going. But also in the roughness and unpredictability of daily life.

It could well be that there are more holy families in our world. Even in places where we would not expect it. Maybe even among ourselves.