

The Challenge of Being Family

In a parish mission that I often preached, entitled *Families of Faith*, I offered a rather simple survey at the weekend liturgies that began that mission. The people were asked to indicate one of several roles they may have in the family and, in the briefest possible sentence, tell what they felt was the ***greatest challenge*** they faced in that role. I used those surveys to create a narrative which was part of a prayer service on the second night of the mission

Some of the results I've gotten over the years made it clear that family life is more challenging than we sometimes realize. Just listen to some of the responses I regularly received.

HUSBAND: *Finding ways to keep our marriage fresh.*

WIFE: *Accepting my husband for who he is, not who I would like him to be.*

SINGLE: *Dealing with family members whose lifestyles are so different from mine.*

DIVORCED: *My son's heart is broken. I'm crushed.*

WIDOWED: *I can't remember life without him.*

MOTHER: *Caring for my children and my elderly parents at the same time.*

FATHER: *How to connect with my teenaged daughter; there's no instruction manual!*

SINGLE PARENT: *Being both father and mother to my children.*

CHILD: *Not having that much to say about anything.*

TEEN: *All the pressure from school, sports, friends, faith and family.*

SENIOR: *I worry about my children and grandchildren not practicing their faith.*

The results of that survey and the prayer service they shaped hopefully led people to be more attentive to the myriad ways of LISTENING to the lives of those around them.

I offer these vignettes of the challenges of being family because the only solution--I repeat *the only* solution--to these challenges is compassion: the ability *to enter into the experience of* another. Being able to put ourselves in another's shoes, being able to listen to the stories of others with our hearts, is the challenge every member of a family faces.

This is what Saint Paul urges us to consider in his message to the Colossians:

Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.

That's at the heart of the Gospel story of Joseph, who is confronted with a staggering challenge. Joseph responds to his

challenge in the very way Paul prescribed: listening with his heart to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Though we may often implore divine help in relationship challenges, we have to be willing to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Joseph willingly listened to what the Holy Spirit prompted him to do, even though it led to even further challenges for that young father.

In the face of the daily challenges we face as family members, this Feast of the Holy Family should invite us to be open to the experiences of others in all our relationships, even entering into the experience of the other in prayer. If we can learn to listen with our hearts and appreciate the struggles each individual in the family experiences, then, although the challenges won't necessarily disappear, they may very well become more understandable and therefore more manageable.

As we gather around the altar today, we ask the Holy Spirit's guidance in dealing with the challenges we face in our relationships.

What is the greatest challenge you face in any one of the roles you have in your family? (Are you willing to share that with other members of your family?)

What is the greatest challenge other members of your family face? (Are you willing to ask them?)

As a family, draw up a list of "Values" that you all agree you can hold. (Colossians 3:12-17 is a good place to start.)

I offer below that simple survey I used in the parish mission "Families of Faith." Feel free to try it out. If you are interested in how I then used the results in the prayer service, I'd be happy to share that with you.

FAMILIES OF FAITH SURVEY

What do you see as the greatest challenge in your role as a (circle only one):

- | | | | |
|--------------|----------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Single Adult | Husband | Wife | Single Parent |
| Mother | Father | Grandparent / Senior | Widow/Widower |
| Young Child | Teenager | Young Adult | Divorced /Separated |

Briefly describe that challenge:

Please place this survey in the basket which will be passed after communion.