

The Holy Family 1986

This is the season of “The Holy Family” - Mary + Joseph + the baby – all in the Christmas creche. Have you ever wandered: “What, in heaven’s name, was it like to be a member of the Holy Family?” Most of us unfortunately share a common concept: a Nordic Virgin Mary and child – sort of pale & wan – an almost invisible Joseph – standing back from the crib – looking awkward and somewhat useless – Alpine type shepherds – and sheep so spotless they appear to have just returned from the cleaners! – Even the straw looks sanitary. Everything in the creche so sweet and clean – angels singing in perfect harmony – even a treasure from the Magi. How snug-er-ly – How lover-ly – How perfect! It all is – for the Holy Family in the creche!

Or – is it? – How perfectly ridiculous? — I think Matthew, the Jew, would think so – he knew they weren’t Nordic types. And Luke, the physician, would undoubtedly agree – he knew it was not all that sanitary – A peasant Semite couple birthing a baby in a cave that served for a barn back of a crowded country hostel, the baby laid in a feed trough instead of a cradle. And all around – the sight + smell + sound of plain people + poverty + real need.

So I don’t think we can identify with the Holy Family as creche perfect: perfect purity, perfect peace – everything so secure, so serene, so sweet. With our sort of families – that is hard to identify with! We want to use that word the children use nowadays – “yuk!” – Frankly I do confess the Holy Family of the typical renaissance creche would give anyone the creeps, if you had to move in and live with them! Suffice it to say – a family in which everyone is always unfailingly polite, gazing fondly at one another, each one poised in set postures of undeviating devotion, with no movement, no life – sort of deep frozen family love – the sight makes me a bit sickish. It just couldn’t have been that way – not really. If holiness means all serenity, all piety, smooth sailing all the way – not many of us would want to be a member of the Holy Family: rich or poor – too pretty – too passive, too down-right dull.

Maybe the typical Christmas creche – all neat + tidy – are like those family portraits we sometimes have made. We force everybody into his Sunday best, all scrubbed + smiling. “Zap” – they take the picture! Now that isn’t exactly a false picture of the family. It’s the way we really are – for 5 minutes once every 5 years when we have the portrait made. So, it isn’t exactly a true picture either. It doesn’t include the struggle we had to get the sulk off “Jr’s” face when we wouldn’t let him pose in his tar-heel t-shirt nor does it show the snarl from both grandpa and the dog – neither of whom wanted to be in the picture at all. Even so – it’s not an entirely untrue image of us. And we are proud to send it off to our friends and family at Christmas – this picture of us in the Christmas creche looking for all the world like the Holy Family might to both. It does have the unity we strive for. It’s just not the whole story.

I once received – blessed relief – a Christmas card with two pictures of the same family – one the occasional ideal all smiles + togetherness + the other a shot of the family as it usually was – taken – not in the parlor but in the kitchen including dirty dishes and even the baby in the sink, mama hair curlers, a T.V. on the blink, papa yelling at the wife, wife sassing the mother-in-law and grandpa falling over the cat. If it was love, it was certainly in living color, real love, love in motion, love in spite of, love overcoming – no fantasy here. Real people. Conflict is a part of being a family – or the family isn’t a

truly holy one – a healthy one. Remember the news headline weeks ago: “Ideal mother shoots family and self.” All the neighbors said she was “ideal,” always so quiet and sweet. I’ll tell you a secret: it’s not the salty, peppery ones who’ll do you in. The ones you better watch are the too sweet – to-be-true ones.

So what was the Holy Family in the Christmas creche really like? What about little Jesus? Little Jesus as a 4-year old. Was he often a nuisance to control? Did Mary ever blow her stack at him when he was 12? 13? Did Joseph ever raise his voice at Mary? Did Jesus ever rebel against his parents? Of course, if the rest of the Gospel story is any indication: Mary, at least, sassed that angel. Later, she and Joseph worried themselves sick when Jesus took off for the temple alone like a typical adolescent. When he gave them a straight but unremorseful explanation, I am certain they didn’t know whether to hug him or box his ears. Even when he was 30, Mary tried to protect her son from the mob. She sent his brothers to get him. “Come home,” she said. Yet she was proud of his abilities too – and was she hurt when he said, “woman, what have I to do with you?”

Now you listen to me – If perfect harmony was not possible in “the” Holy Family – it gives us a bit of hope. Eh what? To help children to grow up “not only in wisdom + in stature but also in favor with God + man” is not easy. To raise a family well – is as difficult as – all get out.

So however they did it – with all their ups and downs – recorded + unrecorded – Joseph + Mary obviously did a good job of it. Out of the arty creche + into the kitchen. To have the sort of faith + courage + independence Jesus had – he must have come out of a home of great love + care – of security + protection. Joseph + Mary’s love for one another + the children could not have been posed and fakey. But real + practical: all the way from the poverty of that stable – to the horror of that cross.

Mary + Joseph? To have faith in a God + a son you don’t fully understand – to watch him give his life away and still have faith and hope. What courage! Joseph + Mary had to be good parents. All those 30 Nazareth v years of love and argument, out of the creche + in the kitchen – of patience and worry, of laughter and frustration – learning to let their boy go – discovering that they did not own him – that he was not their possession – that they could not control his life or destiny – learning to trust him and God – learning finally – to give up someone you love to the mystery of dying –

If that is what it means to be a Holy Family – then we’d like to be like that – and can be – by God’s grace.

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Let us pray

Lord, teach us not to expect the impossible of each other. When love can be so vital + real – don’t let us fake it. Keep us going in the midst of heartache + peril. Keep us growing in wisdom. Help us to help the child + to know when + how to let them go.

Help us to share the dreams + the nightmares. Don’t let us back away from each other or from you when the going gets rough. Help us to see life through – no matter what. Keep us secure in your hands. In your hands. Oh our lord. In your hands.

Amen

This is the season of the Holy Family – Joseph + Mary + the baby Jesus – the angels + the shepherds – the wise men + the star.

Every year it puts me in mind of my great aunt Mary – a Meriweather - “fix em up for Christmas!”

My great aunt Mary –

“well out of the creche – and into the kitchen” –

Even as a child, I knew that the real creche was not under the Christmas tree – with those carved-wooden headed Florentine figures – of Joseph + the Virgin Mary + the Magi + shepherd – all polished + posed –

But the real creche was out in the kitchen- with uncle Joe + aunt Mary + all those children –

They were all Levenetts – high-strung + salty + sassy – but holy in the Elizabethan sense of the word – with “the healthy mind and the happy heart”