For Personal Reflection

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1. What do I think of when I hear the words “Holy Family?”
2. What is my favorite or most compelling scene or experience in the life of the Holy Family? Why?
3. Can I relate more easily to one member of the Holy family as distinct from the others? If so, which one? Why?
4. How can my family be “holy” in the midst of dealing with all the demands, responsibilities and circumstances that are a part of life? What contributions can I make to this effort?
5. How has Francis de Sales’ perspectives on the “Holy Family” impacted upon my perspectives of my own family?

Further Reading

Spiritual Conferences. St. Francis de Sales. Translated under the supervision under the Abbot Gasquet and the late Canon Dom Mackey, O.S.B. The Newman Press: Westminster Maryland, 1962.

Introduction to the Devout Life. St. Francis de Sales. Translated by John K. Ryan. Image Books, Doubleday. 1989.

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Holy Family

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

Faces of Faith and Fidelity

What images come to your mind or imagination when you see or hear the words "Holy Family?" Chances are, you image a serene setting in which a mother and father look lovingly upon their son. You might imagine three people for whom everything goes smoothly: there are no conflicts, no challenges, no problems.

In short, "Holy Family" evokes a romanticized portrait of family life. The Gospels, however, paint a very different picture of the lived experience of the "Holy Family."

"The measure of a 'holy family' is not found in what happens — or does not happen — to its members."

Take the Feast of the Holy Family itself. The Gospel reading for the day (Luke 2: 22—40) tells the story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus making a family pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem: noticing that Jesus was missing a day after leaving Jerusalem to return home, one can image this brief – yet troubling – interchange: "He isn't with me. I thought he was with you. You mean he isn't? Well, where is he?"

What parent hasn't experienced the sickening fear and panic of not knowing where one's son or daughter has gotten to, if only for a second or two? Of course, Mary and Joseph did find Jesus in the temple upon returning to Jerusalem. Notwithstanding their son's explanation that he had to be about his "Father's business," one can easily imagine how Jesus got an earful from his parents during what turned about to be their second attempt to return home!

This wasn't the first experience of trouble for the Holy Family. In fact, challenges faced them from the very beginning of their experience as a family. St. Francis de Sales says: "Consider the vicissitudes and changes, the alternations of joy and sorrow" we find in the Holy Family. "What joy, what jubilation for Our Lady to receive the tidings from an angel that she would bear the Eternal Word! By contrast, consider St. Joseph, seeing that she was with child and knowing that it was not by him: into what affliction and distress he no doubt plunged!"

Francis continues to illustrate how very human this very Holy Family was: "When our Lady brought forth her Son, the angels announced his birth, the shepherds and magi came to adore him: what rejoicing and consolation was theirs, amid all this activity and attention. But wait: a little later, the angel of the Lord said to Joseph in a dream: take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt! Oh, how great a subject this must have been to Our Lady and St. Joseph." (Conferences III, Sermon on the Octave of Holy Innocents)

"'Consider the vicissitudes and changes, the alternations of joy and sorrow'" we find in the Holy Family…"

While the ups and downs, the joys and pains of Jesus, Mary and Joseph have something to teach us, there is a deeper lesson here for any and all of us who try to maintain and nurture "holy families" of our own day. It all boils down to this: we need to consider *how* the Holy Family faced life's realities with its mixture of triumph and tribulation: "We must consider the great peace and serenity of mind and heart of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph, shown in their constancy amid all the unexpected events that befell them."

"Holy Family" evokes a romanticized portrait...The Gospels, however, paint a very different picture of the "Holy Family."

The measure of a "holy family" is not found in what happens — or does not happen — to its members. Rather, a "holy family" is one that demonstrates and practices a certain grace and confidence when faced with the events of daily living, especially the unexpected ones. Francis de Sales urges us: "Consider whether we are justified in being surprised and troubled when we meet with similar accidents in the house of God…We must repeat over and over again to ourselves, so as to more deeply impress this truth upon our minds, that no turn of events must ever carry away our hearts and minds in displays of temper, for unevenness of temper proceeds from no other source than our own passions and preferences."

We most imitate the Holy Family in our own relationships when we impress upon our minds and hearts that the world does not revolve around us; that things do not always go our way; that our plans are frequently not the last word.

We cannot always control what happens to us: we can, however, make choices *how* to respond to the unexpected in our lives in ways that promote faith, tranquility, fidelity and peace.