

They Say - "I Can't Copy That Family"

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Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1205 (1955)

YOU can see them doing it. They're shaking their heads, politely saying "no". That seems to be their reply to what Pope Leo XIII wrote in 1892.

The Holy Father said:

"A benign Providence established the Holy Family in order that all Christians in whatever walk of life... might have a reason and an incentive to practise every virtue provided they fix their gaze on the Holy Family."

But these people — good, fervent Christians, no doubt — still can't believe the truth of the Pope's words. All Christians in whatever walk of life are to imitate the Holy Family? It would be too good to be true. Anyway, it's impossible — so they claim.

And it's regrettable they speak that way. By such an attitude they are closing the door on one of the most precious treasures God has given us to help us reach a life where holiness and happiness and peace go hand in hand.

I've often wondered at this reluctance to accept the Holy Family as an ideal. Even Catholics who profess high standards in their family life have made statements about it that cannot square with the truth. Somewhere there exist misunderstandings about the imitability of the Holy Family. What are they? Suppose we list some of them.

Almost certainly, the list will be headed by this: "Joseph and Mary lived in a virginal marriage. Therefore, they cannot serve as models for husbands and wives who use their marriage rights in the Sacrament of Matrimony."

Another form of the same misunderstanding: "If we happen to have a large family given us by God, how can we look on Mary as a model mother, since she had only one Child?" — And as a mother of eleven was quoted humorously as saying — "and He was God, and I've got my eleven all full of the devil!"

A third: "Jesus could not commit sin. Mary and Joseph did not commit sin. How can such a trio be a model for a sinner like me?"

And a fourth: "God chose Mary and Joseph for so special a vocation that He protected them with a providential care far surpassing what we ordinary mortals get. Mary and Joseph knew in advance that everything would come out all right in the end."

Let's answer the last objection first.

We also know that everything will come out all right in the end, if we're willing to place our trust in God's word. Such faith in His providence tells us that God's ways are unsearchable and that we are not able to understand all His decisions, but nonetheless all of them are all-perfect. The knowledge

that God's providence exists does not take suffering out of our lives. We still have to put our trust in the loving care of our heavenly Father, knowing that what He does is for the best, even though we cannot grasp how it is for the best.

Exactly the same held true for Joseph and Mary. To think that they lived in some sort of fairy castle, free from discouragement and doubt and suffering, simply does not fit the facts. God did not reveal to them at each moment what the next would bring.

In reading the Gospel story of the Incarnation, we cannot escape the force of what it implies: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were accepted as ordinary people by their neighbours. This acceptance explains to a great extent how the secret of the Incarnation was kept so well. To all outward appearances, they must have been very ordinary people.

Mary did not know she was to be the Mother of God until the Angel Gabriel came to ask her consent. Moreover, Joseph was unaware of the identity of Mary's unborn child until he was informed in a dream that the child was the Saviour Himself. Up to the time of each of these "annunciations" Mary and Joseph had no hint that God was to use their humble co-operation when He would take on Himself the flesh of mankind.

All this adds up to another conclusion. A special providence of God brought Joseph and Mary together to prepare for their future roles, but at the time God left them in ignorance of what their future would contain.

All their lives God led them by the path of faith, from beginning to end. When Mary visited Elizabeth, her cousin, she was greeted with the words, "Blessed is she who has believed, because the things promised her by the Lord shall be accomplished." In the case of the just man, St. Joseph, it is but logical to recall Holy Scripture's phrase, "The just man lives by faith." (Indeed any just man becomes God's very own and is very dear to him.)

You may reasonably object: "Didn't Mary and Joseph know the prophecies of old, that when the Saviour would come He would suffer and die and thus enter into His glory?" Yes, they knew the prophecies, but they did not know precisely when or how the prophecies would be fulfilled. Even after they were initiated into the mystery of the Incarnation, they still were ignorant of God's exact plan.

When the Infant Jesus was presented in the Temple, Simeon prophesied that a sword of sorrow would pierce the heart of Mary. He did not mention the time. Herod sought to kill the Child. That might have been the end, for all that Joseph and Mary could say. The twelve-year-old Boy was lost in the Temple. Perhaps this was the time for His enemies and the powers of darkness to seize Him? Even during the long years of the Hidden Life there was no knowing when the placid monotony of that existence would be brought to an abrupt close. After the Public Life began, Mary could realize it was only a question of time until the sword of sorrow would come.

It is not mere fanciful conjecture to say that Mary and Joseph were kept in ignorance of the plans of the Redemption. Our Lord's words (when His parents found Him in the Temple) are proof enough of the truth: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" St. Luke adds: "And they did not understand the word that He spoke to them."

"Well!" you say, "that makes them a little more human. They had trials after all, worse trials than I have. But they were sinless. I am not..."

Sinlessness did not make them any less human. In our own day sin is often pictured as something attractive. The virtuous person is supposed to be the one who has lost all the “joy of life” — sin lets one taste forbidden fruit — sin gives you the thrill of really living.

But nothing is said of bitterness and remorse, the frustrated “biting away” of one’s conscience. Nothing is said of the sinner’s impulse to flee his sense of guilt, his fear of being alone with himself with time to realize fully how wrong he has been.

On the other hand, we must admit that some virtuous persons — and by no means all — have personalities that are not very attractive. Perhaps their virtue is marred by imperfections in charity, making them less likeable neighbours. Naturally, in such a case the kinks in their personality might be attributed to the fact that they are observing God’s law. But the blame should be put where it is deserved. The reasons for being a human porcupine do not lie in being good. They arise from other faults, from selfishness, perhaps from a narrow pride that limits one’s spiritual horizon.

What of the supposedly attractive personality of the sinner? Again, the source of his attractiveness should be correctly identified: not sin — which can only be ugly in its lying, its self-centredness, its greed — but rather talents of likeableness which would be all the more enhanced if their possessor would reinforce them with the solid truthfulness of virtue.

The strongest cause of discouragement in imitating the Holy Family is probably this idea that goodness and attractiveness cannot go hand in hand. The Gospels imply that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were accepted by their neighbours as ordinary people. That can only mean they had the normal traits of a good neighbour. The story of the Public Life reveals the tremendous magnetism Jesus exercised over people of all ages and in all walks of life — children and oldsters, men and women of every rank. Someone has said that the acid test of our Lord’s lovableness was the fact that the children wanted to come to Him. No child wants to play with a gruff elder.

Perhaps the humanness of the Holy Family is not appreciated because we are twenty centuries removed from their time. We cannot easily realize how much their living conditions were like our own. True, in details their food, clothing, and shelter were those of Orientals in a land and an era far in the past. But the picture grows lifelike when we think of the holiest Three sitting cross-legged around a low, table on the beaten mud floor of their home. They are dressed quite simply, because they live in a semi-tropical climate. The mother has a head veil, the father and the boy wear a sort of turban, flowing down to protect their necks from the sun.

For garments, they wear an innermost “sindon”, a sort of long shirt stretching to the knees. Over this is the tunic, ankle-length with slit skirt for facility in walking. A band of cloth at the waist gives the garment pleasing lines, and its appearance is helped even more by the striped reds and browns that are favourite colours.

Joseph wears a two-forked beard. Both Joseph and the boy Jesus have two long locks of hair, ringlets framing their faces on each side, to agree with the contemporary custom. Mary’s hair is made up in tresses.

They are eating their evening meal as we observe them. No silverware, not even wooden spoons are on the table. With their fingers they delicately sample the boiled mutton with its pottage seasoned with mint. Joseph hands Jesus and Mary cucumbers or pomegranates or clusters of raisins — all favourite dishes. They have two beverages available, goats’ milk and wine, kept in goatskin “bottles” — actually, sewed skins — from which the drinks are poured.

Their house looks so poorly furnished, but for the times it represents the living quarters of a middle-class village artisan. Of stone block, with the outer room extending back into the hill as a cave, it is low, perhaps windowless, getting its light through the open doorway or from the flickering lamp whose wick rests in a saucer of olive oil. There is little furniture to be seen, except for the gaily-coloured mats folded along the wall. These will later be spread on the floor as night approaches, for beds as we know them are not the custom here.

The Three are barefoot, because they are at home. Their sandals are placed side by side at the doorway, ready for use outside the house...

What a picture to our Western eyes of the twentieth century! [Or for today!] Yet this is the picture we get of the Holy Family, if we look at them as citizens of a Palestinian hamlet almost two thousand years ago. These were the customs of their times. The Gospels intimate how closely they followed those customs.

But one of the original objections to the imitability of the Holy Family still remains. How can Joseph and Mary be models for the Christian married couple who make use of their married rights according to the holy and indeed sacred 'family vocation' 'God has given them? How can the virginal marriage of Joseph and Mary be an ideal for Christian marriages in which the virtue of chastity is practised in a different way?

I think, by way of introduction, that we should first be certain we understand what is meant by copying a model or an ideal. No person is the same as any other. The same ideals can motivate them, but because of different personalities, different circumstances in their lives, and different vocations, they simply cannot practise an imitation that is reduced to aping a model in every detail.

In other words, no one can imitate anyone else exactly. All that can be done is to apply to one's own particular life the motivation and the actions of one's ideal. If application can be made, then an exemplar truly exists. If application cannot be made, then you have chosen for yourself an impossible model.

In the case of Joseph and Mary these same principles hold true. The special vocation of these two was that they should prepare for the coming of the Saviour into the world, and that they should rear Him to His manhood within the bonds and the love of a family life. It was also part of their vocation that their marriage was to be virginal. God Almighty chose to be born of a virgin mother in order that it would be easier for us to accept His divinity as Jesus Christ. It would have been much more difficult to make an act of faith in the godhead of Jesus if He had had a natural human father. Mary's body was reserved for Jesus.

Nonetheless, God Almighty also chose to be born of a virgin wife, to follow His own law that children should be conceived and born within wedlock. In this special case of the Holy Family, Jesus was to come into the world as the third member of a divinely constituted family in order that His reputation would be protected, but equally that He might be given the love, the protection, and the rearing that only family life can give to the child.

What is essential in every marriage is the spiritual oneness that must exist between husband and wife. They give themselves to each other in a union of wills, and this is called the marriage contract, whereby each belongs to each other in a community of life.

Joseph and Mary belonged to each other in marriage, too. Possessing marriage rights, although not using them because of their particular vocation, they thus became models for both the married and

the virginal state. In each case, it is their love of God and their divinely founded love for each other that we respect and reverence.

For modern Christian couples who reverence God's plan, who see in sex God's plan to continue the human race and people heaven, who see in sex the symbolism of their love for each other, the virginal marriage of Joseph and Mary still remains as an example. After all, the proper use of sex within marriage takes on its full meaning only when it is animated by the spiritual oneness that should exist in every marriage. Love means giving, love means self-sacrifice, love means wishing well for the beloved. This spirit of love existed in the highest degree in the marriage of Joseph and Mary, and that is why the husband and wife of today can take these two as their ideals, and can imitate their spiritual oneness as the source of the happiness and security God intended should exist in every marriage.

At the beginning of this pamphlet I was telling you about the letter of Pope Leo XIII concerning the Holy Family. There could be no better conclusion than to select certain passages of the Pope's heartfelt words, to show how what we have said here has been no more than an echo of the desire of holy Mother Church—that all of us, in every walk of life, in every age, might take Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the Holy Family, as our particular guides. Suppose we emphasize the Pope's words each time he mentions this universal leadership of the Holy Family.

“When God in His mercy decided to carry out the work of man's redemption... He arranged to perform His task in such a way that in its beginnings it might show forth to the world the august spectacle of a divinely founded family. In this all men were to behold the perfect exemplar of domestic society as well as of all virtue and holiness...

“We cannot doubt that all the glories of domestic life, taking their origin in mutual charity, saintly character, and the exercise of piety, were without exception manifested in a superlative degree by the Holy Family as a pattern for all other families to imitate.

“To this very end, a benign Providence had established the Holy Family in order that all Christians in whatever walk of life or situation might have a reason and an incentive to practise every virtue, provided they would fix their gaze on the Holy Family.

“In Joseph, heads of the household are blessed with the unsurpassed model of fatherly watchfulness and care.

“In the holy Virgin Mother of God, mothers possess an extraordinary ideal of love, modesty, submission, and perfect loyalty.

“In Jesus, who was ‘subject to them,’ children have before them the divine picture of obedience to admire, venerate, and copy...

“Nothing in fact can be conceived more helpful or effective for Christian families than the example of the Holy Family, embracing as it does the perfection and fulfilment of all domestic virtues.

“When thus invoked, may Jesus, Mary, and Joseph take their place in the family circle as its propitious patrons.

“May they foster charity, mould character, and encourage the practice of virtue through imitation of their example.

“By sweetening the burdens of this life which everywhere encompass us, may they render them more easy for us to bear...

“Given at Rome at St. Peter’s under the seal of the Fisherman, June 14, 1892, the 15th year of Our Pontificate.”

LEO XIII

You can’t copy that family? What do you think? Try it and see. God be with you.
