

**Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – December 31, 2017**  
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There is, I believe, no one more hopeful, no one more serene, no one more naïve than a first time parent. Their newborn son or daughter is just perfect and they are going to make sure that he or she stays that way. Perhaps they waited for the child for a long time as did Abraham and Sarah in our first reading. Perhaps their child came at an unexpected time – as Jesus did to Mary. In whatever circumstances, a first-time parent often has about them a glow of confidence and peacefulness that shields them from real life. No matter what mistakes their own parents made, their child will be raised differently. Their child will be supremely intelligent, perfectly well-behaved, a star in sports and music and drama, successful in everything they attempt. Their child will never create a mess or start a fight or stay out past curfew or wreck the car. It may take a few years, but most new parents eventually come down to reality – though admittedly some never do. You’ve met them of course. Their child is usually the most obnoxious kid on the block, but they never see it. To them, their child is perfect and will always lead a charmed life.

If anyone was entitled to feel this way, it should have been Mary and Joseph. Their child, after all, *was* perfect. Far from being the neighborhood trouble-maker, Jesus is as good as it gets. So when they traveled to Jerusalem for Mary’s purification and to present Jesus in the temple, they might have had every reason to expect that God would reward them with congratulations, with a bit of good news. And, indeed, Mary and Joseph heard some good news from Simeon who called Jesus the salvation of God, the light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. And if he had stopped there, Mary and Joseph might have walked away as any other proud parents – confident that their son was special and pleased that someone else had seen it. But Simeon did not stop there. He told Mary that Jesus would also be the downfall of many in Israel, a sign that would be contradicted – and that Mary’s own heart would be pierced by a sword. However realistic, it was hardly the news that a new mother wants to hear.

Though Jesus’ life would be played out on a grand scale – with miracles and parables and crucifixion and resurrection – for the most part, his story is not much different than that of any other human child. Sooner or later, every parent’s heart is pierced by a sword – whether from a child’s misbehavior, or from an unexplained illness or these days, quite tragically, from random violence. Yes, sooner or later, every parent knows what it is like to experience pain when their

son or daughter suffers. It is not a reality that we want to face, but it is a reality nonetheless. A family brings tremendous joy, but a family can often be the source of tremendous heartache and disappointment as well. No family – not even the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph – is so perfect that it is immune from heartbreak and pain.

But notice carefully what we celebrate today. Our feast is not that of the “Perfect Family” – but of the “Holy Family,” the family sanctified by the presence of God. And though the Family of Nazareth was uniquely holy because of the presence of the Word made flesh, each and every human family, each and every human person has the capacity for holiness because God seeks to fill our hearts, to fill our lives as well. The eternal Son of God not only became human, he became ordinary so that he might raise all of us who lead ordinary lives to the glorious realm of his heavenly Father. Jesus was born in time to restore our birthright.

Throughout the Christmas season, we are called to reflect upon the enormity of God’s love for us – a love so great that the eternal Son of God humbled himself to embrace humanity, to come among us as man. That message is re-echoed in our feast today. Jesus came not to shield himself and his family from human pain and suffering, but to redeem us in the midst of it. Some of our fellow Christians preach that if you truly have faith in God that you will become rich and healthy and successful. Your life will be perfect. But Jesus never preached that. His words and his life tell us that faith will bring us a vision of our salvation – and that, like Mary, a sword that will pierce our heart as well. His love tells us that if we welcome him into our families and into our lives, and into our hearts, then our families and our lives and our hearts will be holy. And, like Mary and Joseph, our hardships and our sufferings will draw us closer to the God who loves us beyond measure.