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The Feast of the Holy Family<sup>1</sup>

As we celebrate today the Feast of the Holy Family, we learn the great importance of the family precisely in that God *wanted to be born and to grow up in a human family*. In this way he consecrated the family as the first and ordinary means of his encounter with humanity.

In his life spent at Nazareth, Jesus honored the Virgin Mary and the righteous Joseph, remaining under their authority throughout the period of his childhood and his adolescence (cf. Luke 2: 41-52). In this way he followed the wisdom of Sirach and shed light on the primary value of the family in the education of the person (cf. Sirach 3:1).

Today's Liturgy presents for us the image of the Holy Family as a family of protective care. Joseph takes his wife and his adopted son and flees to Egypt; he leaves everything his family knows behind in order to guard those most dear to him and keep them safe.

Joseph reminds all parents that it is their sacred duty before God to do all they can to safeguard and protect their children who are also God's children. This is not to be done so

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<sup>1</sup> This homily is largely based upon the *Angelus* Address give by Pope Benedict XVI on 31 December 2006. It has been modified to fit more closely the readings of the day.

as to stifle the growth of the children but rather to keep the promise they made on the day their children were baptized.

On that day the priest said to them - and to the godparents, whose sacred duty this also is:

On your part, you must make it your constant care to bring them up in the practice of the faith. See that the divine life which God gives them is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in their hearts.<sup>2</sup>

After agreeing to these words and promising to fulfill them, the children were baptized and the priest said to the parents and godparents, handing them the baptismal candle:

This light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. These children of yours have been enlightened by Christ. They are to walk always as children of the light. May they keep the flame of faith alive in their hearts. When the Lord comes, may they go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

Every parent, both individually and together, must daily seek to protect their children from dangers to the faith until the child is mature enough in faith to face such dangers, together with God's grace and the intercession of the Saints.

At the close of each day, every parent must examine their parenting to see if they truly are safeguarding the faith, helping to fan into flame the light of that baptismal candle. The tiny light must be shielded so as not to be snuffed out.

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<sup>2</sup> *Rite of Baptism for Several Children*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

The Gospel presented to us today reveals the most authentic and profound vocation of the family: that is, to accompany each of its members on the path of the discovery of God and of the plan that he has prepared for him or her. Parents then ought not ask, "What do I want for my child's future?" but rather, "What does God want for my child?" Children ought to ask this same question: "What does God want for me?" Discerning together the will of the Lord, parents should show their children - as Mary and Joseph showed Jesus - how to follow the divine will, seeking first to follow it themselves.

Mary and Joseph taught Jesus primarily by their example: in his parents he came to know the full beauty of faith, of love for God and for his Law, as well as the demands of justice, which is totally fulfilled in love (cf. Rom 13: 10). From them he learned that it is necessary first of all to do God's will, and that the spiritual bond is worth more than the bond of kinship.

Parents must daily consider the example of faith they give to their children. Does daily prayer occur in the home? How can children be expected to know how to pray unless they learn it first from mom and dad? How can they be expected to know the Lord unless introduced to him by their parents? This, of course, requires that parents be of deep faith and prayer, looking always to the example of Joseph and Mary.

The Holy Family of Nazareth is truly the "prototype" of every Christian family which, united in the Sacrament of Marriage and nourished by the Word and the Eucharist, is called to carry out the wonderful vocation and mission of being the living cell not only of society but also of the Church, a sign and instrument of unity for the entire human race.

The family is not lightly called the "domestic Church," for it is "the privileged setting where every person learns to give and receive love."<sup>4</sup> Let all families, then, look to the example of the Holy Family and seek to model their homes upon the home of Nazareth.

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 8 July 2006.