

**Homily for a Pastoral Visit to  
St. Mary Parish  
St. Elmo, Illinois**

**and to**

**St. Anne Parish  
Edgewood, Illinois**

**The Feast of the Holy Family - Cycle C  
December 29 and 30, 2012**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Father Simburger, [consecrated religious,] my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is a privilege for me to celebrate and preach at this Mass with you today. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation, celebrating a parish jubilee, or installing a new pastor. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for a regular Sunday Mass because I want at some time to visit every parish in our diocese, in order to get to know the people and the places that make up our Catholic community in central Illinois.

What does a bishop look for when he comes to a parish? Well, I didn't come to see if the floors were cleaned and the pews were polished! I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of

Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish, he looks for the presence of the Catholic **faith**, to see whether it is strong and vibrant, whether it is growing, and if the conditions are present for its continued growth in the future.

At the same time, a pastoral visit is not just a time for a bishop to see the parish, but also for the parish to see the bishop. The Church is all about relationships. As the three persons of the Trinity are an intimate communion of Father, Son and Spirit in relationship to each other, the Church exists as a communion in relationship to God and in relation to each other, the People of God, the Body of Christ. As a bishop, I have a special relationship with you, and you have a special relationship with me, and one of my roles is to bridge the relationship between you and the Pope and the rest of the universal Church, so that we may all be one in Christ's Body.

But this "special relationship" is not just about recognizing each other's faces and knowing one another's names and titles. In the Church, we call this relationship a *communio*, that is, the communion of those belonging to the Body of Christ, the Church, which the Second Vatican

Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (14), describes as follows: “Fully incorporated into the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who – by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesial government, and communities – are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops.” Thus, to remain in this authentic *communio*, we can never see ourselves as somehow “independent” or act apart from the universal Church or even the local Church, or else we cease to be truly Catholic.

This *communio* is present not only within the visible structure of the Church and within each parish; it is also present within the family, the domestic Church. We know that families are also meant to be about relationships, not simply relationships based on blood but also on love. So it is that today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph; we look to their relationship, to their family, to learn how we should relate to our families.

In his book *Christ Is Passing By*, Saint Josemaría Escrivá gave some thought to family life. He wrote: “When I think of Christian homes, I like

to imagine them as being full of the light and joy that were in the home of the holy family. The message of Christmas is heard in all its forcefulness: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.'<sup>1</sup> If Christian families are to be authentic they must be infused with the joy of Christmas, with the certainty that in Jesus Christ God is with us and desires to enter into our families.

To those who experience his love and recognize his nearness, the Lord Jesus Christ grants his gift of peace and fulfils the desires of every human heart. Saint Jose Maria went on to say:

In the midst of difficulties and of our own personal failings, [the peace of Christ] encourages us to keep up our effort. Every Christian home should be a place of peace and serenity. In spite of the small frustrations of daily life, an atmosphere of profound and sincere affection should reign there together with a deep-rooted calm, which is the result of authentic faith that is put into practice.<sup>2</sup>

If every family truly sought to model their lives after the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, our families would be truly ones of serenity and peace, marked always by the joy that comes from knowing and loving God.

On Christmas Day a British newspaper published a story on the more requested gifts that children in Britain – aged three to seven – asked from Santa Claus.<sup>3</sup> From the 2,000 parents surveyed, coming in at numbers six and nine on the list were chocolates and rocks. Within the top fifty were pets and electronic gadgets and even the moon and celebrities. As you can tell, the list itself is rather humorous, with the exception of a few requested gifts which reveal a stark and lamentable aspect of modern family life.

Coming in at number one on the list was a baby brother or sister; number ten on the list was for a dad (a mom was at number twenty-three). This is a country where at least one in five children do not live with their father and where the number children in each family decreased, according to a 2009 study, to just 1.9 children.<sup>4</sup>

As I read about this British study, I could not help but wonder what a similar survey would reveal of Christmas gift requests in the United States of America, where at least one in three children do not live with both of their parents<sup>5</sup> and where the average family size in 2009 decreased to 2.69 people.<sup>6</sup>

Having grown up with both of my parents and surrounded by my six brothers and two sisters, I find these recent statistics both troubling and

sad. What do they say about how we value the family and what we experience about family life and love today? As families fall apart, where do children learn how love? Where do they learn about the love God has for them? Where do they do learn about Jesus Christ, how to follow him, and the joy he longs to give them?

The Lord wishes to make his love known to us through the relationship of the family, which is the fundamental building block of society; if that foundation of the family grows weak and collapses, so, too, does the society built upon it.

Today, as we look to the example of the Holy Family, the Blessed Virgin Mary gives us an excellent example of faith and trust in God, Saint Joseph provides a marvelous model of service and leadership needed of good fathers, and Jesus shows us true love and humility in his incarnation. By turning to Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we can learn from them how to build our families on the very foundation that the Holy Family has provided for us.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Jose Maria Escriva, *Christ Is Passing By*, 3.22. Available at [http://www.escrivaworks.org/book/christ\\_is\\_passing\\_by-chapter-3.htm](http://www.escrivaworks.org/book/christ_is_passing_by-chapter-3.htm) Accessed December 29, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Jose Maria Escriva, *Christ Is Passing By*, 3.22. Available at [http://www.escrivaworks.org/book/christ\\_is\\_passing\\_by-chapter-3.htm](http://www.escrivaworks.org/book/christ_is_passing_by-chapter-3.htm) Accessed December 29, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> "A 'dad' is the tenth most popular Christmas present for children, survey reveals," *Daily Mail*, December 25, 2012. Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2253047/A-dad-tenth-popular-Christmas-present-children-survey-reveals.html>. Accessed December 29, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Dominic Hughes, "The size of the average family is getting smaller," BBC News Health, December 9, 2010. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-11960183> Accessed December 29, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> "U.S. Census Bureau Reports Men and Women Wait Longer to Marry," U.S. Census Bureau. Available at [http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/families\\_households/cb10-174.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/families_households/cb10-174.html) Accessed December 29, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> "Average U.S. Household Size Decreases to 2.6," *Marketing Charts*, October 8, 2009. Available at <http://www.marketingcharts.com/topics/demographics/census-data-average-us-household-size-declines-to-26-10679/> Accessed December 29, 2012.