

## Holy Family 2006

In card games, it's important that you never show your hand; if your competitors know what you've got, they'll react and either take advantage of your weakness, or shy away from your strength. In sports, you need to have a game plan, and it's crucial that the game plan stay with just your team. If your opponents know where your players are going to go, what they're going to do, and how they're going to play, they'll be one step ahead of you—to victory. While that lack of sharing is an integral part of most competitions, it's also human nature to want to know what the other person's going to do. And so we study the previous games of the other teams, to try to figure out a pattern; we try to read the subtlest facial expressions and body language to try to gauge just how good a hand the other person's holding. As much as we can, we like to look ahead, plan ahead, figure things out. We like to know the other guy's next move, and we like to know exactly just where the path we're on is taking us, and whether we should stay the course, or change directions. Most of life is the time lived outside of our many games and sporting events, and (sorry, Husker fans, but it's true), is infinitely more important. And in life, as in competitions, we try to project our decisions on down the road. Where is this decision going to lead me now? I didn't know, at the time, what the most momentous decisions in my life *were*, and which ones which were really changing the direction I was going in. I thought that changing majors in college was such a huge deal at the time; when I review my life now, I see those changes as being little more than sorry little waves that barely made the boat rise. But that part-time job I took in the kitchen at Lincoln General Hospital—that changed the course of my life forever. I don't know if I would have had the courage to pick work over my diligent studies if I saw just then where it would take me. Becoming Catholic, the singular biggest event in my life; don't know if I would have done it, seriously, if I had thought for a minute that it would lead to the priesthood. I didn't know that God was taking me places, place which I was then afraid of, places I didn't believe I was capable to really going to. It's why he doesn't show his hand to us, doesn't give us constant assurances and glimpses into the future. He needs to be able to continue to set before us graces, and crosses, which he knows we need for our salvation, even when we might shy away from them if we saw them coming.

Mary and Joseph stand out among the saints because of their terrific obedience to God's will; they listened all the time to God, and followed his instructions, even though they couldn't see exactly where this was leading. In today's Gospel, we heard the story of the finding of Jesus in the Temple; how as a young boy, on their trek back from Jerusalem, he stayed behind. Mary and Joseph assumed, as did the other parents, that all the children would be together on the pilgrimage back; it was not neglect on their part that led to Jesus being left behind. And Jesus was not being disobedient, because this episode was not to demonstrate his autonomy, but rather be a clue to his identity; and he did, in fact, return to Nazareth and we are told, was obedient to Mary and Joseph. When they find Jesus in the Temple, he questions them: did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" They did not understand. They did not understand, but they did accept, because accepting had been their means of

operation all along. Did they not know that Jesus must be born in poverty, because he came to bring hope to the poor, and tell them of heavenly treasures which far surpass the passing goods of earth? They probably did not know that in all likelihood; but they obediently journeyed to Bethlehem, and stayed in a manger, and accepted their poverty as God's will. Did they not know that their Son would have opposition to his life from the very start? No, they probably did not, or if they did, probably did not know the extent of the opposition. But still, they went to Egypt when Joseph, the great protector of the child Jesus, was told in a dream to go. So much that they did not know God was doing in and through them; so much which they knew, but could not yet fully understand.

Mary and Joseph are such great models for us as Christians, because they did not always enjoy total knowledge of God's plan, did not have total understanding; yet gave him total acceptance. It was their total acceptance which made them the great saints which they are. And as we consider this weekend God's work in and through the Holy Family, we are challenged as well; there is much that we do not know that God is doing, much that we do not fully understand, and probably much that we can see only through hindsight, now. Many of us here have taken vows, vows whose sole purpose is to draw us closer to God. You don't take a vow because it will bring earthly happiness; if it was strictly happiness you were pursuing, you'd leave your options open. But heavenly happiness, that comes not from getting what we want, but from becoming what God wants; what God wants us, and has designed us, to be. That question of Jesus to Mary and Joseph gave them insight into their vocation: theirs was to give him total love, but also to know that he belonged to his Father in heaven, much more than to his parents on earth. And the questions are being set before us, as well, as we maneuver our path in life, especially with our families.

Did you not know? Did you not know that since God gave us our families—we didn't design even one soul among those whom we love the most—did you not know that God must take precedence over them? In the reading from the first book of Samuel, Hanna said to Eli "I prayed for this child, and the Lord granted my request. Now I, in turn, give him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he shall be dedicated to the Lord." I've heard it said so many times that Christmas is really just for children, and that Christmas is all about family—a lovely sentiment, but ... no. We share Christmas with our families not because it's about them, but because it's about the most important person in all of our lives—Jesus Christ! And we draw our youngsters into this annual remembrance, so that they can participate in this great miracle of God's love. Did you not know that love is bittersweet; it is an intermingling of joy and sorrow, and when we take whichever vow we take, there will be both? We focus on the joy, because the joy will draw us in; but the unforeseen sorrows will add depth to our souls and our characters; the sorrows will help us share in the life of Jesus. Did you not know that our reward is in the life to come, not in the life we have here? And it is for this reason that we must walk by faith. If we walked only by sight, by what we see and know here, how many would remain faithful to God through the sad times, through the tragic losses, through the deaths which take a piece of our hearts. We're walking by faith, because we believe in all of God's words and promises.

Mary and Joseph did not realize all that God had in store for them when he called them to such a unique vocation; but they surely did know that God had for them, a big, big plan. I think, before they left this earth, they probably understood why the poverty, why the manger, why the flight into Egypt, why the Finding in the Temple. I think the reasons why kept dawning on them, more and more, because God doesn't show his hand all at once, but he does reveal it increasingly over time. As we look at our lives, each unique with its own victories, setbacks, celebrations, and sorrows; as we ponder what God worked through the Holy Family, I hope we better understand all the "whys." Why the job losses, why illnesses, why angry children, why money woes, why injustice, why death? Because just as God allowed adversity to steer the Holy Family, so too will he use every setback, and every tearful step in life, to remind us of what life's really about, to remind us of what he really put us here for. It's easy, as we see another Christmas season come and go, to think that the years are just flying by, and escaping us. Actually, each successive year is leading us, and if we're walking by faith, trusting in God, and understanding his plan, it's leading us to where God wants us to be at the end. Luke reports that Mary and Joseph did not understand what Jesus said to them when he said he must be in his Father's house. Like them, we may not understand all that God says and does; but if like them we accept it, then one day holiness will be ours, just as it is now theirs.

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