

This Feast of the Holy Family can be very uncomfortable for some of us. At some Christmas dinners, a certain person didn't show up, or perhaps wasn't invited. Some families are divided by past hurts, some by religion, some by broken marriages. Every family is blemished in one way or another, and when we come to this annual feast and look upon Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, we might feel.... uncomfortable. We're not as close to our biological family as they were. Home isn't as happy as theirs. Someone may be missing. And we certainly don't have all that compassion, kindness, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness that St. Paul wrote about.

Let's learn a bit more about the actual family of Jesus. After Joseph, Mary, and Jesus leave the Temple in Jerusalem, they walk back home to Nazareth, about 75 miles north. Nazareth was a little village of about 100 people, maybe as few as 50. The houses would have mostly been connected, maybe a room added on. There would have been only two or three families, and they would have all been related. In Nazareth, the little boys and girls would have all played together until puberty; the women of the village would have watched over them. (Joseph and the other men would have been working.) When Jesus and the other boys turned 13 or so, they would have begun to spend all their time with the men.

In other words, the original Holy Family was 75 or more people, several fathers, several mothers, lots of brothers and sisters, so to speak. There was no such thing as a private, nuclear family,

living a separate life in a separate home. Jesus was loved and taught and brought up by a village, by a community.

Jesus grows up and becomes a man, but he never marries, doesn't have a wife and children--which is highly unusual for his time. Instead of establishing a physical family, Jesus brings together a community of disciples. Once, someone told him that his mother and his brothers were outside waiting for him. Do you remember what Jesus said? "Whoever does the will of my Father is brother and sister and mother to me."

Jesus begins a spiritual family. We call it the church. Through baptism, God has adopted us as His children, so we are in a real sense brothers and sisters--a new Holy Family.

Parishes need to provide that kind of experience. Greeters sincerely welcome us at the door. The Sign of Peace is an opportunity to encourage a stranger. The new church will have a large Gathering Space for people to get to know one another before and after Mass. But it's more: Young people need to know that we love them and value them. Singles need to know that they make a difference, that it does matter whether they are here or not on Sunday morning.

Jesus and his parents do not have to go it alone. There are 75 other people caring for everyone's kids, visiting everyone's elderly parents. Parishes that try to do that become little Nazareths. They become Holy Families too. Strangers no more. Instead, real brothers and real sisters.