

The Holy Family's Real Life

We receive many beautiful Christmas cards this time of year—touching, cleaned-up scenes like our manger here. But today's Gospel shows a different picture: the Holy Family faced hardship. If we're honest, every family does. That's precisely how we connect with them. Mary and Joseph knew the same kinds of challenges our families face, and they can be powerful intercessors for us. With Jesus at the center—what makes the family holy—God can draw grace and goodness out of whatever we face. In fact, as any adult knows, hardships and challenges are often what help us grow most. They can build mettle and strength.

Common Trials, Real Growth

Consider a few examples.

Financial hardship. It brings anxiety, but it can also press spouses to communicate well and, through delayed gratification, guard children from being spoiled. Tight seasons prompt kids to mature and to pitch in. Many adults say, "We were really poor, and I didn't even know it," because they had love—even if the family wasn't perfect.

Illness. Every family encounters it, at least at the end of life. I've known spouses who cared for a husband or wife with dementia over many years and later said it became the biggest period of growth in their relationship with God. The suffering called forth self-gift and deepened faith.

A child's developmental challenges. In many families, such challenges have awakened compassion, awareness, and emotional intelligence in siblings, and have grown at least one parent into a maturity that likely would not have come otherwise.

Relocation and refugee seasons. Mary and Joseph lived as refugees. Families who relocate—or live as refugees—often find that, away from normal support structures, spouses grow more deeply in partnership with each other.

Conflict in marriage. Properly engaged, conflict can lead to growth and to stability. Even if most of us dislike conflict, it often yields better decisions and invites greater self-gift. When older teens and younger children see that Mom and Dad can have conflict and yet are committed through good times and bad, they gain a deeper sense of security—even amid imperfections and loss.

Loss and widowhood. Many who have lost a spouse, by grace and through faith, discover that widowhood becomes an unexpected opportunity to reset and to focus on the Lord as the first love in the final season of life.

In each of these, with Jesus at the center, hardships can build us up and help us mature.

The Virtues We Need

In Joseph, during the flight into Egypt and life as refugees, we see courage and obedience. Courage (fortitude, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit) faces the challenge; obedience keeps us aligned with the Lord's will— "all things work together for good for those who love God." In Mary we see prayerfulness and trust. Though she is largely silent in these hidden years, the Immaculate One lives continual prayer and continual trust in God's plan: what He has promised will come to pass, so she presses into Him amid hardship. In Jesus we see obedience and real dependence: He was entrusted to Mary and Joseph and relied on their love and care. We are called to imitate that dependence by remaining in communion with the Lord.

Dear friends, as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family—and especially as these readings highlight hardship—let us ask the Lord to build up our families in faith. May whatever we endure become, by His grace, the very trials that form us into more mature Christians, ready both to receive His love and to respond in kind.

Praise be Jesus Christ.