

When I say the words, “Holy Family,” what is the image that would come to most minds? Now confess! Joseph is in the background—poor Joseph, so often shown in the background, just watching. Holding a staff or a lily, which is the only reason his hands are not folded piously in prayer. And Mary holding Jesus, or maybe looking down at him, her hands folded in prayer. And of course, all of them with golden halos.

I wonder what the neighbors in Nazareth would have thought of those halos?

Here’s how I like to imagine the Holy Family: Joseph is hard at work, sweating over the board he is sawing. Mary is in the kitchen baking bread, and Jesus is running back and forth between them, tracking flour all over the floor and playing in the wood shavings.

If we admit that God became human—that God is Emmanuel, God with us—then Jesus certainly had a real human family. I’ll bet Joseph yelled at Jesus if he got dangerously close to the saw, and that Mary allowed a little exasperation in her voice as she told him to keep out of the flour.

You certainly could not make a living or feed your family if your hands were folded in prayer all the time. All right, I understand about artistic conventions and symbols...but there is good art and bad art.

We have two statues in our motherhouse chapel in Kentucky that I particularly love. One is Joseph (our patron of Mount Saint Joseph): he is a sturdy Joseph, very masculine, with well-muscled arms, holding carpentry tools instead of a lily. Another is a statue of Mary, taking time out to play with her baby—throwing him high as she dances with joy. In other words, human!

We all have our own very human and slightly flawed or even dysfunctional families. There’s the child who is a disappointment, an alcoholic parent, and the uncle who is a little—you know. But we can rejoice in a shared humanity with the Holy Family.

One commonality I saw in all pictures of the Holy Family that I can remember: Joseph and Mary are always looking at Jesus. How could a family focused on Jesus not be a household of love? And ultimately--no matter the flaws of any real family—if there is love it is generally enough.

I was raised by a widowed mother, a working Mom, and we had our mother-daughter issues. But we had one custom that always stands out in my memory when I think of life with Mom—we never went to bed angry with each other, but always shared mutual apologies for any transgressions of the law of love.

With our church families and wider human community inaccessible in the pandemic, may we rediscover in our own homes that certainty of undeserved love...

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