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The readings chosen by the church to celebrate the feast of the Holy Family leave us with difficult questions. By what standards do we evaluate family relationships, and why? Whom do we include or exclude as family members? And how do we handle family dysfunction, conflict and abuse?

Jesus ben Sira — known to us as Sirach — read the signs of his times through the prism of his faith in order to discern a Hebrew family code. The Pauline letters did the same for the emerging Christian family. The letter to the Christian community at Colossae attempts, among other things, to integrate their new life in Christ into the family code of the day. But this letter used a different approach than the one we see in the Letter to the Ephesians, and generations of believers have been arguing whether subservience or mutuality best typifies the Christian family.

To further complicate the canvas, the church asks us to reflect on a section of the nativity scene in Matthew that is not really about family at all. It is part of his attempt to present Jesus as the new Moses. Matthew points us toward issues of liberation. What does Moses-style liberation have to tell us about being a holy family today?

What “signs of the times” do we read today to discern what makes a family holy?

Hard questions indeed in a time of flux and conflict about sexual orientation, gender roles and relationships, multiple meanings and forms of family life.

Sirach offers a beginning framework for an answer. He calls it “fear of the Lord,” which in his time meant something similar to our virtue of faith. In today’s first reading, he asks how fear of the Lord expresses itself in family relationships. So it might help us approach our own questions if we begin by briefly looking at what lay behind the meaning of family for the Israelites as Sirach was writing around 180 B.C.E.

### **SIRACH 3: 2-6, 12-14**

If there had been some kind of feast of the holy family in Sirach’s time, while the Israelite family code was developing, the feast would have honored large extended families of multiple male-headed households. All family members, including young children, would be engaged in subsistence agriculture in some way. The feast would have celebrated property and progeny, not because either was precious but because both could be productive. It would have, in fact, been a celebration of the intergenerational household’s survival for another year, a survival dependent on the particular family structure that had developed in response to the demands of subsistence agriculture. In other words, what was necessary for survival created, in part, what became the Israelite family code.

In Sirach, we see this family code observed as fitting the needs of the people and, correspondingly, as ordained by God.

Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach (ben Sira), was an experienced sage and teacher conducting a school in Jerusalem for literate young men from wealthier families. The book’s original purpose was as training manual of sorts as the youth prepared to enter the Jerusalem bureaucracy as scribes or other public servants within the theocracy.

With the biblical wisdom tradition as its foundation, Sirach offers practical advice about family behaviors, ordained by God, that further the welfare of the community: “Listen to me your father, O children, and act accordingly, that you may be kept in safety” (Sir. 3:1).

In today’s reading, he joins biblical wisdom traditions with other wisdom traditions of the ancient Near East to explain how a well-functioning family is ordered in a well-

functioning society. He has been called a theological pioneer for integrating biblical and secular wisdom traditions, especially since some of the secular traditions were not of Hebrew origins.

Sirach's teaching expands on the biblical promise "so that your days may be long and that it may go well for you" (Deut 5:16). In the social order decreed by God, children should honor their parents, whom God has placed in authority over them. One need only observe the resulting benefits and blessings of this in the continued life of the family, the land, and the wider society. Sirach is not presenting new information. He weaves together various insights contained in the wisdom tradition. So, for example, "Honor your father and your mother" echoes Exodus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 5:16.

It is important to understand that, at least for Sirach, wisdom is seen as a combination of cultural norms commonly held by Israel, plus the teachings Yahweh gave the people through the Torah. The resulting family code is a form that traces back to Aristotle, who predated Sirach by a few hundred years. Such family codes were a subset of ethics and would also become the model for the family codes of the New Testament, which we will see in the reading from Paul.

## **COLOSSIANS 3:12-21**

And so we move on to Paul's letter to the Colossians with the following awareness: Wisdom comes both from one's faith tradition and from secular wisdom observed. There is an interplay between what a people needs in order to survive, and what it believes is ordained by God. And perhaps that is precisely how God works among us. Where we may see a dichotomy, God may see wholeness. It is, perhaps, this very faith that God is at work in culture — even as culture affects how people understand the divine presence — that honors Wisdom's call for fear of the Lord, and discerns what it means in a particular time and place.

While authorship of the letter to the Colossians is much debated, some scholars believe Paul wrote it prison in the early 60s, along with the letter to the Ephesians. The section we read today calls the Colossians to live a new kind of life, responsive to the still-vivid newness of Christ. In the last few verses, the author tries to apply that newness to the family life code of his day.

Colossians 3:12-17 addresses the behaviors and attitudes that are both sign and consequence of being a holy people beloved by God. One feels the urgency behind

his words, his desire, his demand that those who believe act like believers. That they act with compassion, kindness, forbearance, forgiveness and, above all, by putting on love and letting the peace of Christ dwell and rule in our hearts. There is no separation here between belief and life. One lives life believing and so acts accordingly.

Verse 18 mentions a secular family code — the same device used by Aristotle and Sirach — possibly to reassure the powers that the new Christian way will not lead to anarchy, possibly to push back against anarchy. “To be blunt,” writes scripture scholar Cesar Alejandro Mora Paz in *The International Bible Commentary* (Liturgical Press, 1998), “their inclusion was an attempt to make early Christianity acceptable and eliminate one of the first accusations against it, namely that it was anarchical, trying to subvert the social order.”

“No, we’re not subversives,” the family code says. “See, we are as patriarchal as you are. Kind of.”

Sr. Carolyn Osiek, past president of the Catholic Biblical Association and Catholic Professor of New Testament emerita at Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, Texas, has noted that the household codes of Ephesians and Colossians differ significantly from the code of the day. They address directly all parties rather than only addressing the male authority, and they address the socially inferior member of each pair first. So, for example, wives are told, “Be submissive to your husbands” — at least in Colossians. Ephesians, written around the same time, says, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21).

Also, even if in a subordinate position, this code counts the baptized person as a person in their own right. Women and children were directly addressed as members of the community not merely appendages to the household male authority.

And then, Osiek reminds us, there are the behaviors referred to in other New Testament passages (see 1 Cor 7:12-16, 21-22 and 1 Pet 3:1-2) from which we know that wives were admitted to baptism independently of their husbands and that even if a husband became Christian, his wife and children did not necessarily follow but could make their own decisions. Patriarchal authority did not hold when it came to matters of faith and practice. This is precisely one of the things that made Christians suspect of undermining the social order. In the New Testament, family obligation is sometimes subordinated to the reign of God (see Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21; 9:57-

62; 12:49-53).

Thus, notes Osiek, “while the authors of the household codes felt it necessary — or perhaps even wanted — to reinforce the essentially patriarchal structure of the household, at the same time they did what none before them had. … They moved a familiar piece of their culture toward greater human freedom and dignity for all. The best way to be faithful to their method and intention is to continue taking further steps along the same way.”

## **MATTHEW 2:13-15, 19-23**

The section from Matthew on the infancy of Jesus reprises Moses’ liberation of Israel. Jesus survives an assassination attempt as a baby, as did Moses. Jesus goes to Egypt, as his people once did, and comes out again, as his people also did. Jesus is hunted by Herod, as Moses was hunted by Pharaoh. Thus, for Matthew, Jesus is a fitting messiah, one who embodies the history of his people and will lead by liberating them for a new relationship with God, and each other — including enemies.

Matthew gives us nothing in this reading about nuclear family life or interactions, neither between Joseph and Mary nor between the two and the newborn Jesus. We don’t see either parent holding the child. We don’t hear the child make his first timid sounds. We are instead thrust into the politics of the day and asked to consider our social responsibilities as a people, a family, in Christ.

An angel tells Joseph to flee into Egypt, a traditional place of refuge, because Herod wants to destroy the child just as Pharaoh sought to slay Moses (Exod 2:15). The exile also sets the stage for the later reference from Hosea: “Out of Egypt I have called my son” (Hos 11:1). This is all about the Exodus and Jesus, the new Moses, liberating the new Israel.

Then, so soon after the anticipation of Advent and the joy of Christmas, Matthew leads us into one of the most gruesome stories of the liturgical year, the slaughter of all male children 2 years old and younger in the region. What is Matthew doing here?

Herod’s reputation was well known in antiquity. He killed two of his own sons and ordered several massacres when he felt his power threatened. But there is no record of the massacre Matthew describes. It is not mentioned in other accounts of Herod’s cruelty, or by Josephus in his history of the period. Did Matthew create this story, or

think it historical? It seems rather an echo of the execution of Jewish male infants by Pharaoh, who feared the child Moses might someday subvert the order of the world (Exod 1:15-22).

Via Herod, Matthew has created a humanly inescapable situation for Jesus by ordering the murder of the children. There was physically no way out. Just like Moses, Jesus should not have survived. But he did. The God of Moses and Jesus Christ liberates us.

The Holy Family would have spent four years in Egypt if they did not return from there until after the death of Herod, in 4 B.C.E. But that is not the issue. The episode parallels Exodus 4:19, where God instructs Moses to go back to Egypt, “for all those who are seeking your life are dead.”

A narrative of threefold threats on Jesus’ life reminds us that tyranny was commonplace then, as it was for Moses, and as it is now. And so Matthew’s message of trusting in God’s providence — which has been proven already in the life of Israel — emerges from a faith that expects God to reign in a world where the dominance of the powerful seems unchangeable.

What faith-light do these readings shed on today’s cultural and religious questions? Who is and who is not family, and how do we treat each other, even in and through our differences? From Sirach, I learn a new awareness that wisdom demands a foundational faith in God at work among us, always at work among us. I learn the need for honest observation of cultural realities, how they came to be, and where God is at work in them. That takes thinking, and study, and more than mere lock-step allegiance to opinion or ideology or feeling.

What is God telling us through the struggles of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, for example, or the new questions raised by same-sex marriage? What in our family codes that we see as God’s will should we let go of, or keep, as a faith foundation for living together? And what can we learn from other cultures?

The Pauline author reminds us that we are to live, in our attitudes, choices and decisions, the newness of Christ: his way of valuing, his compassion, kindness, forbearance, forgiveness, and above all, his love. Why? Because first we are loved, and then asked only to let the peace that love brings dwell in our hearts. The author defines this newness by leaving us with a very meaningful choice: Do we continue in subservience or move toward mutuality?

And in Matthew we read a reminder that Jesus and Moses were both about liberation. When it comes to family, what do I need to be liberated from, and toward? I am reminded, too, that liberation requires listening, faith and, sometimes, fleeing for safety.

In what ways do today's family codes liberate or dominate, create subservience or mutuality? What brings wholeness, and what supports powerlessness?

What are your lessons of the day?

## **Planning: Holy Family**

By: Lawrence Mick

The first two readings for this last Sunday of December can be read as simply encouraging healthy family life. Sirach gives advice about honoring one's father and mother and taking care of elderly parents (which might lead to some preaching and/or petitions today). Colossians gives a list of virtues that would enhance the life of any family unit, and urges us to cap them all with love, which should be the ultimate bond of every family. (The last section, with its talk of wives being subordinate, requires explanation today; if it is not the subject of the homily where it can be put into historical context, it should be omitted by using the shorter version of the second reading).

The Gospel passage, on the other hand, pushes us into another realm altogether. This is not ordinary, peaceful family life. The Holy Family is forced to flee in fear for their lives and become refugees in a foreign land. Even when they returned to Israel, they had to move to a new area to avoid the civil authorities.

What does this sound like today? How many families around the world experience this kind of disruption and dislocation today? How many families in our own country are torn apart by war and persecution and economic forces and our federal immigration policies?

This might be an ideal time to remind parishioners of Catholic teaching on immigration and of the basic responsibility we all have to welcome the stranger and to support families who are facing difficult struggles to survive.

This could easily be connected to the themes we have considered for Advent. Are we ready to welcome the Christ who comes to us in the guise of immigrants, documented or undocumented? Are we ready to welcome the stranger into our lives and our hearts?

It is unclear as this column is being written what will happen on the legislative front on immigration reform, but even if a new law is passed, there will still be need for outreach efforts at the local level and there will still be people that the law does not adequately help. If we take the Word of God as our guide, we must go beyond civil law to bring the love of Christ to all our brothers and sisters.

Planners should work with presiders and social justice committee members to determine how best to present resources for concrete responses to these needs. Petitions for families displaced from their homes and homelands can be included in the general intercessions. If there are such families in your community, they might be invited to have special roles in the liturgy today. But remember that the problem is worldwide, so keep the focus broad; it's much more than a domestic political issue.

## **Prayers: Holy Family**

**By:** Paige Byrne Shortel

### **Introduction**

Brothers and sisters, I greet you as family, for we are indeed a family in the Lord. When we think of the Holy Family we may imagine them gathered in the soft light of the stable, safe and warm. But in today's Gospel we are presented with a very different image: Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus as refugees, fleeing for their lives from the evil dictator Herod. Let us pray today for the victims of today's Herods — for all refugees and immigrants — and for open hearts and homes to those who are fleeing persecution and poverty.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you are child of God and child of Mary: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are our brother and call us to be one family: Christ, have mercy.

- Lord Jesus, we beg your forgiveness when we fail to love each other: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Brothers and sisters, God calls us to be a family of believers and to welcome all who are seeking God to be one with us. That we may be a Holy Family, let us pray that Jesus will ... *Be born in us; be born in our world.*

**Minister** For the family of humankind: that we may regard each other as children of the one God, we pray ... *Be born in us; be born in our world.*

- For the family of the church: that we may treat each other as brothers and sisters, we pray ... *Be born in us; be born in our world.*
- For our families and those with whom we live: that we may honor those who gave us life and nurture those whose lives must be protected, we pray ... *Be born in us; be born in our world.*
- For those families torn apart by poverty and war: that refugees find a home, the hungry are fed, all young people educated, the unemployed given meaningful work, and that nations may leave in peace, we pray ... *Be born in us; be born in our world.*
- We remember those who have died ... (*names*). So that all the grieving, especially those who are now alone, may find comfort and companionship, we pray ... *Be born in us; be born in our world.*

**Presider** Creator God, hear us as we pray, joining our prayers with believers all over the world and praying as one family in Jesus' name. Ame

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