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As people grow older and prepare for their transition into the next life which Catholics call eternal life, the notion of “legacy” becomes important. Some people wonder what their legacy will be. Will it be a list of successful accomplishments? Will it be various donations made to charitable organizations or a trust fund or foundation that has been set up to help others in need? Maybe it will be a substantial gift made to the field of medicine or research or education. Perhaps the legacy will be a monetary inheritance left to family members or friends. Whatever the legacy may be, it is a gift meant to assist those in need and to motivate others to remember the generosity and benevolence of the gift-giver.

In 2009 within one month, my father George was diagnosed with and died of lung cancer. A marine engineer by trade and a warm, loving, simple man by heart, he valued family which meant everything to him. His greatest desire throughout his life and in his last days was that my mom, sister, brother, eight nephews, one niece and I would always preserve and live out his great abiding love for family. In my closing words during his eulogy, I looked out at the assembly and said, “Well, here we are, Dad, all gathered together in your honor, filled with great grief yet celebrating the love that you gave to us that binds us together. We are family, Dad, and we are your legacy.”

This Sunday we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family, and the readings* are about just that: family, accented by promise, faith and legacy.

Abram, concerned about an heir, has a heart-to-heart talk with God about his and Sarah's childlessness. God quells Abram's anxiety. In addition to having promised Abram land, God now promises him an heir, one who will be his own offspring. Abram and Sarah will have a son. Furthermore, Abram's descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. What marvelous promises! Abram's further response is to trust God who views Abram's decision as an act of righteousness. God fulfills the divine promise; Sarah bears a son whom Abram calls Isaac. As the inheritor of the divine covenant and the promises God made with Abram, Isaac later becomes Israel's second great patriarch. Abram now has an heir, and he and Sarah now have not only a family but also a future legacy.

In his letter to the Hebrews, Paul, the so-called author of this book of the Hebrew Scriptures, briefly recounts three Genesis stories about Abraham: Abraham's call narrative (Genesis 12:1-9); God's covenant with Abraham and eventual birth of Isaac and later descendants (15:1-6; 16:1-16; 21:1-7); and the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham (22:1-19). Paul instructs his audience about the great theological virtue of faith; he uses Abraham as his primary example to showcase this virtue as well as the beneficence of God who is faithful to divine promises made. Paul echoes the theme of Abraham's descendants being as numerous as the stars in the sky but adds that they will also be as countless as the sands on the seashore. Embedded in Paul's message is the recognition of Abraham's descendants as his legacy.

The Gospel reading from Luke 2:22-40 also focuses on family, faith, promises fulfilled and legacy. Joseph and Mary take their young child Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to God in the Temple as was the custom dictated by the law given to Moses. In the Temple, the family meets Simeon who was divinely promised that he would not die until he had seen the Christ of the Lord. With faith in God and God's promise, Simeon waits. To his delight, he not only meets Jesus but also embraces him; therein, God's promise to Simeon is fulfilled. In the Temple, the family also encounters Anna, a devout prophetess. Both she and Simeon speak about the child and his future mission, though Anna's words are not articulated by the Gospel writer. Joseph and Mary's family legacy will involve having a son who will bring hope and contradiction to a world waiting for salvation and liberation.

In sum, all three readings center on family, faith and legacy. Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna were all righteous people of deep faith. All received divine promises that God fulfilled because they believed. These readings invite us to think about family, to re-evaluate our understanding of legacy, and to believe wholeheartedly in the One whose word and promises are true. Furthermore, Jesus who is a descendant of David, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham will be a blessing for all the families of the earth, thus bringing God's promise to Abraham to deeper fulfillment (Genesis 12:3; 15:4 and Matthew 1:1).

GENESIS 15:1-6; 21:1-3

This reading from Genesis forms the heart of the stories about the first generation of the family God has chosen. The opening verse, "The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision saying ..." indicates that Abram's experience of God is an audio-visual dialogue, and the phrase itself, commonly found in the writings of the prophets, situates Abram in the prophetic tradition. God's initial words to Abram are reassuring and recall Genesis 12:1-3 where God promises to give him land, to make him a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great, to have him be a blessing for those who bless him and a curse for those who curse him, and in him all the families of the earth will be blessed. What wonderful promises Abram receives, but his concern is that those gifts will be useless unless he has an heir to inherit them. In ancient Israelite legal practice, only sons inherit and the eldest son receives a double portion (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). When no sons exist, daughters may inherit, and in the absence of daughters, the closest male relatives inherit (Numbers 27:8-11). Abram has no children, but that does not mean he has no heir. Eliezar, the steward of Abram's house, could legally be heir to Abram's property. What is at stake here, however, is Abram's bloodline. He has no heir to carry on his family name and his life as a whole, and he has no descendant(s) to inherit God's family-related promises. Thus, without a child, he has no future and no genealogy. For Abram, his and Sarah's childlessness is an affliction which moves him to give voice to a heartfelt complaint to God.

God's response to Abram is gracious. God gives Abram another promise: Eliezar will not be Abram's heir; Abram will have a child of his own as his heir. This child will not only inherit the promise of land but also carry on Abram's bloodline and family signified by descendants who will be more numerous than the stars Abram can count. Abram's response is a simple one, he puts his faith in God which God credits

to him as an act of righteousness.

Through Abram, we see what faith is. Faith is not blind trust, it is rooted in a dynamic relationship centered in dialogue, honesty and mutual trust. God entrusts Abram with a series of promises, and Abram trusts in God to bring the promises to fulfillment. They both remain faithful to each other. This two-way relationship is the foundation of righteousness and a quality of right relationship.

In the last part of the narrative, we see the long-awaited, much anticipated promise fulfilled. Sarah gives birth to a son, and two people beyond their procreative years now have a family. Abram and Sarah's son will inherit the covenant God made with Abram, and his descendants — beginning with Isaac and inclusive of Jesus — will be many (Matthew 1:1).

HEBREWS 11:8, 11-12, 17-19

In this reading from Hebrews, Paul, the alleged author of the letter, uses Abraham as a model to instruct his listeners on the virtue of faith. To stress his point, he cleverly uses the literary technique called “cataloguing”: the phrase “by faith” begins each of Paul's examples of Abraham's faith, beginning with Abraham's call story, followed by a brief reflection on how Abraham fathered descendants, and concluding with a comment on the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Through this passage, we see that faith has a motivating and guiding role in Abraham's life and, by extension, for the lives of all believers.

Because of his faith, Abraham is able to trust in God, and faith is the agent that will bring him to his destination. Because of his great faith in God, he is willing to set out with Sarah, his brother's son, Lot, and their extended family to go to where he had never been before. Abraham's life is turned upside down but because of his trust and his “Yes” to God, he changes the course of history for him, for Sarah and his future descendants. God's people as sojourners begins with Abraham, and the journeying continues today, whether our journey is a physical one or a spiritual one. As sojourners like Abraham, we are called to journey with God into unfamiliar territory. Though not mentioned, Sarah, too, trusted in her spouse and in his experience of their God. To be noted, Abraham's obedience involved no dialogue or discernment with God. Later call narratives show a growth in the tradition in this regard (e.g., Exodus 3:1-12; Isaiah 6:1-13; Jeremiah 1:4-10).

Paul continues to point out to his listeners that because of his faith, Abraham was able to trust in God's word and promise that he and Sarah would have a child of their own, an heir to the covenant, with descendants to follow. To express the fullness of the promise, the biblical writer uses the principle of intertextuality. For example, the phrase "descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky" draws on the original Genesis narrative of the promise made to Abraham, but the author enhances the message by adding a further metaphor, "as countless as the sands on the seashore," an image used in other Hebrew Scripture texts (e.g. Judges 7:12; 1 Samuel 13:5; 1 Kings 4:20). The fact that in their old age, Abraham and Sarah lived to experience the partial fulfillment of God's promise to them, namely, the birth of Isaac who would later produce descendants, is a testimony of God's faith in the couple and a sign of God's fidelity to them. Thus, faith is a mutual experience between human beings and the sacred Presence also known as God.

Paul's last comment about Abraham's faith involves the near-sacrifice of Abraham's son Isaac. This part of the Hebrews text deserves several comments. First, the notion of being "put to the test" is an allusion to the narrator's comment on the Genesis story (22:1) which Paul incorporates into his address. Second, Isaac is not Abraham's only son. With Hagar, Abraham first fathers Ishmael. From Ishmael comes forth many descendants who are Abraham's "family" but not heirs to the Abrahamic covenant per se. Finally, the fact that Abraham is ready to sacrifice Isaac is a further testimony to his faith in God: Abraham is willing to sacrifice the promise not only of an heir but also of descendants. He is willing to let go of everything promised. Such faith is magnanimous. The entire passage begs the question: "Is our faith as strong and deep as Abraham's faith?"

LUKE 2:22-40

The themes of family, faith and legacy reach a crescendo in this portion of the infancy narrative of Luke's Gospel. In this story, Jesus emerges from within a family and social world deeply enmeshed in Israel's traditions. Joseph and Mary had observed the laws regarding circumcision and purification, and now they follow the prescription of Exodus 13:2 regarding the presentation of the first born as dedicated to God. They take Jesus to Jerusalem and into the Temple where they encounter Simeon, a righteous and devout person who has received a divine promise: Before he dies, he will see the Messiah, Israel's consolation. Sustained by faith, Simeon receives his heart's desire, and he is now peacefully ready to die. His words about

Jesus are prophetic. Jesus' mission will be to the Gentiles and to the Jews. Both will be the recipients of God's salvific love. Hence, the promise to Abraham, specifically, that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed, comes to a deeper fulfillment through Jesus who, through Abraham, is related to both Isaac and Ishmael, to Jews and Gentiles alike. Today, the promise extends to Jews, Christians and Muslims among others who are all part of the divine family living under blessing and promise.

Anna, a devout, aged prophetess, also encounters Jesus and his parents in the Temple. She, too, speaks well of the child whom she and Simeon see as leading Israel to God and God to Israel, symbolized by the city Jerusalem which represents the redemption and salvation of all God's people (see Isaiah 2:2-6; 60—62; Revelation 21:1-4, 9-27).

Both Simeon and Anna reveal to Joseph and Mary theirs and Jesus' future legacy. Yes, Jesus will be the hope of Israel — the Messiah and long-awaited one — but as Simeon points out, Jesus will be destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel and will be a sign that will be contradicted. Furthermore, Mary will suffer terribly on account of her son's mission that will lead to his eventual death.

For Joseph, Mary and Jesus, joy, conflict and pain lie ahead as a result of those who will accept or resist God's saving initiatives through Jesus' mission and ministry. Such is the legacy bequeathed to all of us who dare to embody the life of Christ through our lives, who are willing to live as part of his "family," and who choose to love those who walk in Jesus' footsteps.

Planning: Holy Family

By: Lawrence Mick

This weekend again brings some scheduling challenges. Similar to last week, Holy Family Sunday is followed by the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God on Monday, January 1. This year, the U.S. bishops have determined this feast is not observed as a holy day of obligation.

For many parishioners, of course, the main concern will be how they celebrate New Year's Eve. Parish leaders need to discern what schedule would best enable parishioners to celebrate both feasts while still finding time for turning-of-the-year festivities. Some might welcome a Mass early Sunday evening before the parties

begin. Others might welcome a late evening Mass in lieu of partying to welcome the year. A Monday evening Mass might suit those whose partying makes a morning Mass difficult. Talk to several parishioners about their party plans and try to plan accordingly. Remember the challenge of getting enough liturgical ministers for whatever Masses you schedule.

For Holy Family, the Lectionary offers multiple options. You may use the readings from Cycle A or the alternate ones for Cycle B. Among those, there are also several long and short forms that may be chosen. While it's often best to use the long forms, this might be a time to opt for the shorter forms since people will be at worship so often these two weekends. This would also avoid the difficulties with the reading from Colossians, whose long form includes language about wives being submissive to their husbands. (If you use the long form of that reading, the preacher should certainly address what it really means.) Make sure that lectors and musicians (and preachers) know which readings are being used at each Mass. Getting that information out early is more important than usual in light of people's holiday schedules.

The Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God does not have options for readings (unless your bishops allows use of the Mass for Peace), but you still need to decide which of the themes of the day you will emphasize. It is the octave day of Christmas, the first day of a new year, the World Day of Prayer for Peace, and the oldest Marian feast. You might combine a few of these but not all in one celebration.

Prayers for peace are certainly appropriate in the intercessions; prayers for a blessed new year also fit there. A blessing of calendars could be done at the end of Mass. Such a blessing can be found in *Prayers for the Domestic Church* by Fr. Ed Hays, or you could adapt the "Prayer for the New Year" in *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*, page 85-87 in the second edition. Or just end the Mass with the blessing for the beginning of the year in the Missal.

Prayers: Holy Family

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Family life is always a challenge, and our religious ancestors had advice about how to make it work. Though many cultural values were different, we realize how family life was interwoven with faith. We don't know much about Jesus' family, but we hear today that they followed traditional Jewish laws. We tend to think of them as so different from our own families; but, like us, they would have struggled to understand what they were being called to. We are more alike than we think.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were raised in a humble Jewish family: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you were brought to the Temple by Mary and Joseph: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you show us that all families can seek God's guidance: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for our own families and for all families.

Minister For the church: That it may be a wise and compassionate guide for families of every configuration ... we pray,

- For all families throughout the world subject to violence, injustice or lack of resources ... we pray
- For families who try to be loving and faithful in the midst of daily challenges and struggles ... we pray
- For national policies and funding that support families and their needs ... we pray
- For families separated by distance, issues of faith or other beliefs and viewpoints ... we pray
- For children in need of foster care or adoption and those who choose to parent them ... we pray
- For all families in this community, especially those dealing with illness or death ... we pray

Presider God of life, we are all members of families, often struggling and imperfect. Help us to remember that Mary, Joseph and Jesus lived together in faith and love, dependent upon you to sustain them. Show us how to love, accept and be grateful for our own families. Teach us how to forgive family members who have wounded us. Grant us the grace to be the people you call us to be. We ask this in the name of

your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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