

Holy Family-C

December 30, 2018

St. Patrick

This is how the opening prayer puts it this Holy Family Sunday within the Christmas season:

“...graciously grant, O God, that we may imitate the Holy Family in practicing the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity...”

Yes, the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph: How many traditional families draw such strength from how the Holy Family lived faithfully!

I’ve also seen unconventional families which likewise show me shared love.

It happened ten years ago. In the evening I received a phone call from a St. Patrick parishioner. I was told that Father Tim Sullivan, St. Pat’s pastor at that time, was out of town, and that a parishioner Kat Bagley was critically ill and needed the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

About 10:00 p.m. I arrived at Methodist University Hospital and went to the seventh floor of the hospital’s East Wing. It was an ICU section, with sliding glass doors alongside each room on the long corridor. I arrived at Kat’s room, and the curtains were not drawn. Kat was in bed, in a coma. Her partner for twenty years, Karen (who did not know I had been summoned), sat next to the bed and was holding Kat’s left hand. Karen would be sitting there all night long.

I stared at the scene before entering the room. I had a visceral reaction—an immediate gut response—to what I was seeing. Late that night, it came to me: How many times have I seen a similar devotion of a married partner, keeping a long vigil at the bedside? Is that scene of Karen with Kat any different?

The next year I was asked by the Commercial Appeal, along with other clergy of varied faith traditions, what we thought about gay marriage. I recounted in what I submitted to the newspaper this late-night experience which I had with Kat and Karen. I acknowledged the official teaching of the Catholic Church against gay marriage, but then noted that many people are having experiences similar to mine—experiences which are causing them to wonder what, in fact, makes family and a marriage.

“...graciously grant, O God, that we may imitate the Holy Family in practicing the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity...”

Was not Karen, with Kat, “practicing the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity”? That question still gnaws at my soul.

Keep in mind, St. Patrick’s, that the Gospels re-define what makes family. Oh, you know the scene: In the last Gospel written, that of St. John, it happened four verses before Jesus died on the cross. The crucified Jesus sees his mother and, as that Gospel puts it, **“the disciple whom he loved,”** standing next to her. We never know his name, but he’s the only male disciple who stays with Jesus at the cross in all four Gospels. Yes, you know the scene: To Mary, Jesus says, **“Behold, your son.”** Then, to that disciple, **“Behold, your mother.”** As a result, that unknown male disciple becomes Mary’s “son,”—well, then, he also became Jesus’ “brother.” Yes, what makes family in the final Gospel is that you stay with Jesus in his passion, in his suffering. It’s not blood ties alone.

This year Kat Bagley died. Her wife, Karen, had become bed-ridden and was only able to visit Kat briefly before her death. In Kat’s final hospitalization, however, a core group of friends stayed with her, oversaw her care. They kept vigil.

By Gospel standards, then, they showed that they were family...staying with a loved one in the midst of her passion, her suffering.

In today’s Gospel, we hear that when Jesus was twelve-years-old, the Holy Family went through “growing pains,” which included anguish, worry, searching...and, finally, relief mixed with frustration, even anger.

That’s part of “family” life, and we know the richness and the challenges of living truly as family. The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph can intercede for us, as they also lived the nitty-gritty of everyday family life.

Yes, *sisters and brothers*—How many times have I called you *that*—we being family by reason of our baptism? May we find joy in that Jesus lived as part of a real family, as we pray this Sunday: **“...graciously grant, O God, that we may imitate the Holy Family in practicing the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity...”**

Amen!