

The Holy Family: The Emergence of Devotion in the Church

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Since Jesus, Mary and Joseph were present at the very dawn of the Christian era, most people would probably assume that devotion to the Holy Family would be one of the earliest devotions in the Church. In fact, however, for several centuries after the birth of Christ, the family group of Jesus, Mary and Joseph does not seem to have been directly referred to in any ecclesiastical, theological, spiritual or devotional writings. Of course, there always has been devotion to Jesus, Mary and Joseph as individuals, but not, however, as a family.

The absence of reference to the family of Nazareth as a group was due mainly to the fact that, until around the beginning of the seventeenth century, the idea of family was much wider than the way we think of it today - father, mother and children. The word 'family' was used in the sense of 'household' and referred to all the people under the authority of the head of the house, including relatives and servants. It could also be used to mean the servants alone, and such groups as the retinue of a nobleman, or the staff of a high-ranking military officer. Thus we find a usage as late as 1641 which states, 'The family consisted of few less than five hundred,' and an even later one saying, 'The proprietor keeps a large family for its defence.' (In English, the first usage of the word with a restricted meaning given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is quite late. It is a quotation from Milton, dated 1667, 'As Father of his Familie, he clad Their nakedness'). With such broad understandings of the word, it is hardly surprising that people did not think of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as a family until quite late. In fact, even in the world of art, works done on the topic of the hidden life usually included others, for example St John the Baptist, St Elizabeth and Zachary or Our Lady's parents.

The emergence of the theme of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as a family group, in late sixteenth and seventeenth-century spirituality - as well as being due to the change in the meaning of the word 'family' - resulted, for the most part, from the development of an interest in and devotion to St Joseph. It was in the fifteenth century that the first treatises devoted exclusively to St Joseph began to appear and many *Lives* of him were written. Jean Gerson (1363-1429), the main theologian at the Council of Constance (1414-1418), proclaimed the mission and wonderful holiness of St Joseph in his letters and sermons. He regarded him as patron of families, of nobles, of workers and of the dying. He also called on his protection for the Church which was torn apart by the Great Western Schism. He spoke too of 'a mystery so profound and hidden for centuries, this trinity so worthy of wonder and veneration, Jesus, Joseph and Mary,' and he emphasised the graces which St Joseph received from constantly living with and relating to the child Jesus and his Mother. Popular preachers of the time also took up the theme of St Joseph and played an important role in spreading devotion to him. As the devotion blossomed and as the understanding of the family unit changed, people were led to broaden their reflection to include St Joseph's family life with Jesus and Mary. St Francis de Sales (1557-1662), wrote in a letter to St Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641) in 1610, 'Live Jesus and his most holy mother! Amen. And praise be to our good father, St Joseph.' Also, when speaking of St Joseph, Francis de Sales was led to refer to the family of which he was head as 'the Trinity on earth which in some way represents the most holy Trinity.'

Even though St Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444) used the term 'Holy Family' in reference to Jesus, Mary and Joseph as early as 1440, and would seem to have been the first to do so, the word 'family' was still not used by authors when referring to them in the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth. Rather the words 'Trinity,' 'earthly Trinity' or 'created Trinity' were used.

During the first part of the seventeenth century, growing attention was given to the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and it was probably around 1630 that a devotion started to be organised, even though it was not very widespread. That year a French layman, Jerome Le Royer Dauversiere (1597-1659), from the diocese of Angers, consecrated himself and his family to the Holy Family. He also organised a Confraternity of the Holy Family to support his projects of the Hospitallers of St Joseph and the founding of Montreal in Canada. The seminary of St Sulpice in Paris, under the influence of Jean Jacques Olier (1608-1657) its founder, developed very early on an attachment 'to the holy Child Jesus and his family' and devotion to the Holy House of Loreto. The connection between the Holy Family and Loreto is that according to an ancient tradition, the house contained in the shrine at Loreto in the north of Italy, is the one where Our Lady lived with her parents and where the Annunciation took place. It was also popularly believed that the Holy Family lived there from the time they returned from their exile in Egypt as Anna and Joachim, Our Lady's parents, had died by then. The house is reputed to have been brought by angels (some say it was brought stone by stone by the Crusaders; others say by a family called *de Angelis*) from Nazareth, first to Illyrium in 1291 and then to Loreto in 1294. Olier went on pilgrimage to Loreto in 1630 and experienced both physical and spiritual healing there. Also in the first half of the seventeenth century, people began to look to Nazareth for lessons on living family life.

The theme of Jesus, Mary and Joseph was also beginning to emerge in spiritual writings of the time. This could be seen as a natural consequence of the centrality in religious thought of the Incarnation which, of course, was the whole *raison-detre* of the home at Nazareth. However, writing relating specifically to the Holy Family as a group was still quite rare. This was partially due to the fact that no liturgical feast of the Holy Family had been established in the Church and preachers and writers of meditations usually followed the liturgical calendar in choosing their topics. In general, those who did refer to the Holy Family invited their readers or listeners to contemplate the exceptional situation of a family whose child was the Word incarnate; the spiritual relationships and sharing of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and the Holy Family as powerful intercessors. The faithful were also invited to imitate the virtues of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and to share in their life of holiness in the ordinariness of their daily life at Nazareth, in their unity and in their prayer life.

Besides Western Europe, devotion to the Holy Family was spreading in other countries. From France, it arrived in Canada where it developed rapidly. In 1642 for example, the proposed city of Montreal was consecrated to the Holy Family. It was in Canada also that a feast of the Holy Family was first celebrated. This feast was instituted in 1665 by Bishop Francois de Montmorency Laval (1623-1708) the first bishop of Quebec City who himself had great personal devotion to the Holy Family.

The Rosary of the Holy Family which had the approval of Bishop de Laval became quite popular. This rosary consisted of three decades. On the large beads was said the 'Our Father' to ask God through the intercession of the Holy Family to look after the spiritual and temporal needs of all Christian families. On the small beads was said the invocation 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Joachim and Anne, come to our aid. Blessed Trinity, one God, have mercy on us.' This was a way of recalling the thirty years that Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived together as a family, a time of which each moment is worthy of special veneration. A 'Gloria' was said at the end of each decade to thank the Blessed Trinity for the immeasurable graces it had poured out on this created Trinity. It was proposed that this rosary be said with devotion and recollection while meditating on some mystery, for example the virtues of St Joseph, during the first decade, the virtues of Our Lady during the second and the virtues of the Child Jesus during the third. In no other part of the world did devotion to the Holy Family spread with such speed and with such good results.

Poland is another example of a country in which devotion to the Holy Family was beginning to develop in the seventeenth century, once more as a result of devotion to St Joseph. In 1624 the

Office of St Joseph, Patriarch and Husband of the Blessed Virgin was published in Cracow. Each one of its seven Hours began with the words, 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph. a God come to my aid ... ' The hymn of each Hour recalled an important moment in St Joseph's life, for example, his betrothal to Our Lady; his anguish; the birth of Jesus; the flight into Egypt; the return to Nazareth; the finding of Jesus in the temple and the death of St Joseph.

In Silesia, Bernard Rosa (1624-1696) a Cistercian had great personal devotion to St Joseph and promoted it throughout his life in his own abbey and beyond. He wrote extensively on the theology of St Joseph, and his devotion and study led him to see Jesus, Mary and Joseph as 'the Trinity incarnate,' 'the created Trinity,' 'the Church in its embryonic state' and 'the first living Church.' He saw Jesus, Mary and Joseph together as being 'great in love, united in love, and helping the faithful in all their needs.' In his writing he demonstrated how Jesus, Mary and Joseph are the powerful protectors of the Church in its struggle to gain the respect due to the name of God since the death of Jesus Christ. Rosa also published several prayers in honour of St. Joseph where the three members of the Holy Family are seen together. He saw imitation of the lives of St Joseph and of the Holy Family as one of the most important Christian duties.

As far as papal documents are concerned, references to Jesus, Mary and Joseph began to appear in the late sixteenth century. However, they are very rare in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and have no doctrinal content. In fact, they are mainly concerned with the setting up of and re-affirming associations and confraternities dedicated to the Holy Family.

Devotion to the Holy Family continued to develop in varying degrees throughout the world during the succeeding centuries with a liturgical feast finally being established for the universal Church by Pope Benedict XV in 1921. Then, as with many other areas of Church life, Vatican II brought about major changes in the devotional aspects of spirituality. Devotions - among them devotion to the Holy Family - declined immediately after the Council. However, in latter years, especially during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, there has been a renewed awareness of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, especially as models of the Christian family life. Devotion to the Holy Family and spiritualities based on the mystery continue to exist. Like other devotions and spiritualities, their expression has changed somewhat since the encouragement given by Vatican II to place greater emphasis on the word of God and the liturgy.

Through family movements and spirituality groups of married couples, the Church has continued to propose the Holy Family as a model of holiness. Several associations dedicated to the Holy Family have been founded to cater for the pastoral needs of families including, especially in more recent times, care of dysfunctional families and families in difficulty. Although the Holy Family is inimitable, it bears witness to the greatness of the institution of the family. It was the vehicle chosen by God to enable the Incarnation to take place. Mary and Joseph fulfilled their vocation within the framework of family life in the holy relationship which they had between themselves and with the Son of God. In recent years, Christian families themselves have explained how Nazareth has inspired their efforts to make their families 'communities of praise and service, communities of love and gift, a group of pilgrims on their way towards God,' a school of contemplation and missionary dynamism. The Holy Family has also continued to inspire congregations of religious life, secular institutes and institutes of apostolic life, especially, though not exclusively, in countries where the Church is still relatively young. The call to religious groups in the mid 1960s to return to their founding charism, has led to a re-discovery of the original intuitions of founders and foundresses, and has greatly contributed to a deepening of the spirituality of Nazareth, showing how the mystery of the Holy Family is an unfathomable source of inspiration for the spirituality not only of family life but also of both monastic and apostolic religious congregations.