

Feast of the Holy Family Year A 28. 12. 25

No two families are alike but the dynamic of love is the same; that is, the will to be together for the sake of one another. Living in community comes close but is not quite the same except in this dynamic of love. It differs because it usually lacks the blood relationship and indeed if there is a blood relationship this is firmly put in its place.

*“Monks must be on their guard not to take it on themselves to defend another monk in the monastery whatever happens or to be his champion so to speak, even though united by the closest ties of blood.” (RB69)*

This allows the dynamic of love – of mutual obedience unsullied by personal interest – to come to the fore. But still, as in a family, others are needed to make this possible: indeed it’s only through many years of such labour that a monk or nun may become complete enough to face the world, to face God, alone – these are the Anchorites or Hermits:

*“not in the first fervour of their conversion but after a long probation in a monastery these men have learnt how to fight against the devil, well taught by the companionship of many brethren;...secure now without the consolation of a comrade, they are able to fight with God’s help against the vices of the flesh and the mind single handed....”. (RB1)*

So both the monastery and the family as formative – the monastery forming a few perhaps to fight alone and the family to form us all in this respect – some through a long process of forming and being formed by families of their own and others facing the solitary combat that will one day face us all, for some sooner rather than later. And a perceptive visitor, one that is already formed by a loving family or community, can soon tell if this dynamic of formative love is at work in another community or family. The members of the family or community may all differ in their weaknesses and strengths but in a good community or family there’s a sort of synergy at work, something greater than the whole, something new and wholesome, which may surprise even those taking part – indeed takes on the nature of love, of holiness, as an unself-conscious self-giving, not a duty or a burden convention demands, but an entirely natural joy. This is when grace completes nature so fully that we don’t even need to worry about it, to raise it as a question. The children of such a process can go out into the world to face the devil, or God, with the confidence engendered by love.

We celebrate this in the family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus – not really knowing the details of their formative process, but knowing its end result: a child willing to take on the world’s sin so formed as he is in the dynamic of love. It’s a model and a hope for us too whether in a community of celibates or in forming a family of our own with always that final solitary combat in mind.

Family and community then as a battleground!

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