

**Holy Family Sunday
December 26, 2010
Noon Liturgy**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

Many of you may be feeling a bit “over-churched” today. Lots of liturgies lately in a very short time period: Christmas Eve vigil liturgies; Christmas day Masses all day; and here we are again the next day! Trust me: those of us presiding at these liturgies have very much the same feeling.

And in preparing homilies, it doesn't help when the celebration is called “Holy Family Sunday,” and yet the readings bear little or no connection to that theme. The Sirach reading does speak about honoring one's parents, but that's about it.

The theme in Matthew's gospel is really much more about how he is always at great pains to illustrate that Jesus is the “new” Moses--in his mission and in his teaching. The evangelist obviously knew the story about how the Egyptian Pharaoh was forewarned by his own “magi” that the birth of a Hebrew child would challenge his own authority. His murderous intent is frustrated by Moses' father's dreams who acts on the dreams's instruction to save his son. Moses is saved and becomes the savior of Israel leading them out of Egypt. The quote Matthew uses “Out of Egypt I have called my son” refers to this story.

Matthew's point is, quite simply, that Mary, Joseph and Jesus repeat the legend quite literally. This is biblical symbolism at its highest. But we are encouraged today to let our imaginations be drawn beyond biblical symbolism into the real-life relationships that must have existed between Joseph, Mary and Jesus.

How do you suppose Jesus did experience Joseph and Mary? What would Jesus remember and tell us if he could about his early and formative years? I want to leave you with just two possibilities.

First Joseph. What must he have been like for Jesus? In reading a section on Joseph in Judith Dupre's new book called *Full of Grace*, I was struck by her use of a Woody Allen line from a few year's back. Woody said: "Eighty percent of life is [just] showing up." That sounds so much like Joseph to me. He just shows up—all the time, everywhere. He is the most quiet person in all the gospel stories. In fact, he doesn't utter one word in all gospel accounts. He dreams a lot, listens carefully, always obeys, and always shows up.

I imagine that Jesus felt so protected, so loved, so free precisely because Joseph was always just there. It is no accident that Jesus favorite way of naming God was "Abba," a word that only a few others in his time used to

name God. The word means Dad. It is a remarkable tribute to Joseph, who always just showed up. That's what a Dad does; gthat's what God does.

And now for Mary. What must she have been like for Jesus? Of all that probably could be said here, I'm always drawn to a Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem; even the title says it all: "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air we Breathe." It's a long poem, but it begins this way: "Wild air, world-mothering air, / nestling me everywhere, / that each eyelash or hair Girdles; / goes home betwixt / The fleeciest, frailest-fixed / Snowflake; that's fairly mixed / With, riddles, and is rife / In every least thing's life; /

We don't always see air. We don't often feel air. We only smell it when there's soot. But it is in us, around us, keeps us warm or cools us. We cannot live without it. Nothing can live without it. And in my imagination, Mary was, and is, the air through which Jesus breathes. All other gifts come first through her. What an extraordinary bond between mother and son. And she remains our mother as well.

To all of you who are parents—in whatever fashion—I suggest these two descriptions of *this* Holy Family are eminently worth imitating in your own lives. Eighty percent of life *is* showing up—for your own son or daughter. And we all still need gentle, warm, inviting air just to breathe. May this

Holy Family live on in our own families and in our own world today.