



The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

By Mary Ann Collett

On this Sunday within the Octave of Christmas, we honor the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. In honoring them, we also honor all families, large or small. While honoring all families, we honor the family of God, the Church. But most especially, we focus in on the hidden, day-to-day life of the Holy Family.

As I was reflecting on the Feast of the Holy Family. I came across this picture with Jesus sitting on what appears to be St. Joseph's lap playing with a dog and Mary watching them. But I was drawn to the dog (it looks like a puppy) in the picture. I never thought about Jesus having a pet dog inside His home before I saw this picture.

Now, with all of the modern technology available to us today. I began a search to find out more about dogs mentioned in the Bible. But before I share a few discoveries with you, I will continue my reflection about The Holy Family.

Let's begin; I would like to invite you to reflect, today, upon your own family life. Some families are strong in virtue, some struggle with basic communication. Some are faithful day in and day out, some are broken and deeply wounded. No matter what the case, know that God wants to heal and enter more deeply into your family life just as it is right now.

All the hustle and bustle leads up to and includes Christmas Day, which is the first day in the eight-days of the Octave of Christmas. This celebration allows us a bit more time to reflect upon the Christmas story, including the everyday reality that was part of their lives as The Holy Family.

The family home of Jesus, Mary and Joseph would have been, in many ways, just like any other home. They would have related together, talked, had fun, disagreed, worked, eaten, dealt with problems, and encountered everything else that makes up daily family life.

I have a few questions in mind. What was it like to have Jesus for a son, Mary as a wife and mother, and Joseph as a father and husband? What was it like to live day in and day out in the household of St. Joseph? Their home would have certainly been a sacred place and a dwelling of true peace and unity. But it would have also been so much more. Of course, the virtues of Jesus and Mary were perfect, and St. Joseph was truly a “just man” therefore, their home would have been a home of much love.

But with that said, their family would not have been exempt from daily toil, hurt and challenges that face most families. For example, they would have encountered the death of loved ones, St. Joseph most likely passed away prior to Jesus’ public ministry. They would have encountered misunderstanding and gossip from others. Our Blessed Mother, for example, was found with child out of wedlock. This would have been a topic of discussion among many for sure. They would have had to fulfill all daily chores, earn a living, put food on the table, attend gatherings of family and friends and the like. They would have lived normal family life in every way.

This is significant because it reveals God’s love for family life. The Father allowed His Divine Son to live this life and, as a result, elevated family life to a place within the Trinity. The holiness of the Holy Family reveals to us that every family is invited to share in God’s divine life and to encounter ordinary daily life with grace and virtue.

As promised, I would like to share with you a few discoveries while researching about dogs. They were frequently mentioned in the Bible.

- They acted as guard dogs watching houses, and protected and controlled flocks of goats and sheep;
- specially bred dogs were used for hunting.
- *‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores...’ Luke 16:19-21*



Lazarus and the rich man: the dogs lick the sores of Lazarus

- The dog was seen as an unclean animal; it could not be eaten. Despite its usefulness, its name was used as a reproach.
- Until recently, many archaeologists and biologists believed that dogs were first domesticated no more than 13,000 years ago, either in East Asia or the Middle East. A burial site in Israel contained the 12,000-year-old remains of an elderly man cradling a puppy. (Nov. 14, 2013)

- Against a Hebrew background *Jesus says, “Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they (the swine) trample them underfoot and (the dogs) turn to attack you” (Matthew 7:6)*. Those who reject the message about the Kingdom of God are as unacceptable and unclean as the dog and the pig under Israelite law.
- In ancient Israel the dog was considered an unclean animal. Several verses in the Bible know the usefulness of watchdogs and sheep dogs, but for the most part we only read of half-wild, half-starving scavengers that prowl the city by night.
- Now here is a passage which I have saved until the last. *A Gentile Canaanite woman, a pagan, fell at his feet. Jesus told her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she replied, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the crumbs from the children’s bread” (Mark 7:28)*. She meant that Gentiles, too, ought to be allowed, so to speak, at least the scraps of God’s favor. Her words tell us that by Roman times, dogs were allowed into the house, where they shared a closer life with humans. Those of us who have loved dogs will like that.

It seems that dogs were allowed to come inside the house at times, and may even have been pets. The dog mentioned by the Canaanite woman (above) is inside, and allowed to come near enough to the eating area to pick up morsels of food from the floor or from the people around the table – much as a modern dog will do.

These are all great ways for us to contemplate this feast. We can imagine what Jesus learned from both Mary and Joseph that prepared him for his life of proclaiming the coming of the Reign of God. He desires to give you strength and virtue to live as the Holy Family. Surrender yourself and your family, this day, and invite the Triune God to make your family a holy family.

Lord, I do offer myself to You this day and in doing so I offer You my family. I offer every relationship, be it good or difficult, and I offer every challenge we face. Please come and sanctify my family, making it holy in imitation of your family in Nazareth. Jesus, I trust in You. Amen.