

## THE MODEL FAMILY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

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My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

There is a first line in a very famous novel, the novel *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, first published in 1878. An opening line that is at the very beginning of the novel, it's a line that has always perplexed me. It says, "All happy families are alike. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." And after this opening line, it then goes on to describe the opening kind of confusion in the Ablonski household after Steve Ablonski has had an affair with the French governess. And his wife is just absolutely enraged, she refuses to speak to him. In the meantime all the children are running about in this utter- utter confusion. And as we go on to read in this story, this- this novel, we see how Steve just, well, basically- he embodies the notion that life is just meant to be lived and to be enjoyed. And you shouldn't just, you know, you shouldn't really live any of your duties if they are in any way difficult. And he is a guy who just lives for the moment. He only thinks about his responsibilities much later, and he ends up having a number of financial problems and stuff. And he's quite an immature character whose kind of rather dazed reaction to being chastised for adultery is- is not so much for regret for having done something wrong, but rather a regret of being caught, just, you know, being caught, and now- he's not an exceptionally evil personality or character, he's just very superficial, rather immature, and quite somebody who feels quite entitled to enjoy himself as he pleases while his wife is just expected to endure his affairs in this kind of good natured silence.

But- but that's the opening of the- of this famous novel. But that saying, "All happy families are alike. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Well, I don't know if you've heard this before, and it kind of has a ring of truth to it. But is it really true? Are all happy families really all alike? That statement seems to suggest that happy families have- have kind of like played a game where they have learned all the elements of happiness, and have kind of put them together like a puzzle. They've mastered all the elements and well, they put together the puzzle so they- they're a happy family. But that sounds like a very human notion- notion of happiness and it seems to imply that if you have had financial help or financial health, if you- if you're good at parenting, if you have certain, I guess, spiritual beliefs, decent relationships with your in-laws, and you're nice in the neighborhood, well, everything will be just fine.

Well, this Year of the Family is a good moment to pray about this and what it really means to be a family at all. I mean, one fundamental truth that we know is that salvation itself comes through the family. In particular because the Son of God was born in a family amongst the holiest figure, the holiest creatures in history: Mary and Joseph, his parents. Indeed, St. Josemaria used to say that this was the Trinity on Earth,

that reflects in some mysterious way the Trinity of Heaven. It's an icon of the Trinity of Heaven, meaning that the Holy Family is- is reflecting what God really is. That's what an icon does, it reflects something. And that would mean that the perfection of the- of the family is in- in God. God is not an isolated solitude housed in his- his kind of own perfection. God is a covenant, a family of interpersonal love. Indeed, God revealed himself first in the Old Testament through the covenants, through the people of God. And the people of God were really constituted as one large family. And all those pages of the Old Testament are really like a family album. And it all started with God making them male and female, husband and wife, and they have one child, another child. But of course, very soon after, I mean, comes sin, which is not only an offense against God, which of course it is, but it is also a breaking apart of the family. And we see that as it plays out in the fraternal rivalry between Cain and Abel. And then, you know, many other passages in Scripture reflect the breakdown of the family. See, you know, think of- of Abraham who was waiting for a son. And he wasn't- he was sterile, Sarah was sterile. And then he takes on this concubine in Hagar and she gives birth to a child, Ishmael. And then Sarah gets really mad about this and rejects Hagar and she almost dies. And- and then, like, think of later on, the anger of Moses who- who is impeded from entering the Promised Land. Or, of course, we all know the story of David, who is described first as a man according to God's heart but then, yet too, he sins by committing adultery with Bathsheba and he tries to hide it. And, and I mean, these are like deep family problems.

And- and so, that plan of God, of course, with all these- all this dysfunctionality, that plan of God was to reunite that family, especially after all this suffering in the family, all these broken relationships. And this came about when there was like an occasion to give a kind of reboot to this plan of God, when the Son of God was born into a human family, the Holy Family, Mary, Jesus, and Joseph, a unique family that kind of opened up a new path. That is why God gave us this family, and we have seen so many pictures of this Holy Family surrounded by the ox and the ass during Christmas and- and of course, the shepherds adoring Jesus and Mary there holding the child, or putting them in the manger and- and, of course, Joseph adoring as well, or, you know, with a more- he's sometimes represented a little bit more in the distance, perhaps, you know, with a protective gaze. And- and so, you know, as we think about this during the Year of the Family, we have to look at our human family and, you know, when we think about our own family, we know that that's where we have our most cherished memories. And, you know, the deepest sense of identity of who we are, you know, comes from our father and from our mother and our siblings. And all that comes from the family. Those who we love the most in this world are tied with- to us with family bonds, and even extended family. And, of course, at the same time, in the family that we have, sometimes the greatest hurts, the deepest wounds. And it's also in the family that we sometimes really find it difficult to forgive.

Now, many people are afraid of this patriarchy. They talk about- they talk about toxic masculinity, you know, in the family, but God wanted to take his place in this Holy Family, remember, an earthly icon of the blessed Trinity which is a communion of love. So, something is going on there in the Holy Family that is very divine. And somehow that has to be for us a model of what goes on in- in our families, no matter what our- our state in life. And that is why we- we need so much- need this model of the Holy Family, so

that we can forgive. We can learn to care for others, we can learn what real affection is, we can learn truly how to protect the others. All things that we, of course, discover in the Holy Family of Nazareth.

I mean, how strong Joseph was yet discreet and ready to go hidden. I mean, there's an art historian in Rome, her name is Elizabeth Lev, who has just published a beautiful book about the history of Joseph in art. And the title is *The Silent Knight*. I guess it's somewhat of a pun, but it's precisely because with humility in front of the beauty, and just the immaculate purity of Mary, his spouse, that he feels the need to kind of stay in the background because in the earliest representations he's not there, he's not shown in their earliest representations of the Holy Family. He's kind of gone, takes several centuries before he starts to make his appearance. And- and yet, we know that this Holy Family suffered in a unique way, of course, like when they lost the child in the temple, when they had to flee into Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod, how they- how they must have prayed for all those- those innocent children that had been murdered in their most vulnerable moments and how they must have prayed for their parents, for the mothers of those innocent children who had been murdered by Herod and, I mean all the violence that- that supposes and these they were just two-year old children.

I sometimes think that maybe, I don't know, maybe years later, as a kind of a reward for their unimaginable sacrifice, these parents of the Holy Innocents, these parents, maybe would have gone on- gone on to meet Jesus as an adult, maybe even to meet Mary and Joseph. But perhaps just meeting Jesus, the Healer, the Messiah, that would have healed their own wounds and somehow would have made them understand that they were somehow part of their- of his mission. Maybe Jesus would have helped them understand the mystery of God's providence. And especially when God allowed the evil to befall on their- on their children like that, and maybe they would have accompanied him on his missions.

But with all the hurts and even the scars that we have, we sometimes feel- look, I can't- I can't be like the Holy Family. I mean, the holiness of Joseph and obviously- obviously the holiness of Mary, and we feel it is impossible. But as we meditate on the mysteries of the holy Rosary, we realize that so many of those mysteries do involve the Holy Family and we see too that we can be part of this great- this great family. And the greater family we can be part of also is, of course, the family which is the Church. And no matter what we are, no matter what our state in life, whether we are divorced, whether we're widowed or alone, or weak or celibate, or- or married, we are always part of this family of God, the Church, founded by Christ himself. And we have, of course, God the Father. We have our- we call him Our Father, lord, St. Joseph. But we also have the father in the Pope. That's why the Holy Father, the Pope, which means *father*, he has given us this Year of the Holy Family. He started with the Year of St. Joseph, now he's given us this beautiful- this beautiful time to reflect on the importance of the family. So, we should really pray for the Holy Father. He is what kind of gives unity to the Church. And we know that in each saint- each great saint or, I don't know, the lesser-known saints as well, but they all began some ways in a family.

And St. Josemaria's home, for example, didn't always have financial stability nor physical health. Some children died, some of the- his sisters died when they were very, very young. Nor did he have a great

relationship with his in-laws, like his uncle was very angered when, with the fact that his father wasn't really- his father felt obliged to pay off some creditors when the business went belly up. And- and well, left the family under certain financial strain. So, his- his- his uncle could not resist the stinging remarks to the family's new situation when they went to visit him. And he was like really harsh. And there, too, I think Josemaria and his sister, Carmen, would have learned to forgive and they would have, in some ways, forgiven their uncle. But despite these hardships, St. Josemaria still felt, he used to say, that- that he came from a happy family. But he was happy, but it was very unique in the sense that it had its unique difficulties. And the same thing could be said about Thérèse of Lisieux, she believes she came from a very happy family, but it had intense challenges, including the loss of her own mother when she was very young and the hardships of her own father. And so, there were challenges there too. But it still wasn't clear to me why Josemaria's was like that, a happy one, or why do he consider that?

Well, I just recently came across a good answer from Mr. Tom Hoopes. He's a Kansas author whose- whose writing has appeared in the National Catholic Register and some other newspapers. But he spoke about unhappy families, and he commented on this text from Tolstoy, you know, where Tolstoy says that "All happy families are alike. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Right. He- he commented on that to see, well, how true is this? And well, he said that- that in every case that he could think of, one or both spouses felt when they were unhappy, they felt unfulfilled in the marriage and so became kind of fixated on something outside their marriage from which they hoped to find some fulfillment. Like either in another person, a hobby, an obsession, or even the television set. And being in the presence of an unhappy marriage is kind of deadening and draining. It's like- like a black hole where- where love should be and it kind of sucks out all the energy into it. Unhappy families tend towards maximum entropy, this- the moody withdrawal of every family member into their own little world. We cannot let that happen, that we go into our own little world. And he said, then it dawned on him, "The difference isn't that unhappy families sin and happy families don't sin. It's that happy families forgive, happy families forgive. All families have their faults and foibles, but truly happy families have mercy."

Perhaps you- you remember hearing about this wonderful impromptu speech at the World Meeting of Families that Pope Francis made in Philadelphia in 2015. And it was just impromptu, you could see he was just speaking off the cuff- sometimes he's brilliant when he speaks like that off the cuff. He said, "In families there are difficulties. In families, we argue. In families, sometimes the plates fly. In families, the children give us headaches. And I'm not even going to mention the mother-in-law. In families, there is always, always the Cross, always, because the love of God, the Son of God, also opened for us this path. But in families as well, after the Cross, there is the Resurrection. The family," he said, "is a factory of hope." That's beautiful. In a place where the plates- plates fly, people throw plates at each other- it's still a factory of hope.

Now, Tolstoy was a very insightful writer and profound, but unhappy families are those perhaps ultimately that are, you know, that are fixated on injury, mired in the banality of sin and ultimately unwilling to move on, unwilling to forgive. And happy families have been freed by mercy. And they can be more fully themselves. What have I been fixated on? What about me, where do I need to forgive? Where can I do a

chore or an act of service, like without complaint, lovingly? Well, can I do that in my life, but especially where can I forgive because every family, we need at one point or another to forgive. If I go back to the grainy footage, that- the super-eight footage of my childhood and I see areas that I need to forgive, let us do that. I can forgive my father. I can forgive my mother, my siblings, and uncle. Where can I forgive and start anew?

And that's why Mary, Jesus, and Joseph are a model that we can contemplate in a special way this year. Maybe- maybe Tolstoy should have said, "Every unhappy family's sin, wounds, sins- wounds are alike. Each happy family has found mercy in its own way." And that's- that's what we have to find. Lord, we ask you now as we finish this time of prayer, help me to find mercy in the way that you want me to find it so I can really apply it in my family situation. Who do I have to forgive? What person specifically and for what act? Or, maybe it's just generic memories that are perhaps bitter to me? Maybe I can- I can tease out that bitterness, that- that poison of resentment, and clean it out with a lovely act of forgiveness and mercy. And our Mother is the Mother of Mercy. See, she teach- she teaches us to have a merciful heart in that family that God has placed us in his providence for our sanctification.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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