

On this Trinity Sunday I want to speak about the family. This homily will simply be a reflection about the link between God the Trinity and our human families, and what they tell us about one another and ourselves. Our family relationships are some of our most powerful experiences because we were made for family. For many of us this is a happy thought, but for others it is a broken promise. There has never been a golden age when all families were happy, but today the family as an institution is in crisis. Many marriages end bitterly in divorce. Many children must come to terms with feelings of abandonment by one or both parents, or perhaps a parent wasn't there from the beginning. Many adults struggle with anger and a deep sense of betrayal. I imagine there are few of us here so blessed as not to experience something of this in our family. For the victims of such circumstances the word "family" may not evoke happy memories or pleasant associations. And I'm sometimes tempted not to dwell upon family and family metaphors in my homilies because of not wanting to cause pain.

But it is precisely those who have suffered from dysfunctional homes who know that they have been deprived of some great good. They feel anger and bitterness precisely because they know they lack something essential. That wound is a sign that their family is not what it should be, not as God created it to be. The fault, then, is not with the family as God created it to be, but with our particular families as they stray from God's plan. Dysfunctional families are a result of Original Sin and our personal sins flowing from it. Indeed, that great story of human beginnings and experience – the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel – reveals the first human family shattered by that sin. Our hope for regaining wholeness and happiness is to recover God's plan for the family. Where are we to find it?

At the very center of Christianity is a revolutionary belief: that the one God is a Trinity of Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; a unity in plurality. It's no accident that this most basic truth is revealed to us in family language, which brings us to the fact at the heart of this homily; the model of the happy family is found in God because God is not only One, He is also a family.

To say God is a family is NOT a metaphor. If anything it is more accurate to say that human spouses, parents, children, brothers and sisters are family ONLY in so far as we reflect the reality of God the Trinity. God is not like a family. He is THE family. God alone possesses the essential characteristics of family to perfection. Our earthly households have these characteristics only imperfectly, as we all know.

To explain what these characteristics might be let me first describe the Trinity. From all time the Father begets the Son, pours out the fullness of Himself. The Father is above all else, then, a life-giving lover. The Son is equally a life-giving lover. He returns that life to the Father as a perfect expression of thanks and love. And that very life and love, which the Son receives from the Father and returns to the Father, IS the Holy Spirit. In eternity, the Trinity's inner life is the complete gift of self. In time, the reflection of that inner life of the Trinity is the self-gift, sacrificial love. The self-offering and death of Christ on the cross is the greatest revelation in time of the eternal life of the Blessed Trinity.

What does this mean for us concretely? Self-giving love goes along with wholeness even in our earthly families. In our lives we imitate God when we give of ourselves out of love. Love demands that we give ourselves totally, holding nothing back. We must die to ourselves for the sake of others.

Ideally a family begins with a man and woman marrying because only in marriage is there a public, life-long commitment by each spouse to give up preferences, pet peeves, privacy, personal space, to share and bring forth life with the beloved. Marriage and parenthood are meant to be all or nothing – total gift – like the inner life of the Trinity. Anything less undermines them. This is the theology behind some of the church's now controversial teachings. For instance, this is one reason why living together outside of marriage is morally wrong and sinful. It's not living the Trinitarian life of total self-giving. And this is also one of the fundamental reasons contraception is morally wrong. The Trinitarian life of total self-giving requires the lover to share with the beloved everything, including the gift of one's fertility.

Children bring even deeper call to self-sacrifice for the family. This is because the child begins life with only desires and wants – for food, warmth, to be held. When a couple has their first child their lives change completely. They give up certain freedoms for that child. Forget the spontaneous dinner for two now. Forget those vacations to the Napa wine country, or the trip to Paris. But despite those sacrifices – no, through those sacrifices, they can actually grow in happiness.

But the child, too, must gradually learn to delay self-gratification if the family is to be happy. In a loving home the individual, couple, and children gradually become conformed to the Family by their self-giving. Domestic peace depends on every individual's adaptation to the family rhythm and needs. Dysfunction happens when one or more persons don't adapt and consistently choose themselves above the others.

And so family life on earth gives us constant opportunities to deny ourselves for the sake of others, to give up our comforts so that others will have theirs. In so far as we live this way we make our homes into sanctuaries of charity because that self-giving is a reflection of the Father, Son and Spirit's inner life in the one God.

God is three in one, which means God is a loving relationship. The Holy Trinity is not an abstract doctrine important only to theologians. The whole universe is shaped by this Trinitarian life. This Trinity Sunday I have tried to describe just one example of this influence in the relationship between God and the human family. In the Trinity, every person, however broken his or her human family has been, can find a home. In fact, part of the experience of heaven is finding there the perfect family we always wanted but couldn't find on earth.

But even in this world, drawing upon, and imitating, the power of the Trinity's self-giving love, every human family can become what it was made to be, a place of love and a giver of gifts. That is the Christian life. Every family, then, even the weakest and most suffering, is called to greatness, for it is meant to be, and can still be, brought by its faith into the Great Family of God the Trinity, who is the source of all our joy.