

Well, if you heard my Christmas homily you know that the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” is my theme this year. As I thought about the feast of the Holy Family that film’s storyline seemed just as pertinent as it did for Christmas. The movie is a story of sanctification – holiness. George Bailey by the end of the film becomes aware of the deeper connections and charity lying behind his life primarily through his bonds and responsibilities as a member of a family.

When we speak of the feast of the Holy Family at this time of year after Christmas we can sometimes mentally roll our eyes at our own reality. We’ve had enough of Uncle Ralph or the in-laws. We’ve barely managed to be civil to the children over the past week and we wish everybody would go home – soon. Maybe, we think, other families are different, but ours can hardly be characterized as a “Holy Family.”

There we have to be careful. This feast is not claiming that our families have to be as perfect as Jesus, Mary and Joseph before we celebrate them. Think of George Bailey’s family in “It’s a Wonderful Life. For a supposedly feel-good movie I’m struck by the frustration, resentment, anger and depression George Bailey feels toward his family in the film. He’s trapped, in part, by the manipulation of his parents, brother, and alcoholic uncle. But it is, nevertheless, true that by the end George Bailey has been changed through the interaction, responsibilities, relationships, and, yes, love in, and for, that family.

That possibility of spiritual growth is one reason we celebrate this feast. When we speak of a “Holy Family” we must understand that, while the family is holy in and of itself, it is also an almost necessary MEANS to holiness for the individual. Our American worship of the independent, autonomous individual as hero and ideal -- free and happy because autonomous -- is an illusion. We are, in fact, not independent actors fulfilling our personal destiny without ties of blood and marriage. We are connected. Today’s gospel account of the Flight into Egypt is a perfect example of this. The threat to one member of the family – Jesus – results in all three persons uprooting and moving to a foreign land. And, again, one person’s decisions, Joseph’s – affect everybody else.

If a person is to become “holy” in life it is most likely going to be by exercising the virtues in such a family setting. St. Paul tells us how in the second reading from Colossians. “Put on as God’s chosen ones . . . heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another.” There’s the plan for holiness. But, notice, we either accomplish or offend against these virtues most often within the family.

Despite all his dreams that never came true, and hopes that were disappointed, George Bailey continued to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, forgiving. In doing so he formed and deepened bonds with his family (and the larger community) without even realizing what he’d done until the final crisis. His virtues have been exercised in such humble circumstances (not in world travel or the huge construction projects of his dreams), that George doesn’t even realize he has become holy through his suffering, the richest man in Bedford Falls, until it’s revealed to him by an angel.

We are sometimes tempted, perhaps, to cut our ties to our family members, or let those ties die through neglect. There has been so much pain and dysfunction, we think, that we are better off without each other. But I doubt it. It may not be easy, but our holiness comes through the struggle to develop and exercise the virtues in and within those closest relationships God has given us.

Throughout western civilization today I think there is a crisis in the family precisely because we don’t see it as a place and source of our holiness, but, at best, as an economic shelter, or at worst, a restriction upon our freedom, peace, and pleasure. I don’t deny the cost of family life. In considering the first reading from Sirach we feel the burden of family duty. “My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fails be considerate of him.” Can you feel the humility, gentleness, patience, sacrifice called for by those words? I know some of you can because you are faced with, and have accepted, just that choice – caring for an aged parent.

But while sensing the difficulty of what Sirach advises, do you also sense the possibility for holiness in that choice, the possibility for expressing and growing in love through sacrifice? George Bailey faced this kind of test. It was a crushing

burden that eventually did crush him – until God’s grace and angel saved him. The human family is crucial for human happiness, not because it is the result of economic forces, or the invention of society, although economics and society shape the family. But because the family is a creation of God Himself as a communion of persons brought together for a purpose – as the green house, as it were, in which love grows best.

Sometimes that love grows with great pleasure and ease; sometimes through suffering. But either way the family serves love because the family is merely a reflection of the inmost being of God, who IS love. God is one, but is made up of three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are made in the image and likeness of that God. In this season of Christmas, let us not give up on our own families, but seek to deepen or re-form those ties of communion in imitation of God. The family of each of us here, no matter how messed up, is holy, not because we are already holy as individuals, but because together, we are an image of the Holy Trinity – God, a communion of Persons united by love.