

Family is One of Our Greatest Gifts

Over the years, I've gotten some memorable gifts at Christmas. Some of the "coolest" as I look back include a six-band radio I got one year from Radio Shack, on which I could pull in out of town baseball games and short wave radio; and the original Nintendo video game system which allowed me to upgrade from the Atari. Both provided a lot of fun. But nothing compares to the gift of family. Especially during the height of the pandemic and coming off last Christmas which admittedly wasn't all that great as it missed the typical family get together, what I appreciate most is truly the gift that keeps on giving - that of a great family I've been blessed with.

A few years back, I read an article about the Martin family from Alberta that had a most challenging Christmas to say the least.

That Christmas, Terry Martin's family from Edmonton, Alberta, had a hard time figuring out what to give one another for Christmas. That's because they really have all they need, which is one another.

In an article that ran on their family, it was discussed how Jacquie, Terry's wife, was diagnosed with a brain tumor, just before his daughter, Natasha, was injured in a car crash and needed emergency surgery. As if this isn't enough, his son, Jesse, a 22-year old senior who plays hockey for the University of Denver Pioneers, was hurt in an October game against the University of North Dakota Fighting Sioux (this was prior to the name change), and carried off the ice on a stretcher with a spinal cord injury. Just three days after getting home from visiting Jesse, who had come down to Minnesota for treatment, Terry himself had a heart attack.

In looking at their year, Terry said that they were all having some problems buying Christmas gifts. In his words, "I mean, really, what material things could we give or receive that could provide greater happiness than what we are experiencing by simply being together?" What they've found is the gift of family is what matters most. Jesse, who's recovering, points out that "Like every family, we have had our ups and downs, but the common thread has been that we never forget that we are there for each other no matter what, and we are always able to lean on each other for support. And this support goes beyond the immediate family.

Natasha stayed in Edmonton to help care for her grandmother while Jesse was in Minnesota. And then there has been the hockey family, who have done what they can to help out the family. Jesse says that he has always loved Christmas, "but now you don't take it for granted – you cherish the time with your friends and family that much more." And what they've seen is through the tragedies that hit them in that year, each of the four members of that family did what they needed to do. "Somehow, and really without being aware of it, we all seem to offer or derive inspiration when it really matters, each of us sort of taking turns being 'the rock' for the family," says Terry. And because of that, they were able to celebrate Christmas and get through the difficulties, celebrating the gift that they have learned really matters most, which is each other.

Families are an incredible gift, and admittedly they can sometimes drive us up the wall. We fight with one another when we are growing up and then when we grow up. We use passive-aggressive behavior at times, or hold grudges. We argue about the silliest of things, and then are the best of friends again later in the day. But the family is where we learn so much, about life and faith – and that's why it's so important to celebrate.

This Sunday after Christmas (coming just the day after Christmas this year), we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. We have very little recorded about the 30 years that Jesus spent with His family other than it being recorded that Jesus as a pre-teen left Mary and Joseph briefly to be in the Temple where He instructed the rabbis and scribes, telling them He had to be in the House of His Father. After this, we are told that Jesus returned home with Mary and Joseph and was obedient to them, growing in wisdom before God and man.

One can't help but wonder though all that happened in those years that were not written down. How much Jesus must have learned from seeing the loving marriage between Joseph and Mary. How they passed on the faith to Him further by bringing Him to the Temple. And of the many moments of love that happened in the family.

We are told in the Second Reading today: "Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection." It's a great blueprint for what we should do in our families. But sometimes, our families can be easy to take for granted.

As you continue your celebration of the Christmas Season, and hopefully have a quiet New Year's week that is less stressful and as you find yourself continuing to be with friends and family, my hope is that you take a moment to realize what Terry did: that for all the great gifts you gave to one another and put under a tree, no greater gift could you give than the gift of one another. Looking at the New Year, try to put that into practice daily. In the busyness of work and school, try to make time for a family dinner so you do not just get status updates on Facebook about one another's day, but have face-to-face communication. Listen to the words of Paul and put on compassion, patience and forgiveness rather than escalating an argument with a sibling, spouse or parent. Give one another the gift of time. Cherish the moments that you spend together. Be there for one another by recognizing when someone may have had a bad day or needs you to be more present to them. Pray for one another or as a family each night.

After our liturgies, I'll be heading to my sister and brother in law's where I'll get to see my nephew and parents. I'll probably join my mom and dad later in the week too for a New Year's dinner. No there won't be a six-band radio this year, and I'm not looking for a new video game system. I have gotten some nice gifts over the years, but nothing tops the gift of having the great family God has blessed me with. Make sure to spend some time with yours not just over the Christmas turkey, but throughout the year by never taking them for granted. Yes, they can drive us crazy at times, but they also do so

much to help bring us closer to God - so let's strive to do that for one another every day of our lives.

God's blessings to you and your family,
Fr. Paul