

The fourth commandment is: "Honor your father and your mother." Interesting isn't it that immediately after the commandments dealing with our relationship with God, the next commandment has to do with relationships within the family? The family is so important that the right order of relationships within the family comes before the commandment; "You shall not kill."

If we were to have a debate in a public forum today on the order of the 10 Commandments, I suspect that at the very least these two would end up swapping places in the hierarchy. In fact, given the constant assault on the family in our society today, I'm sure that in that debate we would have to entertain a motion to eliminate the fourth commandment all together because it is not relevant to society today. And in that concept, the idea that a man married to a woman in a life long covenant before God and their children isn't important, is the root cause for so many of the problems that we have in society today.

Hold that thought and look at the Holy Family. Here they are in the Temple. A teenager, pregnant out of wedlock now married to her young husband with limited financial means, soon to become refugees in a foreign land separated from family and friends. But somehow they make it to the Temple on the eighth day to present their first-born son to the Lord. The Son of God is presented to the Father through the impetus of the Holy Spirit. The Priest is presented to the Levitical Priesthood, a sacrifice of two turtledoves are offered to redeem the redeemer who is the ultimate sacrifice. To the officials present, this is just another routine event, but to Simeon and Anna, people who have devoted their lives to the Lord, this day was the fulfillment of their dream.

The marriage of Mary and Joseph, our marriages are all love triangles. Marriage, a covenant between a man and a woman and God and in our case witnessed by the Church. In order for the marriage to be successful God must be more than just an equal partner in the marriage, he must be the senior partner in the marriage. Why? Back to where we started with the 10 Commandments. The first commandment is: "I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me."

Our dignity, our worth is rooted in our relationship with God as his children whom he loves. Logic then dictates that anything that violates a person's dignity as a child of God is inherently sinful. Therefore, if anything or anyone is more important than God in our lives, then we diminish our own dignity, the dignity of the other person and our relationship with God.

In our lives, like Mary and Joseph, marriage establishes family life. One of the marriage promises that we make is “to accept children lovingly from God and to bring them up in according to the law of Christ and his Church.” Joseph and Mary accepted Jesus and raised him lovingly in accordance with their faith as part of God’s chosen people.

Joseph and Mary presented Jesus in the Temple. We bring our children into the Church, our temple and present them to God in the Sacrament of Baptism. We present them so that they can become one with us as children of God.

Jesus, God, loves and honors his foster father Joseph. He accepted discipline from him, he learned his faith from him and he learned his trade from him. He loves and honors his mother Mary. Mary and Joseph in their interaction with each other taught Jesus, who is love how to love. Just as the first thing that we teach our children and continue to teach them throughout our lives is how to love by our interaction as husband and wife, father and mother.

Those same interactions continue to teach and form our children throughout their lives. How often have we said to someone ‘you are just like your father’, or ‘you are just like your mother’? They didn’t learn that behavior in a classroom, they learned it in the home.

We suffer difficulties, pain and grief in our lives; Joseph and Mary also suffered difficulties, pain and grief, as refugees, at the death of Joseph and at Our Lord’s Passion and Death.

Speaking to young adults, many of them don’t see any reason to get married. They see it as government interference in their personal relationships. The only benefit being the tax breaks with the trade-off being the legal hassle when they split up. Valuing their partner enough to make a life long commitment with all that implies is simply beyond their thought process. What a shame. They are afraid and that fear is controlling their lives.

Queen Elizabeth II of England in her condolence message to the United States after the attacks on 9 -11 closed her message by saying; “Grief is the price we pay for love.” On a more personal level I buried a good a friend of mine a little over a month ago. We were out with his widow for dinner just before Christmas and she told us that a lady had berated her about her grief saying; “if you hadn’t loved him so much, it wouldn’t hurt so much now.”

We can recognize the logic, the desire to avoid grief and it can be seductive, but it is ultimately self-defeating and leads to a life of misery and doubt.

I've spoken before about how courage is a facet of love and that acts of courage, those acts that we call heroic are in fact acts of love. Another facet of courage is that in order to be courageous, the person must be frightened. The courage, the love for someone else is what provides us the ability to overcome our fear, our being scared silly in order to do good.

Let me share personal experience that most of us can relate to. I have been scared silly more than a few times in my life, usually when I had time to think things over, and over and over... One of those times was for the couple of weeks before marrying my wife. The concept of 'until death do us part' and the magnitude of the commitment I was making were frightening for many reasons. Looking back 41 years, I can't even remember what I was worried about back then so it must not have been all that important.

Looking forward I know that one of us will depart this world and go home before the other. Should I have discarded all the years of happiness to avoid the pain and grief that comes at the end of marriage? Should I have succumbed to the fear of a life long commitment like so many others just to make it easier on myself? Obviously no, we cannot be afraid to love. That would be the path of a coward, a person who dies William Shakespeare's thousand deaths. Worse than Old Bill's deaths, these would be deaths to the soul because I would have rejected the love of my wife and my children who are gifts to me from God.

The Holy Family had advantages that we will never have. A sinless wife and son and God physically present in the home. But that doesn't mean that we can't have holy families as well. Holiness is being transformed by the Holy Spirit, but in order for us to be holy and therefore have holy families we cannot be afraid.

We aren't sinless, but we can bring God into our marriages and into our homes through prayer. We can be willing to trust God and subordinate everything we are and have to him. Not an easy transition to make, in fact we cannot make the transition to total trust, total subordination to God on our own. We can only do it through the grace and favor of the Holy Spirit and it is in that effort that we can become holy.