

HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY, 2026

When Pope Paul VI visited Nazareth in 1964, he gave a speech that is included in the Breviary's Office of Readings for the Feast of the Holy Family. In the speech he made two points about the Holy Family. The second one struck me as wise as soon as I read it, while the first annoyed me, honestly.

"First, we learn from its silence," said Paul VI about the Holy Family of Nazareth. Do we? The speech was given before I was born, so I hope I can be excused from sounding too insubordinate for asking that question the first time I read Pope Paul's address 20 years after it was given, back in 1984. Where in the Bible does it even hint that the Holy Family was particularly quiet? The Bible doesn't hint that they were particularly loud either. There is no evidence either way. For all we know, it may have been one of the noisiest homes in Nazareth. Of course, it was precisely a HOLY Family, wasn't it? Isn't silence connected to holiness? Not necessarily, I thought. A monk in contemplation is silent, but so is an assassin in hiding. Nor is noise necessarily unholy. A fistfight is noisy, surely, but so is a birth.

"Silent Night, Holy Night", eh? And yet that silence was shattered for the Shepherds by nothing less than a choir of Angels singing "Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth peace to men of good will." "All is Calm . . ." And yet, the Angel had to say to the Shepherds, "Fear Not!" Visits from Angels have several effects, but calm is not one of them. If your Christmas sometimes feels a little hectic, it might be wise to recall that the first Christmas was more than a little hectic, what with no room at the inn, and a squad of excited shepherds dropping by.

Nothing irritated me more in my youth than the automatic equation of holiness with physical weakness and mild silence. There is nothing particularly holy about not being strong enough to do your duty, whatever that duty is. And there is nothing automatically holy about silence, when duty requires dealing with noise, and sometimes even making noise, up to and including making a joyful noise to the Lord in Divine Worship.

Pope Paul went on from the silence of Nazareth to make good points about study, meditation, a well ordered spiritual life, and silent prayer. Unfortunately, the Holy Family is not the best jumping off point for those particular good points. They belonged in a separate speech. The Eternal Word of God became one like us in all things but sin. That meant that He did everything that a normal human baby and child does. That meant noise, and sometimes inconvenient noise. Don't you suppose that Mary and Joseph sometimes had to get up in the middle of the night? I think they did. Further, as Jesus grew up, it is not clear to me that He grew up all by Himself. Certainly, He was Mary's only child; but who were those people the Bible calls His "brothers?" That the word "brother" means more than just blood brother is too obvious to require much emphasis, but it certainly means some sort of close relationship. If any of Mary and Joseph's relatives had children who needed taking care of, Mary and Joseph were by far the best people to do it. I suspect that they took care of many children. I suspect that lots of kids were living and playing in and around the home of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph; and kids do not live and play silently.

No, I did not think and still do not think that "silence" is something particularly taught by the Holy Family.

With all of that noise, however, comes something that is taught by the Holy Family - love and sharing. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, certainly loved and shared life with each other. I

suspect that they lived and shared life with a lot of other kids living at various times under their generous roof.

This leads me to the good part of Pope Paul's address. He said that from the Holy Family, we learn about family life. What do we learn? We learn to live together, to take care of each other, and to share. We learn to share! In the family, we learn every day as we grow up that we have to share with each other, and to do our part in taking care of the shared home. About a decade ago, Nationalist-Socialist China's "People's Defense University" published a piece about the problems that come when 80% of your military recruits are only children. They never learned to share and cooperate (amusingly, the piece also noted that they are less physically tough than recruits who had siblings). A society full of people who never learned growing up to share and cooperate is a society headed for big trouble. I'd stay away from Chinese bonds, if I were an investor.

We in the "Free World" don't have much room for bragging, however. We have messed up family life in our own free enterprise way. The Socialists of China messed it up with a brutal, centrally planned "one child policy," unimaginative and uncreative to the point of being nearly brain dead. The "Free World" messed it up by telling people that children didn't need both a mother and a father, and, indeed, that most people really don't need to marry or have children. Now, life is messy, and there are many situations in which people have to grow up without both a father and mother, often for nobody's fault at all. It is foolish, however, to plan for people to grow up that way. The Church has always understood that not everybody needs to get married and have children. There are other holy callings. It is disastrous, however, if most people stop getting married and having children.

Here is where Pope Paul, perhaps with some divine inspiration, spoke prophetically in his Nazareth address of 1964. The family has a "basic function in society: a community of love and sharing, beautiful for the problems it poses and the rewards it brings." These are noble words. Living in a family means love and sharing, and that is never easily done. In no other way than the family, however, can love and sharing be so effectively taught, day by day as people grow up. It is precisely the problems that come with family life that make it beautiful. Every family that holds together is a piece of evidence for the Christian assertion that love is stronger than selfishness and tougher than troubles. "In sum," said Pope Paul, the family is "the perfect setting for raising children . . . there is no substitute" Modern efforts to make something else, including schools, a substitute for the family, rooted in the marriage of man and woman, are failing badly, producing too many people who grow up not knowing how to share and cooperate. If America doesn't start getting better and marriage and family, I would stay away from American bonds too.

The Holy Family, said Paul VI, "is a kind of school where we may begin to discover what Christ's life was like and even to understand His Gospel." Precisely so. Jesus Christ's life had some silence, but also a lot of noise. What was constant in His life was love and sharing, even to the point of death, dying on a Cross. The love and sharing of His Cross, Resurrection, and Holy Eucharist began in the Holy Family of Nazareth. By the help of His Grace, may we all gradually learn to imitate that love and sharing.