

Frist Sunday in Christmas

A Message from Fr. Mark

Dear Parishioners,

Merry Christmas! According to our Catholic tradition, Christmas lasts for eight days! This is called the Octave of Christmas. For eight days we can continue to say "Today is Christmas day! Then we continue to celebrate the joy of the Lord's coming throughout the Christmas season until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (January 12).

Today is the Feast of the Holy Family, which is always celebrated on the Sunday within the Octave of Christmas. In our scripture readings for this day, we hear about the beauty of family life. In particular, we hear about the importance of a good father. We hear in the Gospel of Matthew about how St. Joseph was a faithful and provident father for the Holy Family. Saint Joseph is a "just man" who provides love and guidance and protection for the Holy Family. At the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, St. Joseph is visited three times by an angel who appears to him in a dream and gives him very specific instructions. Each time, St. Joseph wakes up and performs exactly the actions which were demanded of him by the angel. The same verbs that were used by the angel are also used to describe what Joseph immediately: He "took" Mary his wife into his home, and he "rose" and he "took" his wife and the newborn Christ and "fled" to Egypt. Then a few years later he again obeyed the angel and "rose" and "took" the child and his mother back to Israel. (Mt. 1:24; 2:13-14; 21-22)

A good and virtuous father is a great blessing for a family. Our first reading today says that we should be grateful to our fathers and honor them, especially when they are old. Our first reading today says that our efforts to be kind to a father can serve as good penance to make up for sins. We can "offer it up" as a sacrifice to atone for our own sins and for the sins of others. Our sacrificial acts of mercy can help pay the debt of our sins to our Heavenly Father by paying a debt of gratitude to our earthly father. This passage expresses well our Catholic belief in the doctrine of atonement and expiatory sacrifice: "God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons.

Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and preserves himself from them. When he prays, he is heard; he stores up riches who reveres his mother... My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him... kindness to a father will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins..." (Sirach 3:2-4,12-14)

This week we will also celebrate the feast day of a saintly mother. January 4 is the Feast of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. She was born in 1774— two years before the birth of our country in 1776! She was born into a protestant family, but converted and became the first native-born American to be canonized by the Catholic Church! She loved to go to her Anglican church. Sometimes on Sunday, she would hurry from one Protestant church to another to receive communion twice! (Later she would realize that what she was experiencing was only a faint shadow of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Catholic Eucharist!) When she was twenty years old, Elizabeth married William Seton, a wealthy businessman, but four years later he contracted tuberculosis. The family moved to Italy for the sake of his health, to escape the severe New York weather. Nevertheless, he died soon afterward. While in Italy Elizabeth stayed with an Italian family who had a very strong Catholic faith. They even had a chapel in their house because of their great love for the Mass and the Eucharist. This made her begin to consider converting to the Catholic faith. One day from her upstairs bedroom she heard the sound of a bell ringing and looked down to see a priest walking down the street behind an altar server. Later she learned that the priest was carrying Holy Communion to a sick person. This inspired her to join the Catholic Church. When she returned home, she was disowned by her protestant relatives. She dedicated the rest of her life to

establishing Catholic schools and a religious order of sisters. She died in 1821 and was canonized on September 14, 1975.

Sincerely,
Fr. Mark