

## **29th December 2024 - Holy Family**

### **The Feast of the Holy Family - a very brief history**

Although the Holy Family itself has been a focus for devotion and a source of inspiration to the Faithful since at least the late sixteenth century, the official Feast of the Holy Family was instituted relatively recently.

With the huge changes brought about in society by the Industrial Revolution into the late nineteenth century, concern grew within the Church at the malign influence of secularism and ideologies such as communism upon the family. In 1890 Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical 'Sapientiae Christianae' (on Christians as Citizens), in response to these concerns. In this he stated:

“The family may be regarded as the cradle of civil society and it is in great measure within the circle of family life that the destiny of the State is fostered” (Para 4).

This focus on the importance of the holiness of families and the Holy Family's model for this way of living was continued by the same Pope when in 1893 he instituted the Feast of the Holy Family to be celebrated in any diocese which requested to do so. He also wrote three hymns himself for the occasion, for Vespers, Matins and Lauds.

By 1921, three years after the end of the First World War, concerns about the sanctity of family life had only increased, and Pope Benedict XV promoted the Feast of the Holy Family to the universal Church calendar. The Feast was originally on the first Sunday after Epiphany, but in 1969 it was moved to the Sunday after Christmas.

Subsequent Popes have continued to highlight and promote the importance of both the Feast of the Holy Family and the importance of families today striving to live holy lives.

When he was on a visit to the Holy Land in 1964, Pope Paul VI gave a very beautiful address at the Basilica of the Annunciation, some of which is quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 533):

“The home of Nazareth is the school where we begin to understand the life of Jesus - the school of the Gospel. First, then, a lesson in *silence*. May esteem for silence, that admirable and indispensable condition of mind revive in us... A lesson on *family life*. May Nazareth teach us what family life is, its communion of love, its austere and simple beauty, and its sacred and inviolable character..”

Some of the gravest threats to the family began to develop at an increasing rate in the 1960s and 70s. Partly in response to these threats, in his homily on Sunday 31st December 1978 Pope John Paul II reflected on the meaning of the family:

“The deepest human problems are connected with the family. It constitutes the primary, fundamental and irreplaceable community for man. "The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God himself", the Second Vatican Council affirms. ([Apostolicam Actuositatem](#), 11). The Church wishes to bear a particular witness to that too during the Octave of Christmas, by means of the feast of the Holy Family. She wishes to recall that the fundamental values, which cannot be violated without incalculable harm of a moral nature, are bound up with the family.”

In our own day, Pope Francis has written and spoken extensively about the need for holiness in families. In the apostolic exhortation ‘Amoris Laetitia’ (The Joy of Love) released in April 2016 he states:

“No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love.”

With those words in mind, to end here is a little prayer from the USCCB book of Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers:

May the Lord Jesus,  
who lived with his Holy Family in Nazareth,  
dwell also with your family,  
keep it from all evil,  
and make all of you one in heart and mind.

Amen

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