

Homily for Holy Family Sunday

Over the summer, my family and I were all on vacation together at a house in the Poconos. There were 25 of us in one house. And we had a good time. Of course, just like you can imagine, or just like would be the case with your families, not every moment was bliss, but we made many good memories together. One of the fun things we did was put together a thousand-piece puzzles. The scene was this beautiful snow-covered landscape of a church somewhere in the mountains of Germany. An absolutely beautiful picture on the box made me pick this one up at the store. But, when we dumped those 1,000 pieces out on the table over vacation, I was having second thoughts.

Well, as you usually do when putting together a puzzle, you look for the easy pieces first – the ones with the flat edges – and you put together the outer frame. But, then there's the 99% that has to be filled in. And so you get smart. You look at the picture on the box, and you see a lot of snow – lots – and so you decide to put the white pieces in a pile on one part of the table. Then, you see lots of blue sky, and so you put all those blue pieces in its own pile. And then, like grunt work, you just keep trying piece after piece, until you occasionally find one that fits. Rinse and repeat.

Oh sure, it was fun at first. But then there reached a point in time where I thought to myself: “If I have to look at one more piece of white, I’m going to scream”! But, then you get a second wind. But before long, you start getting really tired, and when you find a piece that almost fits, and you just try to shove it in the place where it obviously doesn’t belong. But, you’re determined to make it work, because you’re tired of waiting for the full picture! And then finally, towards the end of the puzzle, there comes a time where you just can’t find a few pieces. And you’re 100% sure someone took them just to mess with you, only to find them a short while later in a place where you thought you looked before! And then, after all the work is done, you glue the puzzle together and hang it up on your living room wall – like I did over at the rectory this past week. (I posted a picture of the photo on Facebook just in case you’re curious what it looks like).

But, as I was thinking about such an experience the other day, the Holy Spirit helped me see a profound connection between such a puzzle and family life – after all, this is the feast of the Holy Family. In other words, I think family life works a lot like putting a puzzle together. You know, we see lots of pretty pictures of other families. Maybe we see them on TV, or read stories about them, or even see them here at church. And we just think to ourselves, “If only my family could be perfect like that?” That’s the pretty picture on the box. And please get it out of your head right now that some families are just lucky. Happy families just don’t happen, just like puzzles don’t just assemble themselves. In both cases, they take work!

And so, when you get home, and see all the proverbial puzzle pieces of family life laying all over the place, there's simply work to do. And so, we make a plan, or have a conversation, or do something to try to bring more structure and order to what otherwise seems like a bit of chaos! And that's what God would have us do – start with the basics in life – the pieces with the flat edges of the frame. Start with easier things like having dinner all together a few times each week. Start with prayer together as a family, like before meals or before kids go off to bed. Start with occasional quality time together, just playing a board game, and without any electronics to distract you. And just like you feel encouraged when you get that puzzle frame together, so doing these basic things will help you feel more united as a family too.

But, let's face it, life happens. And you realize more than meals, games, and prayer before bed are needed. Then, it's time for the harder “grunt work” of things like: having those difficult conversations, or assigning chores to teach personal responsibility, or disciplining children and saying “no” when “everyone else's parents are saying “yes”. Or really tackling personal issues like: controlling your spending, or really working on your weaknesses, or not spending too much time in front of the TV. And just like trying puzzle piece after puzzle piece, you're going to just get tired of going around and around with such struggles. And sometimes it'll feel like you're not making any progress, and if you have to see one more dirty sock on the floor, you're just going to scream!

But don't shove that discouragement, resentment, fear, or other negative emotions just deep down within you, like trying to jam some puzzle piece into a place it obviously doesn't fit. Rather, give it to the Lord. Really. Talk with God about what's frustrating you. Don't try to deal with it on your own!

And if you feel like there's a P-I-E-C-E missing from your life and your family's life then maybe try the P-E-A-C-E that only God can give. In other words, if you think you're going to have the dream family by doing the crazy stuff the world suggests, that's not working for other families – well, that's a little insane. Rather, we only get to become more and more like the Holy Family by having God Himself right in the center. If God is just an hour of you and your family's schedule each week, you're largely not going to have the peace, strength, and joy that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph had, because those things come from God.

As it's been said many times, “the family that prays together stays together”. And so, a time of daily prayer personally and as a family each day is so important. Coming to Mass together every week. Reading the Bible or other spiritual books. Actually talking with one another about what you heard in church today or about your relationship with God. All these things help us put God in the very center of our lives and our families. And, then the God who already sees the beautiful finished picture of each of us and each of our families, helps us put the puzzle together one piece at a time – but only if we let Him. God bless you.