



THE RISE AND FALL (and fall and rise) OF THE HOLY FAMILY

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Not long after Holy Family Sunday, which falls between Christmas and New Years, I wanted to write about how Christian families are called to be **holy** not **perfect**. I figured I could draw upon lots of examples of good, decent families I know, including our own, who struggle to do the right thing, give generously of themselves, but have had their share of family failures and feelings of inadequacy. These folk don't usually think of themselves as holy or religious in the sense of having frequent family devotions. Most of them wonder daily about whether they're succeeding as parents, and are painfully aware of the shortcomings in their family relationships. To my eyes, however, they're **holy**. They're committed to hanging in there, mistakes, harsh words, and all, while they experience the ups and downs of family life. They are faith-filled people while they continue to search out what that means in their daily lives.

Well, that's what I planned to do, but God often has other ways of making a point. I eventually decided that rather than talk about *other* families, I'd share a humbling experience that our own family recently had.

It was one of those rat race days! I got home from work late and we were expecting a special guest for dinner. Not to worry, though, because my husband, Jim, had agreed to cook dinner. What Jim had not counted on, however, were two extra errands to get child #2 ready for a spelunking trip. Sounds minor but that shoved dinner back 45 minutes which meant one of us had to leave shortly after grace to take a child to a church youth group skating party. I missed most of dinner.

Speaking of grace, let me tell you how this **holy** family handled it that night. We usually rotate the leader of grace among the six of us but some of our children object to singing which other children always choose on their turn. Rather than risk a scene, I led the prayer. Four year old jumped right in with his two petitions. (Awhile ago we cut a deal with the youngest that if he limited the people he prayed for at dinner to two, he could ramble on to his heart's content at bedtime prayer. Only people who have heard a toddler pray their litany of relatives can fully appreciate this. If he forgets one, he has to go back and start all over.) Then child #4 puts his finger in his mouth. Now that's not horrendous for a four year old, but child #3 thinks it's embarrassing, so he persists in whispering all through grace, "Mom, tell him to get his finger out of his mouth!"

And then we eat. I asked Jim not to cook anything unusual so that the kids would eat it, but Jim likes to experiment. He says, "Company are the only people who appreciate my creativity!" Child #3 and #4 say they're not hungry and ask to be excused. At least part of our company manners prevailed which says you're not allowed to say "Yuk, I'm getting PB&J!"

When I return from chauffeuring child #2, child #1, who up until I left, was going to spend the evening with us, is being picked up for an evening with friends. It seems to be an unwritten law with teenagers that no plans can be made more than five minutes before departure time. Meanwhile, four year old tells our guest that he doesn't think he likes him too much and he doesn't feel like talking.

I think to myself, well, this is real family life for us. I would like it to be more harmonious, more predictable, not as rushed – and sometimes it is. Sometimes it's really good; but you have to stick around awhile to see the mix of good and bad; to see the tender and forgiving moments mixed in with the screaming and complaining.

Now just as this wasn't the best view of our family, it also is not the worst. I'm not quite ready for that level of public disclosure yet. I bet many families, though, who are trying their best to be a decent family i.e. a **holy** family, can understand our imperfect hospitality. I sure hope the bishop did.

P.S. The names of children have been disguised to protect the guilty.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What part of the Vogt family's experience do I identify with most?
2. Thinking back on recent family meals -
 - A. What was a highlight that made me think, "Yes! This is working. All is well and the kids are cute."
 - B. What was a lowlight when I wondered, "Is our family dysfunctional or at best boring? Will we ever have a calm and friendly meal?"
 - C. How does our family say "Grace"? Do we want to make any changes?
3. What does "holy" mean to me? Describe a time in your family's life (other than going to church or saying prayers at home) that you think was a holy time. (Hint: Sometimes we only recognize God's presence in hindsight. Consider times when someone in the family sacrificed for another, forgave another, a moment of celebration or peace when relationships felt whole and right.)
4. If I could do one thing this week to improve the time our family spends together at meals, it would be: _____
Possibilities:
 - A. Increase the number of meals we eat together
 - B. Be more intentional about how we say grace
 - C. Introduce the practice of sharing "Highs & Lows" at dinner, i.e. family members share their best or worst experience of the day.
 - D. Review table manners and choose to make one improvement
 - E. Decide how to handle table disputes
 - F. Reassess dinner chores and who is responsible for what
 - G. Have a meal a week without any children
 - H. Have the kids cook and clean up (Well, we can dream, can't we?)
 - I. Other

PRAYER

Dear God, we thank you for our imperfect families and imperfect meals together. We remember that you did not ask us to be perfect but to be faithful followers of you. May our foibles, failings, and frustrations be the grace that saves us from self-righteousness. Give us eyes to see your face in each member of our family and your presence in the daily tasks of making a home. Give us the wisdom to know when to correct and when to accept. Amen.