

# The Holy Family and the family model of chastity

## *How one's parents demonstrate the Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*

Fifth in a series  
By CECILIA O'BRIEN

"In the framework of educating the young person for self-realization and self-giving, formation for chastity implies the collaboration first and foremost of the parents, as is the case with formation for the other virtues such as temperance, fortitude, and prudence. Chastity cannot exist as a virtue without the capacity to renounce self, to make sacrifices and to wait."

— *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, No. 5.

When I was young I had the suspicion that my parents were not quite normal. Maybe it was the fact that we managed to exist without a television and had our walls overflowing with books. Maybe it had something to do with the watercrress and cucumber or cream cheese and date sandwiches on whole wheat bread that were packed in our school lunches. It would be many years yet before the health food trend went mainstream, and let's just say that my parents were definitely pioneers when it came to healthy lunches.

It was not until I reached the relative maturity of young adulthood that I came to realize that beneath these seeming abnormalities in my parents there existed a great good. My parents were quite effective at parenting and they were good parents because they had a very good marriage.

I can honestly say that I never saw my mother and father in a rapturous embrace, but their love for one another was self-evident. They loved each other in a quiet and unassuming manner and yet their love had taproots that ran so deep that I am still discovering them. My parents' love was based on one big yes to God and yes to each other. It was a love that involved many sacrifices and trials but it persevered only because on a daily basis they renounced their selfish desires and poured themselves into the other.

In *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, it is stated that "When God Yahweh says that 'it is not good that man should be alone' (Genesis 2:18), he affirms that 'alone,' man does not completely realize his existence. He realizes it only by existing 'with some one' — and even more deeply and completely; by existing 'for some one.' Married love is fulfilled in openness to the other person and in self-giving, taking the form of a total gift that belongs to this state of life" (No. 12).

It is clear to me now that my parents didn't just live with one

another, but for one another. In sacrificing for one another, they possessed a love that necessarily spilled over into the lives of their children.

As I look back on what my parents bestowed on me during my formative years, it's not difficult to compare what they did in their own small way with the actions of the world's most famous parents — Joseph and Mary.

One of the biggest struggles parents face is how to model chastity in an age that is saturated with permissiveness. When our very culture sees the sensation of pleasure as a virtuous end how do we as parents teach our children to value chastity? We have only to look to the Holy Family for our answers. Joseph and Mary submitted their wills to God. Reflecting this submission was the way they embraced a life of poverty and service and dedicated their entire lives to the care of the Holy Child, Jesus.

From the beginning, St. Joseph was "a just man" and he showed his deep love and concern for his wife even before they were married. When he learned of her bearing a child (unlawfully, he naturally presumed), he was "unwilling to put her to shame" and "resolved to send her away quietly" (Matthew 1:19). Then, like his Old Testament counterpart, Joseph came to know the Lord's will more clearly through dreams.

Joseph and Mary experienced a unique calling, in that their marriage was completely virginal. Though they were never joined in the "marriage act," they loved one another no less and undoubtedly experienced a sublime union of spirit. It is easy to imagine that no more than a look passed between them on the bumpy road to Bethlehem,

a look that said simply, "It is time."

Though we have no scriptural record of the daily external manifestations of their love it is easy to surmise from what Scripture does relate. They had a relationship based on mutual understanding and devotion. This love would naturally be recognizable to the outside observer by word and deed.

Though the virginal form their witness took was unique, Mary and Joseph are the model that spouses and parents must continually turn to for guidance in their roles. In today's modern society their example is a radical antidote to the glorification of material and sensual pleasures. Witness the Holy Family's life of poverty and self-abnegation. At the same time, it was a life of superabundant love. While it's true that Jesus, as God, had no need of Mary and Joseph as models of virtue, in his condescending to become man in order to die for our sins, the Lord submitted to be taught by only the best — this poor, humble carpenter and his young wife.

It was not only Mary's blood running in his veins, but also her lessons of humility and joy. It was not only Joseph's talent with hammer and saw which he instilled in Jesus' own soul, but also virtues easily detectable in Joseph's character — purity, justice and manliness. Again, it is clear that Christ did not need Mary and Joseph to teach him these things, but we know, as well, that the apple of salvation did not fall far from the Holy Family's tree.

I now realize as an adult that my parents made a conscious decision to follow the example of Mary and Joseph in so many ways in their marriage. And as a parent myself I see that my par-



CNS/Karen Callaway, Northwest Indiana Catholic  
Mary, Joseph and Jesus are depicted in a church window. As a model of holiness, the Holy Family also offer the world an example of chastity as it is related in the Vatican Document "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality."

ents had a reason for the "abnormalities" they inflicted on us as children. It was this same sense of faith and self-sacrifice that allowed us to be formed by our parents' love. Through small deprivations, little humiliations and much joy, they were preparing and arming us with the tools to practice chastity in the many stages of our lives. They were building up the fire of love and preparing us to carry the torch of

love to our own hearths — to nourish our children with its warmth and teach them by its light.

Editor's note: A parishioner at St. Philip Parish, Rolling Ground, and wife and mother of five children, Cecilia O'Brien received her B.A. in History and English from the University of Dallas in 1993.

*The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* may be purchased by mailing a check for \$2.60 (payable to the Diocese of La Crosse) to the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization, PO Box 4004, La Crosse, WI 54602-4004, or call (608) 791-2658 or e-mail alankford@dioceseflacrosse.com.