Homily, 29 December 2013
Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
Sirach 3:2-6,12-14; Psalm 128:1-2,3,4-5; Colossians 3:12-17; Mt 2:13-15,19-23

God instituted the human family and endowed it with its fundamental constitution. It is an institution prior to any recognition by public authority, which has an obligation to recognize it. [CCC 2203 & 2202]

On Christmas night we had a big party in our little house. There were parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, great-grandparents and great grandchildren, aunts, uncles, and cousins ... lots of cousins.

The table was piled with foods both sweet and savory, the kitchen counters with cups and plates and bottles of wine, a pitcher of eggnog and more food in reserve. In the cooler on the deck were cans of pop and bottles of beer.

It sounds idyllic, and it was ... but it wasn't perfect.

My family, likes many of yours, has its troubles. Not everyone was there. Some had obligations and other family ties. But some simply lived too far away and the cost of the trip would be too dear. Some were ill and couldn’t travel. Some didn’t come because of long held bitterness, or because they had, over the years, grown distant from the rest of us.

And yet in our little house that night there were four generations. Though the cousins had little in common save that they were family, everyone was talking, and laughing, and playing.

When the party finally wound down, and I was in the kitchen cleaning up, I thought of how timeless the night had been. Family life is ancient and enduring. What happened at our house has been happening around the world for thousands of years. Extended families formed the foundation of the earliest human cultures and pre-dates the rise of civilization. If civilization ever collapses, I’m sure that it will be families that rebuild it.
If you are a Christian, then there is nothing very insightful in this. In creating man and woman, God also created family life, which begins with the conjugal love of a man and woman bound together in the covenant of marriage.

Though family members have different roles and responsibilities they share a fundamental dignity: whatever their relationship to one another — parent, child, sibling — each member of the family is a child of God.

Love pervades family life. It is given and returned between husband and wife, parent and child, and brother and sister. But it is also shared: every parent wants his children to love each other, and in turn, every child wants his parents to love each other. It is in the pervasiveness of love that families are sign and an image of God, the Trinity.

The family's web of relationships forms the foundational cell of social life. Families are little communities where each member learns to take care and responsibility for the young and the old, the sick, the handicapped, the poor. It is were we first begin to perform works of mercy: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, instructing the ignorant, admonishing the sinner, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving injuries.

The family is a communion of faith, hope, and charity. It is where the faith of the Church is passed on from one generation to the next as parents teach their children by word and example to love God and neighbor. It is rightly called the Domestic Church.

What we learn in our families devolves to other persons, to other families, to neighbors, and to the common good of society.

Family life is so integral to God’s design, that but for one little miracle, he followed it completely when his word became man: born of woman, born into a family. It was so ordinary that we miss that the miracle of the incarnation was bound up in God’s affirmation of the holiness of family life.

Jesus was born into a family, though I wouldn’t call the family’s situation enviable and certainly not ideal. His mother conceived him before she was married. A government edict forced them to travel late in her
pregnancy. The king tried to kill him in infancy and martyred many innocent children in the attempt. They fled in haste and lived in exile in a foreign land. Bad things happen to good people and to good families.

I don’t know of any saint who led a perfect and idyllic life. Each one seemed to have struggled to live out the call of discipleship. And so it is with families. No family – not mine, not yours – is perfect. But like the saints, we ought not to lose hope when our dreams and expectations for our families go unrealized.

Every family has to struggle at times, to deal with disappointment and sorrow, to adapt to unexpected events. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had, I think, more than their share troubles. And the positive exhortations of Ben Sira and Paul in the first two readings encouraging family members to respect and honor each other suggest that even two-thousand years ago, family life was far from perfect.

Family life is at times very fragile. Families sometimes need help, a lot of help. At those times, it is our duty and the duty of society to render aid, to support families that are struggling or in disarray.

But the aid we give should always respect the fundamental place of the family in creation. The freedom of husbands and wives to have children, to raise families in accord with their own moral and religious convictions, to work in order to maintain a home and provide for the health and education of their children must be respected and encouraged.

The Church has always taught that the family holds a fundamental place in creation, but it is you, the laity, who must apply those teaching in everyday life. Do what you can for family life in our community, in our country, and in our world. Given generously when aid is needed. Speak out when policies are debated, vote with family life in mind.

Not every man is a father, not every woman is a mother -- but we are all sons and daughters; so let us heed Ben Sira and see that family life is honored and respected and strengthened. And pray, that every family can in its own unique way, be a holy family too.