

Protecting the Formative Years of Childhood

Holy Family (Year C)

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Fr. Tony Davis

The year 2018 will go down in Catholic history as a bad year for us. It was a year of crisis regarding the abuse of minors by clergy. Among other things, this past summer the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report was released, a report that attempted to show that the abuse was not limited to a few bad priests, but existed on a systematic scale. While the vast majority of the abusers are now deceased or have been removed from ministry, the saddest part is the victims who were hurt and continue to live with their pain. Anyone who is suffering from this in isolation should make it known and seek the justice they deserve. Child abuse, obviously, is not limited to the church, either. It is all over. Childhood isn't supposed to look like this.

Today's feast of the Holy Family centers around Jesus as a young boy himself. It is one of the few references we have to his childhood. In our Gospel from *Luke*, he is only 12 years old. It is the story of him getting left behind at the Temple in Jerusalem on accident and being lost for a few days. The passage ends by saying that the boy Jesus advanced in wisdom and age. We will not hear again from Jesus in the Bible until the start of his ministry around age 30.

The years of childhood are our formative years. What happens in childhood can make a significant impact on the rest of our lives. For Jesus, childhood was a positive experience, so positive that it was the time when he started to come to know his identity as a child, or THE child, of God. Mary and Joseph indeed formed a 'Holy Family' in which Jesus could explore and discover his deepest identity.

Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, a Dominican priest, speaks of the importance of childhood. He notes that human beings need a longer childhood than any other animal. He says, "the infancy of a fruit fly is over in a moment. Even a newborn elephant must be on its feet soon if it is to avoid being eaten by a lion. Chimpanzees grow up quickly. But we human beings need years to learn to become the people we are created to be." (15) He continues, "this is why the sexual abuse of children and young people is so terrible, especially by ministers of Christ. It is an assault not just on their childhood but on what is central to their humanity: their confidence, their trust in other people, their

playfulness and lightheartedness.” (*Take the Plunge*, 19) The wounds of child abuse run deep.

We need to be especially protective of children because it is a formative time in their lives where they start to find their deepest identity.

Interfering with this process is to interfere with God’s work. God is trying to give our children an identity, mission, and vocation. Our job is to be like Mary and Joseph, parents who even though they lost their kid, protected him and gave him a solid foundation in life. It was in their home that Jesus knew that he was the son of his *abba*, and isn’t that the identity we are all looking for, for “beloved: see what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. And so we are.”