

"Get Real"

Homily of December 26, 2004

by Father Michael Dibble

Today is the feast of The Holy Family. Over the past decade or two, I have heard expressions I had never heard as a kid: "Tell me about it!" or "In your dreams!" or "Get real." And it's that third one that I would like to think about, with your help, this morning, "Get real!" Feast of the Holy Family.... Get real! And that's our acronym, the first in a while, R...E...A...L, about the Holy Family and your family and my family, R...E...A...L. R (rigorous), E (euphoric), A (affectionate), and L (lonely).

RIGOROUS, . In each of them I would like to give a couple of examples and then something from Our Lord's words or Our Lord's life, to show He was real. He got real about what family is like. First of all, rigorous, the rigorous truth about families. When I was a child I remember in second grade, Catholic school, there was a big painting of the Holy Family in our classroom, and there was Our Lady embroidering and she looked like a movie star. She was cosmetically perfect, and her clothes were by Chanel, and Joseph was working at the carpenter's bench, and a glow was suffusing his head. Our Lord, with another glow, was handing him a plank. Even then, I thought, "That's not very real."

A lot of families at this Mass, members of families obviously. My father was a cartoonist and I grew up as a kid seeing balloons over people's heads. You know the little circles where you can see what they are saying in cartoons? Every time I am here on a Sunday, thinking and talking with you, I see balloons, over the heads of families. And I've even gotten to meet a few of you. A balloon over there might be a father worrying about a job, who smiled when he greeted you as he came into church. Probably even smiled at me, but in his heart he is worried. His heart is a bit clenched. I hope not many of you are going through that suffering. And though you see him in church, and he comes to communion and he is smiling and gracious, get real. He is worried. He is worried.

And there is a balloon over there, above maybe the mother of an adolescent. Her balloon says, "Is this demonic teenager mine?.... Is this really MY daughter? She was so affectionate and delightful when she was younger. What is happening to her?"

And a balloon over there of either a man or a woman saying, "I didn't know they were going to stay overnight all these nights. Now, what do I do about lunch?.... And I hope he is not too long-winded this morning. We have got to get going!"

Get Real!Real families, good people, real worries. Rigorous, it's rigorous. I no longer think celebrity is difficult. I think fathers and mothers have it hard. Truly I do, and I am old enough now to

get the proportion. It's tough. It's a rigorous vocation. And what about Christ, Christ Our Lord, the child in this holy family? Well, first of all, remember how it says, they settled down when they got back from Egypt, in today's gospel, "they settled down in Nazareth." And I read the same scholarly books I am always bragging about, the six Catholic Bible Scholars, and they read all kind of symbolism into Nazareth and the Greek word is "Nazaree" which means.... You know what we've recently found out, from archaeology? Nazareth, when Our Lord was a baby, was being set down right next to a big new rising community. Big groups of families were moving into the next town. They needed new houses. That's real! Joseph settled in Nazareth because a carpenter would be needed in the next town. And think about Joseph, not this glowing movie star, but standing there as a carpenter, having his price haggled down. He was a just man. He didn't overcharge. Having his price battered down and haggled down and being glad to take what he could as a carpenter.

And what about Mary? She lost that child for three days! Remember? Our Lord disappeared for three days. Get real! What did she feel? What was she going through? She didn't understand until a long time later. And about work, Our Lord told a wonderful story. These are Christ's stories. They are rooted in the mystery of the rigors of family. Remember the story Our Lord told about the two boys? Dad goes to one kid and he says, "Will you go to work in the vineyard?" And the kid says, "Oh, you've got it, Pop! I'm going." And Our Lord adds, "He never went. He never showed up." The dad then, right away, went to the second kid, "Will you go and work in the vineyard?" The kid says, "Forget about it!" Then, Our Lord adds,"but he felt sorry, and he went and he worked all day." Get real! Sometimes you are disappointed and sometimes delighted and thrilled in the rigors of family life, by your kids.

The second is EUPHORIC. I saw one kid raise an eyebrow, but it is spelled with an "e," eu, euphoric. The euphoria of family life.... The first thing that always occurs to me is Whittaker Chambers in his magnificent book called "Witness," one of the three best biographies I ever read in my life. He was a super intellectual, as some of you remember. The Alger Hiss trial... Whittaker Chambers was a super-intellectual and an atheist. And then, one day, his wife gave him his first child, his newborn son, and with all Whittaker Chambers' intellectual arguments in French and German against God, he took one look at his kid's ear, his infant son's ear, and Chambers knelt down and said, "There is a God. That didn't just happen by chance. That perfect ear..... There is a God." That's euphoria. Well, that's just emotion. Yes, but in that case it was wonderful. But our emotions of euphoria in family life, they can't last. Do you want any emotion to last? Do you want grief to last? Or do you want fear to last? And the euphoria of falling in love and the romanticism and the bliss, about which I have read. Of course, it can't last. It's not like putting a bug in lucite. Of course it passes. The euphoria passes but you still see it sometimes, glorious euphoria. Get real, in family life! At airports, when relatives whom you haven't seen maybe in years are coming back from war, faces waiting at the airport.... That's euphoria.

Now Christ told maybe the most euphoric story about family life in the history of western civilization. Guy deMaupissant, the great French author, said if he could have written that one story he would sell all his books, just the one story of the Prodigal Son, which you have heard since you were kids. The kid goes off and wastes his money, gambling and ladies of loose morals. And he

comes stumbling home and the father runs out. The father is supposed to be God, God treating us when we are sorry. They have a big bash, but I am sure after the bash the father said, "Now, you go back to work." Get real! Get real!

And the "a" is AFFECTIONATE. Affection always lasts longer than euphoria, thank goodness. Now, last night, speaking of affection, the binding glue that keeps us together, the famous saying "Home is where they have to let you in when you knock at the door," the affection of family.... And along with that painting that I saw as a little kid, Our Lady looking like a movie star, and Joseph, and Our Lord, well there was a movie like that. And I still love the movie, (Don't get mad at me.) "The Sound of Music." And I remember when I heard about it I was a young priest. It's all about a father who lost his wife, (She died.) and he is bringing up these kids alone. That was the story of my family. My dad was a widower and I said, "Oh, I've got to see this movie!" Be real, about a man bringing up kids by himself. Well, I still love it. It's a charming movie, but.... It was on again last night, all the affection, cooperation of those little Trapp children coming out and singing for Daddy's party in their little sailor suits, warbling away, day after day.... Don't you think, if you get real, that, on some occasion or other, one of those darling little seven Trapp kids said, "No, I'm not going to sing one more glockenspiel number! I'm not going to warble about the edelweiss one more time, and I want my hot cocoa but I want it NOW!" I think so. It didn't mean that there wasn't great affection and great love. But, get real!

And Christ.... the most affectionate friends Christ had on this planet (And it's in all the gospels, affection!) were Martha, Mary and their kid brother, Lazarus. And it frequently mentions, Our Lord goes to "hang out," as the expression has it, to relax. They lived in a place where there was evidently money. They probably had some money and He could just sit and be Himself. And all that affection that He found in that house, with two sisters and their brother, when He could just breathe, that was real!

And finally, LONELINESS, a strange word to appertain to family, loneliness. Leo Tolstoy has an opening line in a novel that has been called maybe the most famous opening line in the history of western fiction. You probably know it. It's a famous line. The novel is "Anna Karenina." The opening line is "All happy families are happy in the same way. And all unhappy families are unhappy, each in its own separate way."

When loneliness lasts too long, when always feeling a-lone, that's not good. But simple loneliness is part of even family. A priest I had as a teacher in the seminary, theologian, big shot, two degrees, told us when he was very young, studying to be a priest in the seminary, he got very sick and they had to send him home to a place called "The Bronx." He walked into the living room of this little apartment, and his mom was there. He had seven siblings and dad and mom. But this moment when he walked in sick and home for Christmas, he put his bag down, and Mom was alone in the kitchen doing dishes. He said, "Mom, I am beginning to think that becoming a priest, my life shall be very lonely." His mother said, putting the dish cloth down, "Sit down. Now sit down. You have six siblings and I love them all. But your younger brother just got back from college for Christmas holiday. He dumped his laundry in the bedroom, ran in, kissed me on the cheek, and is gone out to

see his buddies and his old girlfriend in a bar. And your other siblings have come in and want to know what's for lunch. And your father, (I love him. I even like him most of the time.) sometimes.... With all the stuff I have to do, I put the dishrag down when I am alone here in the kitchen and I look around and sometimes I have said, "I love my kids. I love my husband. I am so lonely." She said, "Sit down. Have a cup of tea, and welcome to humanity. It's part and parcel of the human race, to be lonely at the most amazing times, even surrounded by the people you love."

And as for loneliness, I have never forgotten, as a child, hearing about Our Lord missing for three days! If I lose my Irish terrier for twenty minutes, I am in a panic! And this is Christ, three days, the responsibility of Mary! And they search and they finally find Him in the temple. You have heard that story. It's a true story. He was gone three days talking to all these big shot brains, the Pharisees, in the temple, about theological minutiae. Mary says, "Why did you do this to us? We've sought you sorrowing." Now, in the Greek translation, "sorrowing" means "in agony." And you know Our Lord's answer, "Why did you look for me? You must have known I would be here in My Father's house, attending to My Father's business." Now, don't you think that St. Joseph, quiet, long-suffering, good-hearted man, at that point might have wanted to.....(gesture, raising his arm as if preparing to strike someone). Get real! Now, we know he was a man of incredible reserve and forbearance and patience but the loneliness of not even understanding someone you have lived with for three years, thirty years sometimes. Where did that come from? Why did she say that? Even Christ imposed a kind of pain on Mary and Joseph. It's just inevitable.

Anyhow, for two thousand years, the Jewish people believed a Messiah was coming, and a lot of suffering, those Jews, a lot of suffering, waiting for the Messiah. And a lot of them must have said, in one way or another, in flawless Aramaic, "Get real," about God. And He did. He came down as a child with emotions and a brain and feelings and tears and laughter (Get real!) into a family that we very honorably, but humanly call "Holy."