

Catholic

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ONE LIGUORI DRIVE
LIGUORI, MO
63057-9999

800-325-9521
LIGUORI.ORG

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SEEING FAMILY LIFE AS HOLY, WARTS AND ALL

BY MITCH FINLEY

I rose from my seat and turned to face the audience. “Family life,” I said, “is holy.” A man called out, “Ha!” which, naturally, drew laughter from the entire group.

My critic was only being honest, of course, and most of us, if we’re honest, would tend to agree with him. *Holy* isn’t the first word that comes to mind when we think of family life.

The word *holy* tends to have an unreal sound; it smacks of a spiritual and moral perfection associated with plaster saints or nature untouched by human hands. We can call a brilliant sunset or a majestic eagle perched atop a tall pine tree holy. But a little knot of people who live together and squabble over who’s going to take out the trash or what to watch on TV? Fat chance.

We consider Mother Teresa holy because she cared for people dying in the gutters of Calcutta. But to call the typical family holy sounds like a weird joke. After all, in our family, you may protest, there’s a ten-year-old who hit his younger brother over the head with a baseball bat; another brother whose sole ambition is to own an electric guitar; a girl who hangs posters of rock stars on her bedroom walls; a husband and father who commutes an hour to work each way and whose idea of a good time is watching football on TV; and a tired wife and mother who doesn’t care how the kitchen looks as long as she can tend her flower garden each day.

WHAT DOES *HOLY* MEAN?

No matter what form of family we belong to, we’re tempted to ask with a dash of skepticism: “*This* is holy?” It depends on what we mean by *holy*. When the Bible



says *holy*, it means “separate” or “different.” The word implies health and wholeness in a world where much is unhealthy and fragmented. The phrase *hale and hearty* sums up effects of true holiness.

To be holy is to rejoice in oneself and the gift of life, to be charged with enthusiasm for life. Holiness includes humor and laughter, compassion and understanding, and the capacity to forgive and be forgiven, to love and be loved.

A frazzled Jane greets a visitor at her door with an apology, “Come on in, but the house is a mess. The kids have been driving me up the wall. I don’t know what’s up with the twins; they’ve been beating on each other all day. Would you like a glass of lemonade? Ted’s going to be late. He called and said his supervisor just handed him a project that has to be done by tomorrow morning. Joseph, stop that!” Jane can’t see it, but her visitor does. She and Ted have a holy family. It’s chaos city, but it’s also perfectly human and perfectly hale and hearty.



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Family life, as a way of living, is a holy way to go. To belong to a family is holy; to commit oneself to marriage is holy; to struggle as a single parent is holy; to live together with the ne’er-do-wells we call our family is, plain and simple, holy. To struggle to be a family is a holy struggle, no matter that we fall short of our ideals.

What makes family life sacred isn’t attaining perfection, but living with people as lovingly as we can is to live with God. That bleary-eyed wonder who sits across the breakfast table each morning? Well—surprise, surprise—that person could be your path to closeness with God and may be as close as you’ll ever get to God, this side of the grave.



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