

HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY

When I was in Catholic grade school some of our teachers made us write the letters JMJ on top of every homework assignment and test. The letters stood for Jesus, Mary and Joseph: the Holy Family. They reminded us that we children should look to the Holy Family for a model and contribute to a peaceful family life in our homes.

Christians often imagine the Holy Family gathered joyfully at the manger in Bethlehem or cooperating peacefully with one another at their home and carpentry shop in Nazareth. But today's gospel recalls a disturbing event in their life. Herod the king wanted to kill their child. To ensure success, he decided to kill all the infants in Bethlehem. Joseph packed up Jesus and Mary and fled about 300 miles to Egypt. After Herod died, they prepared to return to Bethlehem, but Matthew says they went to Nazareth - not because that was their home, but so they could hide from another king, Archelaus. Around this peaceful Holy Family violence escalated beyond their control. They ran away from it because they couldn't stop it. Among our Christmas songs, the Coventry Carol includes these horrifying words sung to the infant Jesus as his parents packed their bags in Bethlehem for the urgent flight into Egypt: "Lully, lullay, Thou little tiny Child, / Bye, bye, lully, lullay.... / Herod the king, in his raging, / Charged he hath this day / His men of might, in his own sight / All young children to slay.... For thy parting neither say nor sing / Bye, bye, lully, lullay."

Pope Benedict once said of the Holy Family that in them "we can catch a glimpse of the painful condition in which all migrants live, especially refugees, exiles, evacuees, internally displaced persons, those who are persecuted. We can take a quick look at the difficulties that every migrant family lives through, the hardships and the humiliations, the deprivation and fragility of millions and millions."

Here in the Northeast of Kansas City, it's easy to think of our Vietnamese brothers and sisters. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, over 1 million Vietnamese migrated to the United States to escape persecution and poverty. Many of them left their shores in rickety boats and established homes in poor neighborhoods. Christians form a small percentage of the population in Vietnam, but nearly a quarter of those who came to the United States were Catholics. Our Church has felt particular compassion for those who had to flee from violence to make neighborhoods like this one their home, their Nazareth.

Every family faces its share of drama. Sadly, the lives of children are sometimes placed in peril. Like Joseph, we all need to do our part to protect families from danger. Part of the immigration reform we seek is to address the causes of migration and put an end to any injustice that forces people to leave their homes for another land. We all want to protect our own families. We also need to take care of one another.