

The traditional family seems anything but these days. Just a few decades ago you'd expect a family to include one father, one mother, and 2.4 children. That image was reinforced by sitcoms, cinema and commercials. Now it's hard to find a movie that features a traditional family or a commercial that refers to two parents. The audience has changed. And so has the family. Instead of two parents raising children we often find some other combination: one parent, or a parent and step-parent, a parent and a lover, grandparents, a same-sex couple. And all of them may be splitting the children's time with another combination of relationships from the list. It's not ideal, but it's very real. The Catholic Church continues to promote the traditional nuclear family, even as we strive to provide the best pastoral care for all households. People in non-traditional households find inner strength from self-esteem, the one attribute that Americans prize even more than traditional families. The thinking goes: if you're not in the household that everyone dreams about, you should at least feel good about the household you're in. If you pass that test, society accepts you. Still, absolutely every engaged couple I visit shares the old traditional dream. Some of them admit they've done it all backwards -- they have children, then they live together, and then they get engaged. But they all say they want kids to have two parents. And they want their marriage to last forever.

Perhaps with some wry realism the scriptures for the Feast of the Holy Family give us two families that are nuclear, but not exactly traditional. Mary was found to be with child while she was engaged. Now, think about that. If you were God, and you were sending your son into the world to teach people how to live, would you start the project with a pregnant unmarried woman? The other family appears in the first two readings today: Abraham, Sara, and their son Isaac. What's nontraditional here is the age of the parents. They were both about a hundred years old, according to the Book of Genesis. Mind you, they did not adopt a child at age 100. They did not assume grandparent or greatgrandparent duties at age 100. They became parents. Talk about supermom. It took that long for God to fulfill the promise that they would have descendants more numerous than the stars of the sky. They had their first child, Isaac, when they were 100. These are not traditional families.

If anything is traditional in these stories it's how difficult parenting can be. Remember, the most gut-wrenching part of the Abraham story came when his only son Isaac grew a few years older. God said, "OK, I gave you a son. Now kill him in sacrifice to me." Before there were any grandchildren, Abraham had to trust God again that the covenant would be fulfilled. I'm not a parent, but this much I know. Good parents don't kill their kids. Good parents never put their children in danger. And yet, collectively, we do this. We put our children in danger when we don't provide education about sex, peaceful means to resolve conflicts, the proper care of our own bodies and the respect we owe to others' bodies. A lot of our kids are in danger. They smoke cigarettes. They smoke marijuana. They engage in casual sex. They become addicted to alcohol. As inconceivable as it is for Abraham to lift a knife against his own son, we do the same thing when we don't provide good moral guidance for our

children, whether we are parent, step-parent, grandparent or pastor. We're all responsible for these kids.

The answer which the Feast of the Holy Family offers is not what you might expect. The readings do not completely rely on the traditional family. The tradition remains the ideal, but we all know two-parent families who succeed at being two-parent, but not at being family. The solution this feast offers is faith. When we live our faith the strength of God will overcome whatever threatens the family. Our goal remains the same: society founded upon family, and families founded upon faith.