

On this feast of the Holy Family we hear in the Gospel three periods or stages of faith manifested by three generations of believers. Those periods of faith may be present at many different times of life however, and go in no specific order.

They also can be stages of family life in general, just as the church is a family and the family is the primary manifestation of the church.

First of all, and perhaps most obvious and least common are moments of pure grace and holiness. They are times when God's grace and power are clearly at work and we know it. Jesus is described, for example, as growing in wisdom and strength, and people noticed.

Another period of faith comes in moments of confusion, questioning and doubting, and sometimes even feeling like I am a fraud. It is important to realize that someone can have faith, and at the same time question. Mary raised questions with the angel; and no one accuses her of having no faith. For some of us those times are especially difficult and we are carried on by faith and tradition. And so keep coming to church, we keep praying, *even if* we're not sure that God is listening. That is faith!

Finally, there's a kind of tempered faith that comes through trial and time, when someone has learned to recognize the hand of God even if others don't see it. It is a time-tested weather-worn faith that many people long to have. But usually it comes only after having lived in the other two periods of faith. Anna and Simeon had that kind of faith, that recognized the long-awaited Messiah when he was brought to the Temple, causing amazement to his parents, while it did nothing to convince the religious powers that be – because deep faith really never *convince*s others. It has to be *lived* to be real.

In families there are times of trial, like adolescence (for the kids and the parents); there are times of illness, and troubled behavior, and financial stress, and old hurts rising to the surface. And through all of it love struggles to keep going. We try to keep the door open even if it keeps getting slammed in our face. Just to keep going is an act of faith and a path to holiness.

In families too there are moments of peace, times of deep consolation and contentment, times when all the pieces seem to fit together, times when family comes together, with all our faults and imperfections and faults well-known, still loving each other and still BEING family just because we ARE family. It confuses other people when they see how we put up with members of our family, and yet it doesn't matter to us. At such times there ought to be profound gratitude when that occurs, because for most people it doesn't happen very often!

All of these are stages of family life; and all of them are stages of faith. None of them are better or holier than any other.