

Msgr. Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on Sunday, November 30, 2003
First Sunday of Advent - Liturgical Year C

Two required features of a preacher three days after Christmas:

- Don't talk about things you know nothing of.
- Be mercifully brief.

Most Catholic priests have memories of their own family upbringing, a library of books on marriage preparation, and years of stories and tales of woe. All of this is best left aside today. On family life, I share a story of a woman getting on a bus accompanied by seven children. "Are they all yours?" inquired the driver, "Or is this a picnic?" "They're all mine, all right—and believe me, it's no picnic."

Anyone who thinks family life is a simple task probably never had a family.

The Jesus of today's Gospel is a child on the threshold of becoming an adult. That passage, as any family can testify, is rarely accomplished without stress and strain. Today's tale of newly-asserted independence—of a child moving out of a family circle, discovering his identity—is also a tale of worried parents, a frenzied search, and a tension-filled encounter: "How could you do this to us?"

Let me briefly comment on two strains produced in our own society by the passage from childhood to adulthood in the practice of Catholic faith.

First, Mary and Joseph appear surprised by Jesus' insistence that God wants him with teachers in the Jerusalem temple. No reason to think their surprised is feigned. Parents are often surprised—and disappointed—by the road taken by their adult children. But making choices, exercising freedom, finding one's own way—that is precisely the mark of adulthood in all our lives.

Second, regarding the transition from childhood to adulthood is the practice of faith itself. Countless parents of adult or near-adult children are full of anxiety, self-accusation, anger, and guilt because their children have walked away from the faith of their childhood.

Remember, for many children, this passage is not easy. One high school student wrote: "I just don't know what's wrong, but I just don't believe like I used to. When I was in grade school, I was really religious. Now I just don't seem to care."

Recall, too, that faith is an ongoing project. It is a process that goes on, to some extent, all our lives long. There are no easy answers. But choices made by adult children, even when disappointing, are still their own.

Jesus today strives for adulthood and independence. Difficult for him. Difficult for Mary and Joseph.

That God-made-human could share our struggle is the message and grace of today's feast.