

Family Catechesis



Christ in the House of his Parents, or The Carpenter's Shop, by John Everett Millais (1849), Tate, London



This painting is full of symbolism. Spend some time seeing what you can discern.

What elements of your experience of family can you see reflected here?

What does the portrayal of Joseph and Mary in this painting tell you about the role of parents in a family?

How does this painting help me reflect on my role as a catechist?

How does this painting help me reflect on the life of my Church community?

The Return to Nazareth, Luke 2: 39,40

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favour of God was upon him.

This painting was not well received when first exhibited. Millais, the painter, set out to depict the Holy Family as a 19th Century British working class family. What do you think he was hoping to achieve? How does the painting speak to you today? The painting is very obviously religious (in addition to the obvious subjects of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, his grandmother St Anne and his cousin John the Baptist. Who do you think the last figure might be?) as it is filled with religious symbolism.

- The carpenter's triangle on the wall above Christ's head - the Holy Trinity
- Wood and nails - prefiguring the crucifixion
- The wound (he has cut himself on a nail) and blood on Christ's hand which drips on to his foot - prefiguring the crucifixion
- Bowl of water carried by John - prefiguring baptism of Christ
- White dove on ladder - Holy Spirit which descended from Heaven at the baptism of Christ
- Sheep in background - you and me - the Christian flock
- Unknown figure - perhaps a possible disciple?
- Wooden work bench - alludes to an altar
- Jesus is dressed in a white shroud - alluding to the white shroud of the tomb
- Partly woven basket on the left - Christ's mission too is unfinished, or allusion to Palm Sunday or perhaps a Moses basket
- The painting was exhibited with the following passage from the Old Testament, another prefiguring of Christ's Crucifixion: *'And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then shall he answer. Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.'* (Zechariah 13:5-7)
- Notice Mary and Joseph's care and attention which is so recognisable as parental love.
- Although the impending sacrifice of the cross is evident throughout the painting, so is the sacrifice of family love. The floor is covered in wood shavings, we are called to work and make sacrifices for our families.