

THE HOLY FAMILY (Centre)

We see the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, seated at table, sharing a meal. Seeing the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs and radishes and the cup of wine on the table before them we can surmise that they are celebrating the Passover meal together. Their faith was celebrated in their home. Their trust in God was remembered at table.

On the left, we see Mary. Look at the colours of her clothes. Her undergarment is blue, the colour of our humanity and adorns a garment of red, the colour of blood, the colour of life. In icons it stands for the colour of Divinity, of God's life. We see some stylised stars on her outer clothing, symbolic of her virginity both before and after giving birth to Jesus, a reminder to us that, as the Creed tells us: Christ, born of the Holy Spirit and of Mary, is both true God and true man. Note how her hand is wistfully held up to her face. This is a 'quotation' from the icon of 'Our Lady assuage my sorrow'. With her other hand, Mary is also "Theotokos" – directing us and showing the way to Jesus, her Son.

On the right we see Saint Joseph, her husband. In icons of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, he is shown presenting and holding up in his hands a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, the offering of the poor as a thanksgiving to God. Here he presents us instead with the offering to be made in thanksgiving to God the Father: Jesus, who is the "Lamb of God" [cf. John1:36]. Hence there is no need for us to see a Passover lamb on this family table as the true Lamb is there before us [cf. 1 Corinthians 5:7]

Both Mary and Joseph are turned toward and bow to Jesus – who is here shown as a boy around twelve years old. They surround him with their love and care, but they do not smother him, they do not impose themselves. Both leave him space to be who he truly is.

The boy Jesus' face has a high forehead – a sign that he is full of Wisdom. His neck is somewhat bulging, filled with the Divine Breath, the Holy Spirit. It is said that, in icons, the face of Jesus can appear to have two sides – on the left his countenance is softer, almost smiling with gentleness; on the right side, he seems more stern. Jesus is both our compassionate Saviour and our Judge. Look at Jesus' halo. It is different from that of Mary and Joseph and that of the angels. It has three bands, making it look a bit like a cross. However, this actually signifies that Jesus has the holiness of one of the Persons of the Trinity. In the halo we see the Greek letters in it: an abbreviation for "I am who I am" the Holy Name of God as revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. The boy

Jesus is dressed in a traditional Jewish patterned cloth and a radiant orange, a colour associated with depictions of the Risen Christ. Down his right shoulder is a kingly sash.

His right hand is raised in blessing; his fingers even make the shape of the Greek letters IC and XC, abbreviations for his own name: Jesus the Christ. Two fingers are raised to remind us that in him, two natures co-exist, in him God and humanity are one. The other three digits are nearly joined together, again reminding us of the Trinity.

In his left hand he holds a scroll. He himself is the Word God the Father speaks to us. Jesus speaks to us the words that call us to life. On the scroll is a quotation from the Gospel of Luke: the message to the angel to the poor shepherds telling us who Jesus is: the bearer of a great joy for all of humanity – the joy of Love. [Luke 2:10]

THE HEALING OF JAIRUS' DAUGHTER (Left side)

Jairus begs him to come and lay his hands on his daughter who is at the point of death. In the upper part of the icon we can see adults in gestures of distress and commotion. None of them seem to be even looking at each other, they are caught up in their own upset. Jesus has put them all outside of the house. The interior space is defined and marked for us by the draped red cloth.

The only still person in the middle of this disturbed crowd is a little child, dressed in white, with hands raised in an ancient gesture of prayer known as the 'orans'. The child seems to be trying to reassure the grown-ups as if to say: "Everything is going to be alright, Jesus is here." Sometimes our children can teach us powerfully of the things of God. Jairus begs him to come and lay his hands on his daughter who is at the point of death. In the upper part of the icon we can see adults in gestures of distress and commotion. None of them seem to be even looking at each other, they are caught up in their own upset. Jesus has put them all outside of the house. The interior space is defined and marked for us by the draped red cloth.

In the lower half of the icon we see how Christ has a great sensitivity and respect for the privacy and intimacy of our family lives. He takes with him just the girl's parents and his closest companions Peter (left, with the curly hair and beard), James and the youthful Beloved disciple John (right) to the room where the child was.

With the scroll of the Word of God in his hand, Jesus takes the girl by the hand. Notice how he holds her by the wrist, a grip similar to how a lifeguard would rescue you or a trapeze artist would hold someone safe. It is the same way the Risen Christ takes the hand of Adam and Eve to lift them from the Underworld to restore them to the fullness of life.

Jairus has his hands outstretched to Jesus as if he is placing his daughter completely in his hands. His wife holds one hand up, as if she is lost for words, the other holding onto her husband for support. In this Gospel we also see the practical concern of Jesus as

he tells the girl's parents – 'give her something to eat'. The Lord recognises and truly values the everyday sacrifices and providing that goes on in our families.

THE WEDDING AT CANA (Right side)

We see the bride and groom seated at the table, with their wedding crowns. In the Orthodox Churches, spouses are 'crowned' as part of the wedding ritual. They look to each other with concern and worry on their faces. They have run out of wine. In the Old Testament we hear how wine is a symbol of joy. God brings forth wine from the earth "to gladden the human heart" [Psalm 104:15]. This couple have run out of the joy of love. An elderly couple in the background, perhaps the couple's extended family members, bring bread and wine to the table, but will their help be enough?

Mary sees their dire need and the risk of embarrassment to them. Sometimes mothers have the keenest eyes for the burdens of others. She herself can do nothing but she goes to Jesus. We see her standing right beside him, pointing with her hand towards the husband and wife. Jesus has not yet worked any signs. He feels it's not yet the appropriate time, and the face of Jesus in this icon captures something of his reticence. But Mary sees the couples need as most important. She trusts that Jesus can do something and tells the servants: "Do whatever he tells you."

With one hand holding a scroll of the dynamic Word of God, Jesus, with his right hand, blesses the water being poured into the jars by the servants in response to his command. Something insipid and tasteless is filled with flavour and joy. And God gives with superabundance, beyond all expectations. The seated wedding steward holds a cup of wine up with a gesture of approval. "You have kept the good wine till now," he says.

You have saved the best till last, perhaps an allusion to Hebrews 1:2: God spoke to us through the prophets "but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son".

Christ Jesus is revealed too as the Bridegroom of the marriage between God and Humanity. The bread and wine on the table again remind us of the Eucharist.

Indeed, blessed are those called to the supper, the wedding feast of the Lamb.

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THE ICON OF THE HOLY FAMILY

(A BRIEF DESCRIPTION)



Icon of the Holy Family © World Meeting of Families 2018.

Why not take a walk around Crolley Park in the grounds of St Patricks Cathedral and Pray the Stations of the Family?

FAMILY STATIONS: *COME AND PRAY*

1. FAMILY PRAYER
2. PRAYER FOR THE YOUNG
3. PRAYER FOR THE AGED
4. PRAYER FOR THE SICK
5. PRAYER FOR THE DEAD
6. PRAYER FOR THE WORLD MEETING OF FAMILIES