

MODERN FAMILY

Timothy Daaleman

IT MAY BE COMMON after the age of fifty, but I find myself looking back and trying to understand some of the dynamics in my family of origin and in my present family. As a doctor in general practice I am familiar with many of the theories and explanatory models related to family life, such as birth order and the life course, but as I tried to apply these to my experience, none resonated or offered insight. Independently of this retrospection, several years ago I first saw a bronze sculpture entitled *The Holy Family Resting—The Flight to Egypt* in the east entrance to the Crypt Church at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC.

As you face the statue, Joseph is angled to the left, curled up and sitting with his chin resting on his knees. Arms and legs enfold his tunic and give the impression that Joseph is so bone-tired that he is barely able to hold his body together. To Joseph's right is a donkey that is lying down with its head on the ground owing to fatigue. Mary is the central figure in the relief, and it appears that only the wall behind is keeping her upright. Although her eyes are closed, Mary's body is flexed slightly forward, and her arms are extended with the infant Jesus lying in the crook of her left elbow. There is nothing physically restful or restorative about *The Holy Family at Rest*. In fact, it depicts the complete exhaustion of a family, one that has journeyed quite unexpectedly and fearfully far from home, and with great haste.

Although this image has remained with me long after I first saw it, it surprisingly did not come up in many years of spiritual direction. An important reason for this absence, I believe, was my struggle with imaging God in a way that was authentic, and in a way that I could relate to. This was not for lack of effort, since I tried hard to generate some representation of God that was real to me, one that would help in my prayer and spiritual life.

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The Holy Family Resting—The Flight to Egypt, by Anna Hyatt Huntington

However the only image that I could conjure up was of God the therapist; a wise and understanding, grandfather-like figure sitting and listening as I was stretched out on the couch revealing big ideas and deep thoughts. I do not know where this representation of God came from, since I have not been in therapy as a patient and had limited exposure to psychotherapists in my training and career as a family doctor. After many attempts I finally gave up on this endeavour, feeling spiritually deficient in some way.

In more recent years a spiritual director introduced me to the Ignatian practice of using my imagination when reading or hearing the gospel, most directly by placing myself as a character in the narrative.¹ So I tried this strategy as well, by picturing myself as a bystander or active participant in the narrative, particularly in readings during the Lenten season. And again

¹ William A. Barry, *Letting God Come Close: An Approach to the Ignatian Exercises* (Chicago: Loyola, 2001), 101–108.

it felt forced and inauthentic, and I moved on to other approaches and practices. Yet during the Christmas season each year the infancy narratives that were read would invariably bring me back to that bronze sculpture; not to the idyllic manger scene but to an exhausted family on a journey and resting for a moment.

It is important to place *The Holy Family Resting* within the context of the story behind it. In the Gospel of Matthew we read that:

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. (2:13–15)

As I enter more deeply into this story I am continuously discovering ways in which *The Holy Family Resting* helps me to understand my experience of married and family life, an intimate and personal revelation of the mystery of God's presence and workings.

To begin, my father still has the unique ability to drop everything and engage in a singular task at hand with absolute clarity and certainty. In years past this charism was not limited to minor decisions but sometimes had an impact on major life transitions, as when we moved away from a neighbourhood that was thick with family and friends. Although our new home was only eight miles in geographic distance, the relocation was light years away from my emotional centre. For years I could not understand his rationale and what led to this decision. And yet, thirty years later, I too uprooted my wife, two sons and daughter from the loving support of family and close friends, and replanted them halfway across the country.

Perhaps my attraction to *The Holy Family Resting* is God's way of drawing me close by helping me to understand God's mysterious but very active workings in these events. I am moved by Joseph, that presumably rational, upstanding, hard-working husband and father. In the infancy narrative, Joseph so allowed his dreams to possess him that he took his wife and infant son and left home at a moment's notice. In my own experience, I had no such dreams or visions but rather a gradual awareness of desiring something more, something deeper in my professional life that came from within. And after a year-long period of discernment, what began with an interior invitation eventually led to the major transition event in my family's life.

Mary's central position in the sculpture makes me curious about the sources of her exhaustion, an itinerant, impulsive husband notwithstanding. During our weekly phone calls, my mother often comments on the busyness of our lives and will routinely ask if my wife and I are getting enough rest. In some way I wonder if she is indirectly sharing part of her experience of participating, as did Mary, in the exhausting work of a God who never tires. Now eighty years old, she has never complained that her life—marked by the daily humdrum round of countless loads of washing and endless meals to cook—has ever been unfulfilled. And I am coming to the realisation that this ongoing work has tilled what Thomas Merton would call the hidden ground of love in her, and in all of us who have been in her care.²

For contemporary families such as my own, Joseph and Mary are not simply beatific images, and their place in the underlying narrative of the flight to Egypt is not role- or gender-specific. To listen to God's call and to live it out within the context of the domestic church that is married and family life is exhausting, uncertain and often hidden work. At those times, when I complain again to my wife that I am struggling with believing in God's active presence and workings in my life and in the world, she reminds me that what is real is the love that sustains our family.

Then I can rest for a few moments.

Timothy Daaleman is professor and vice-chair of family medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

² Thomas Merton to Amiya Chakravarty, 13 April 1967, in *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1993), 115.