

Year C
Sunday in the Octave of Christmas
Feast of the Holy Family
(Sir 3:2-7, 12-14; Ps 128; Col 3:12-17; Mt 2:13-15, 19-23)

In the original conception of the “Ten Commandments,” or Decalogue, followed still by Jews and Protestants (and by many Church Fathers in the early period of Christianity, but no longer in the Catholic tradition), there were two sets of five commandments each, the first set relating to God, the second to fellow humans. In this reckoning, the fifth commandment was “honor your father and mother,” thus included among the obligations to God. Parents are like God in that they give us life and nurture us, and are our authorities in many ways all the days of our life. This commandment is the only one with an incentive included: “so that you may prolong your days on the Land which Yahweh your God is giving you,” Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16. Jesus upholds this commandment twice in Mark’s gospel. In Mk 7:10-13, he refers to the commandment and to its opposite, “cursing” one’s parents. This is not a simply matter of words; the “curse” is to not support one’s parents, included among the homicide legislation in Ex 21:17. In affluent societies, this curse may take the form not of withholding material sustenance, but emotional and living support, such as may take place when children who want to be comfortable and unbothered and “free” put away their parents in “homes” for the elderly to wait to die. The Community of Sant’Egidio, to which I belong, emphasizes visits to nursing homes as a prominent form of solidarity with the poor in societies like ours; see www.santegidio.org. Note that Jesus includes this commandment in his remarks to the “rich young man,” Mk 10:19.

The gospel reading from Mt shows the paradox of the Holy Family’s situation. Magi (wise men) come with fine gifts worthy of Jesus’ regal status, but his parents must flee to avoid persecution. They flee to Egypt, where the whole story of God’s salvific dealings with his people began, a story that Jesus recapitulates, transforms and redeems. This is all according to God’s plan and the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Note the repetition of “the child (Jesus) and his mother.” Mary is closely united to Jesus in all his trials; see Lk 2:22.