



Sts. Joachim and Anna: The Story of the Great Faithfulness and Love

My brothers and sisters in the Lord, Christ is in our midst!

We all know “the greatest story ever told.” It is the Gospel, the story that we share with one another and with all who bear the name of “Christians.” In our churches, Catholic and Orthodox alike, we make the highlights of this story an intrinsic part of the adornment of our sanctuaries — for our eyes are accustomed to seeing the visual images of the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and above all, the Resurrection. And just as we witness these events in icons and statues, we also relive and retell of these events of salvation through liturgy and worship.

But have you ever asked yourself how “the greatest story ever told” begins?

When we look at the formal record of Scripture, we find that Saint Mark begins with the baptism of Christ. Saint Matthew’s narration begins with the events of the Nativity. Saint Luke starts a little earlier, with the Archangel Gabriel’s visitation to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Saint John begins his Gospel the furthest back of all, in the time before time, before the first day of Creation.



But Christians in the earliest centuries also knew of another starting-point for the Good News. And they



were able to do so because they were aware of the unwritten family history. That unwritten story began with an ordinary family, a man and wife. His name was Joachim. Her name in Hebrew was Hannah, meaning “grace” or “favor”; she is known to us better by the name as it comes through the Greek: Anna or Anne.

To be certain, Joachim and Anna were not an extraordinary couple; unlike Joseph and Mary, he was not an aged widower and she was not a consecrated temple virgin. In reality they appear to be everyday people. Their marriage was not the product of a divine matchmaking like Isaac and Rebekah; they did not find each other through a providential meeting like Boaz and Ruth.

Joachim and Anna were an ordinary family, as ordinary as any of ours: which means, of course, that like the rest of us, their family was warm and loving, ... but it wasn't perfect. Upon them was the pain of childlessness. In their culture and in that place and time, this problem was more than a heartache; it was a social stigma, seen by some as a sign of divine disfavor. Unlike today where we consider ourselves to be the sole arbiters of the miracle of human creation, our forebears understood family and childbearing to be part of God's divine blessing and plan.

The tradition of the Church tells the story of the great faithfulness and love of Joachim and Anna. In many ways, they were considered blessed: for by God's mercy and providence, they had material abundance; and from their abundance they offered one third of their material blessing to the work of the Temple and its priests; one third to the needs of the poor; and they cared for themselves with the remaining third. One might say that they had everything – except the joy of children.

Thus on that fateful day it was not unusual for Joachim to approach the Temple with generous gifts and offerings – he always gave to the work of God, and he always prayed for the blessing of a child; what was different on that day was that he was turned away. An unthinking person in authority challenged him: How can a childless man be deemed worthy to come before God? In typical male fashion, confused and ashamed, Joachim goes off to be alone (in his “man-cave”) in the wilderness; there to nurse his soul's wounds, but even more, to pour out his heart before God.

His faithful wife Anne fears the worst for her absent husband. Unaware of what happened, she too goes into mourning as a childless widow. And from her heart, shattered with pain, escapes a prayer that reaches the heavens: “O God of our fathers, bless me.”

Yes, my friends, we know these people, don't we? We know this family: they are us. For, beloved, what family among us is untouched by hurt, by loss, by weakness, by strife, ... by shame? Which of our families is not affected by some condition that breaks our hearts and challenges our hope, whether because of unemployment or underemployment or financial stress or medical issues or legal troubles? What family has not been tested by the presence of moral failure and loss of hope? When we see the family of Joachim and Anna, we see people just like ourselves, just like everyone else. We see people who ache for a sense of God's presence, a sense of God's purpose in their life. And just as both were in deep despair, God sent his angel to tell them of His mercy and love, and that after waiting with faith and hope, their prayers would be blessed: they would have a child.

Is it any wonder, then, that in popular piety, the early Church at times could begin the Good News with these two people—at once so obscure and yet so familiar?



That the greatest story of human history starts with such an ordinary family—this brings hope that God can make wonderful things happen even through us—despite our limitations, despite our frailty, despite our basic human nature in all its broken beauty.

And a wonderful thing did happen for Joachim and Anna, a wonderful thing for all humanity. A child was born, a little girl. They gave her a name from the history of God's mercy on His people, the name of the sister of Moses—Miriam. Today, when we call her blessed, we address her as Mary. And we call her blessed, because she gave birth to the Savior, to Jesus Christ – to God in the flesh.

Joachim and Anna were well along in years when they became parents—in their late sixties at the least. Their child was a miracle. But even in this, Joachim and Anna are akin to all of us. Each and every time a child is born, what parent does not look upon their infant as an absolute miracle, a gift directly from God? Made as we are in God's own image and according to His likeness, we bear within us the latent powers of creation. (Gen 1:26) That is how the Church sees this marvelous gift of reproduction.

Yet we live in a world that uses the word “sexuality” to set us up for a punch line. Around us and even among us, sexuality is a gift that is squandered and unappreciated. We who are of the Church are accused of fearing sexuality, of denigrating it, of suppressing it. Not so! Quite to the contrary! We in the Church recognize that sexuality is a gift from God. We lift it up. We consecrate it and set it apart through the Sacrament of Marriage. It is for us not simply another biomechanical process for replicating DNA; that's for the birds and the bees, the dogs and cats. We imbue sexuality with a sense of holiness, with an ultimate purpose, so that it is not all about the fleeting pleasure of one or two people, but about the well-being of the whole race of mankind. It is about the gift of love and life— both of which are from God.

When you see the fruit of the union of Joachim and Anna—when you behold an icon of the Virgin Mary—you see a most profound spiritual statement. Theologians struggle to put into words what every father and mother, every godfather and godmother, every grandparent, every aunt and uncle knows to be true: When human prayers come together with God's grace, miracles happen. We creatures of dust cannot will it to be so. But when we humans do our human things and live our human lives in cooperation with God, miracles happen, even though the eyes of the world see nothing new under the sun. God speaks to His people every day!

The infant Mary was a miracle. But she was not magical. She did not enter the world ready-made for her role as the Virgin Mother. The work of Joachim and Anna in God's plan of salvation did not end after a conception and nine months of pregnancy. They were called not merely to be progenitors, but even more, to be parents. The Latin word is so fitting, sharing as it does a root with the word “prepare.” A parent is not simply the one who sires a child, but the one who prepares a child to become an adult—through instruction, through patience, by word and example.

This, too, is part of the greatest story ever told. That the mother of our God had parents who were role models of love and self-sacrifice, of perseverance and prayer.

When you hear the story of the Annunciation and you listen to the Virgin Mary singing the Magnificat—can you not hear the voice of Saint Anne, singing psalms of God's praise to the infant at her breast?



When you hear the story of the Crucifixion and see beneath the Cross the Virgin Mary standing watch as her Son departs from this life—do you not recognize the strength of Saint Anne, bidding farewell to her only child at the end of every visit to the Temple, staying strong even while her heart breaks?

Without the motherly example of Saint Anne, day by day and year by year, who would the angel Gabriel have to hail as the one full of grace? This too is part of our shared Gospel, and part of our witness to the world of today: strong adults gave us a strong Mary!

And this is perhaps the greatest message for this day. God has opened the gates of Heaven to us as a community of faith – as a family. It is not realistic for us to grow and be nurtured in the faith as Christians without the caring love and concern of others — and firstly, of our families. Yes, as we add the life and contribution of St. Anne to the story of God’s love for us, we remember that we are never alone ... we are always part of a community ... of a family.

Sts. Joachim and Anne demonstrate this for us today just as much as the holy family of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. You and I are more able to be here today because at some point in our life not only did God call us to His house, but we also were blessed to witness the faith and example of parents, of relatives, of teachers, of clergy, and of friends. Yes, even the voices of the cloud of witnesses who repeated the words of the Samaritan woman to us: “Come and see.” (Jn 4:29)

So this day above all days tells us how important the strong and faithful example of our parents, our first models of faith, is for us so that we might see past the distractions of this age and come to know the love, and mercy, and grace of God.

Without strong parents, children do not grow with a sense of personal independence. Without strong parents, children are more prone to bow to peer pressure, to act on impulse, to forego delayed gratification. In our church life we sometimes succumb to an insidious trap. We make the mistake of always emphasizing the “youth programs” and neglecting the spiritual development of the adults in the lives of our children.

The greatest ministry of the Church to our children is in training their fathers and mothers to be better parents, — to be better witnesses of the power of God to take us from earth to heaven. If the Church had nothing else to offer your children, this would be enough. In fact, this pious example of parents and family was enough for the generations of Christians in centuries past, enough to raise a company of martyrs in the Roman persecutions of the earliest centuries and under Communist oppression of our own times. Surely it was the faith of the parents and martyrs that nurtured the faith of the children!

More than any basketball league or camping ministry, this is what we should celebrate as the Church’s gift: a Christian family to grow up in. A family that is shaped by the teachings of Christ: about God’s love for us; and about forgiveness and patience and generosity. Teachings about the essential connection between love and self-sacrifice, between sexuality and commitment. Teachings about self-discipline and responsibility. Teachings about dealing with temptation and troubles, with disappointments and death.

I daresay that this is one of the reasons why the Catholic parishes have always emphasized the need for parochial schools. How else would one offer to the children, to the younger members of the family, the witness of the everyday example of faith in action. At the parochial schools the example of faith can be



found in the teachers and priests, the janitors and the cooks, the secretaries and maintenance staff. Everyone can be an example of faith for the children.

I recently read a book by David Kinnaman in which he explores the reasons for young adults leaving the Church in droves. He writes (in *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith*):

We are at a critical point in the life of the North American church; the Christian community must rethink our efforts to make disciples. Many of the assumptions on which we have built our work with young people are rooted in modern, mechanistic, and mass production paradigms. Some (though not all) ministries have taken cues from the assembly line, doing everything possible to streamline the manufacture of shiny new Jesus-followers, fresh from the factory floor. But disciples cannot be mass-produced. Disciples are handmade, one relationship at a time.

When we begin the Gospel with the story of Joachim and Anna, this is precisely the point: disciples are not mass-produced; saints are handmade, one at a time. So it was for the Blessed Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, through the parenting of Joachim and Anna. So it is for our children today.

The full homily can be read [here](#).