

## What makes our faith special and unique?

What are some sentiments that can be heard when looking through a family photo album or sharing stories at a family reunion?

Things like; look he has my eyes, those freckles are from your dad's side, you get your height from grandpa, curly hair runs in the family... We cling to these traits, these similarities- because we begin and end with family. We are all connected, because we are family. The universal church joins us all as one body in Christ. Pope Francis has brought this sentiment to life.

When Father wanted me to share my experiences from the World Meeting of Families I kept coming back to this feeling of a universal family- so I guess I could sum it all up with this statement:

My husband and I just returned from the biggest family reunion we've ever been a part of.

That is one of the many things that I discovered when Shane and I attended the world meeting of families in Philadelphia about a month ago.

It would be impossible to really cover everything that I thought, felt and experienced during those amazing 8 days. One feeling that God has put on my heart to share is how amazingly unique our Catholic faith is. Another is the passion to share the love and word of the one who created me.

For many being Catholic is something that just is- you are Catholic because you were born and raised into this faith. For those who didn't have that experience, being Catholic can be confusing or intimidating. All of the ceremony and symbols, to genuflect to kneel, candles lit, incense burned, anointing oils and countless beads. When you take all this in at face value things can be a bit much.

I was trying to come up with an analogy or relatable comparison when speaking about those unique Catholic practices. Things like placing statues around or hanging crucifixes on a wall. Praying the rosary, wearing holy medals or displaying relics may seem dated or not contemporary enough for our evolved society. But then I was watching a Royals game. And I saw fans scramble for that coveted foul ball. I started to realize we would not fault someone, who, if they had a baseball signed by Hosmer and then they decided to display such a gem in their home. If they decided to incase this prize in a protective box and even shine a light on it for better viewing they would not be seen as radical zealots. If people see value in a jersey, game ball or a slip of paper with a scribbled signature, it really isn't that strange to see the value in a crucifix on a wall or blessed medal on a chain worn close to your heart. It was eye opening when I realized this comparison.

As I journeyed through shrines and relics I began to learn how beautifully special and precious our faith and its practices are. Celebrating these special aspects of our faith are what will endear these practices to our children- the future of our church and our world. When we embrace our specialness, our ceremony, our unique form of praise we become more of what our creator intended. That is a family of believers. Connected in communion with Him.

Now speaking on the conference;

When a professional travels to conferences it is usually to stay abreast of the latest trends and technologies. You listen to keynote speakers who are the leaders in their field. You find solidarity in those around you, who like you are wanting to grow and learn. Being at the World Meeting of Families was nothing different than that and just so much more.

As I had the opportunity to commune with 25,000 during the conference and then 1.5 million at the papal mass, I was taken with this sense of purpose. We have a responsibility to evangelize, spread the word, to the world around us.

We were blessed to listen to amazing speakers. Their messages of faith, truth and love took my breath away. Though their messages were all unique, the theme of the World Meeting was never lost. That theme of strengthening the core of our existence, which is our families-is what will turn this world around. Our group had an amazing opportunity to experience the message of Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers. He spoke on some controversial issues facing families today. One of his personal experiences I wanted to share today.

He began his testimony with a bit of a pop quiz. He asked our group what is the replacement rate for Americans today (that is # of children born to two parent households). Next he asked what is the replacement rate of families in Muslim households. The answer was very eye opening. In American households the replacement rate is 2.2. The replacement rate for Muslim households is 8.7. Then he proclaimed "We are aborting and contracepting ourselves out of existence." He went on to illustrate this with a personal story. He travels around the world for speaking engagements. One in particular landed him in England. He had an afternoon free and decided to go explore the town. He came to a local coffee shop and noticed a group of Muslim youth sitting around a table. He introduced himself and told them why he was in their country. He said they were polite and engaging. One thing he noticed is that they all were wearing the same T-shirt. On the front was the same word written in Arabic. On the back was the numbers 2-0-5-0. Deacon Harold asked them what their shirts were all about. Very confidently they answered "the front says Shiri Allah, and the back is 2050 and that's when we'll own everything"

As shocking as that story is, Deacon Harold did not say it to create tension, bigotry, hate or racism. No, he was honest in his statement to show that this global situation is at our door step.

We need to embrace our faith and its practices. We need to embrace what makes families strong. Because strength in the family will lead to strength in the community, that will ultimately build to strength in our cities, country and world. If we don't like the trending culture of hate, uselessness, loveless greed, lack of dignity and respect we have all the power in the world to fight and win. This is NOT a hostile takeover or surrender. Build up your homes. Not with mortar and bricks but with love for those who you were blessed to marry, who you were blessed to be a mother or father to. Build up your homes using Christ and His church as your foundation.

I heard more than one speaker mention this fact: The creator of the universe, the one who hung the stars in the sky, the one who moved mountains, and the one who formed the first man could have populated the world any way he felt like. In a single miracle our God could have filled the world with people. But instead, he chose us to carry out this task and be a part of His work. How amazing is that?? It is monumental!

Now we have all experienced times in our families where things felt less than miraculous. Our Holy Father even spoke to this. During the Festival of Families he got up and in an impromptu speech he touched on those “less than” moments in family life. He said “sometimes the plates will fly, and the baby will cry all night”. He goes on to proclaim “But love is JOY, love is moving FORWARD”

Hearing those words meant so much. If you strip it all down, that is what we need to concentrate on every day. Our God is a God of love. He created us for the purpose of love. That is our mission.

If anyone would like to hear more about specific speakers, experiences or see pictures I would be more than happy to share with you. Also, on the World Meetings website they have posted the opening ceremonies, keynote speakers, masses and other events.

Thank you for this opportunity and I encourage all to make a pilgrimage in their life time. It is nothing short of life changing.

The next World Meeting of Families; Dublin 2018- will you go??

By Shannon Holthaus