



The Nativity by Jacopo Tintoretto (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) Public Domain

In praise of our ancestors

DEAR FATHER KERPER: The Church speaks a lot about the importance of family life. But when it comes to Jesus we hear only about the Holy Family, which had just three very unusual people. How can we imitate Jesus when we always see him alone and separated from his blood relatives?

You're correct. Scripture gives us almost no specific information about the Lord's family life. Indeed, he does seem solitary. However, when we take a wider look at Scripture we discover a strong emphasis on family and ancestry. Though much of the Lord's life prior to his public ministry remains hidden, we may presume that his family life resembled that of other people. For sure, he had cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents.

Two resources help us here. First, biblical texts that affirm family life as an essential element of God's plan. And second, non-biblical accounts of the Lord's ancestors, notably St. Anne and St. Joachim, his maternal grandparents.

We find one relevant biblical text in the Book of Sirach — "The Eulogy of Ancestors." (*Sir: 44-55*) Here's an abbreviated form of the Eulogy's opening section.



*I will now praise the godly,
our ancestors, in their own time,
All these were glorious in their time,
illustrious in their day.
their virtues have not been forgotten.
Through God's covenant their family endures,
and their offspring for their sake.
And for all time their progeny will endure,
their glory will never be blotted out;
Their bodies are buried in peace,
but their name lives on and on.*

These words, written about two centuries before Christ, express basic truths about family life, especially the principle that goodness reproduces itself from goodness within families. In other words, it is very likely that good offspring will emerge from good parents. This mysterious tendency for goodness to beget more goodness extends backwards and forwards, uniting all generations into one com-

mon family. Notice also the strong emphasis on the intertwining of "ancestors," the endurance of "progeny," and remembrance of virtuous behavior across generations.

This requires us to honor our ancestors: known and unknown, close and distant, living and dead.

It also broadens our awareness of our true family, which goes far beyond a single household or generation. In a sense, everyone is family to us and the Lord. Moreover, this very broad sense of family includes frank recognition of the "bad apples." Hence, Sirach's accounts of heroic people like David and Solomon did not omit evil deeds like adultery, murder and idolatry.

This frankness simply acknowledged that goodness far exceeded evil and so this bold reporting of grave sin served goodness.



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Early Christians, who would have known the basic ideas of Sirach, would have applied them to Jesus and his family. As such, they would have rightly concluded that his key ancestors had to be good and deserved veneration. This recognition of holiness within the Lord's blood line eventually ignited a strong desire to honor his ancestors, especially his mother. This devotional impulse inevitably turned the gaze of Christians toward other blood relatives of the Lord, notably his maternal grandparents — St. Anne and St. Joachim.

Here we discover the second resource that fills in some of the gaps in the Lord's broader family. We call this Tradition.

According to Catholic belief, Tradition is the Spirit-guided process that transmits truths not explicitly mentioned in sacred Scripture. Tradition never contradicts the Bible. Rather it gradually enhances our knowledge and understanding of sacred matters. This happened as knowledge about St. Anne and St. Joachim gradually unfolded over a few hundred years.

In the 2nd century, Christians began to learn about the Lord's grandparents. This knowledge came primarily from the *Protoevangelium of James*. Pope Innocent I formally condemned this work in 406. Despite this, some elements pertaining to Mary and her parents survived and gradually entered into popular devotional life. Some of this material even entered the Koran, the "Bible" of Islam.

According to the *Protoevangelium*, St. Anne and St. Joachim were married for many years but produced no children, which was a great disgrace in their culture. The writer portrayed Joachim as a righteous man who had lavishly assisted the poor and had generously supported the temple. God rewarded them for their patience, goodness and unwavering faith by allowing St. Anne to conceive in her old age. She then gave birth to Mary, destined to

become the mother of the Lord and Messiah.

Gradually devotion to St. Anne became very widespread. In the 6th century, for example, Emperor Justinian built a church in Constantinople — now Istanbul — to honor St. Anne. During the Middle Ages, St. Anne's popularity soared. In fact, in 1584, Pope Gregory XV made her feast a holy day of obligation. St. Joachim, by contrast, never came close to his wife's fame. In 1969, the Church abolished St. Joachim's individual feast day, which used to be Aug. 16 and combined his feast with his wife's on July 26.

No one knows for sure whether Jesus ever knew his maternal grandparents. Since the traditional story asserts that St. Anne was beyond child-bearing age when she conceived Mary, it seems unlikely that either grandparent would have known their grandson as an adult. However, they could have known him in his early childhood. Indeed, paintings depicting the Christ Child together with his mother and grandmother appeared in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. One such painting hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. It's a very large Nativity scene painted by Jacopo Tintoretto (1515-1594). It shows Mary and St. Anne kneeling in adoration before the Christ Child. Both women closely resemble one another. Meanwhile, St. Joseph, very old and barely visible, hangs in the shadows; and St. Joachim is nowhere to be found.

For sure, the loving relationships we have with our own grandparents validates the insights of Sirach and the example of St. Anne and St. Joachim. If we have goodness within us we must see its source in our own parents, grandparents and other loved ones from our blood lines and even beyond.

Goodness flows from goodness. This has become very evident today. After all, in many cases grandparents — rather than parents — pass on the Catholic faith to

Cherish our elders, pope says

In his message for the 2nd World Day of Prayer for Grandparents and Elderly, which will be held July 24, Pope Francis urged elders "to persevere in hope" and reminded "them of their great power to transform the world through prayer and tenderness."

Pope Francis announced the theme for this year's annual event is to cherish the value grandparents and elderly — who too often are relegated to the margins of family and community life — bring to our lives and society.

"In old age they will still bear fruit," (*Ps 92:15*) the pope tweeted, announcing the theme of the global event to promote dialogue among the generations, especially between grandparents and grandchildren.

children. Grandparents can do this so effectively because they have endured suffering and hardship. This gives them credibility in the eyes of younger people, who respect experience more than words.

Almost 50 years ago, Father Pius Parsh, a meticulous Austrian scholar, made this same point. In his summary of the feast day liturgy of St. Anne, he inserted an uncharacteristic personal comment:

"A final thought. Let us think of our grandmothers today with gratitude.... Next to God we owe our faith principally to our mothers and grandmothers. To them we owe our gratitude." How true this is!

For sure, Scripture doesn't provide much specific information about the Lord's broader family. But the Church's veneration of St. Anne and St. Joachim calls us to honor our own ancestors, to find courage in them, and to live in hope, trusting in the great company of our one family.

Another biblical text deserves attention: "Remember the deeds performed by our ancestors, each in his own generation, and you will receive great honor and everlasting renown" (*1 Mc 2:51a*) ■