It is more than appropriate that the church sets aside the Sunday after Christmas as a day to reflect on the Holy Family and on our own families. Even as we give thanks for so much that they have given us, we ae invited to recommit ourselves to making our family a little more the kind of family we have always hoped and longed that it would be.

Family and family life are the object today of countless studies of various kinds from sociology and social work, to psychology and history. Everything affects the family in one way or another, including the economy, education or, as we have learned over the last two years, a pandemic.

I am not an expert in any of these areas and yet, like you, I came out of a family, a good family in many ways, a family that has given me some insight into the positive elements of family life and also into some of its challenges.

Although since the age of 17 I have had little direct family experience, I have had some contact with families and have come to appreciate how crucial they are and the good that they can do. I am also aware of some of the difficulties with which many contemporary families have to struggle.

The family story at the heart of Christmas has many striking parallels with that of many contemporary families. We hear of Joseph and his pregnant wife forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem and then, after the birth of the child, to Egypt, a journey they undertook in order to escape becoming victims of a king capable of killing even children in order to hang on to power.

Their experience was not unlike that of many refugee families today. Now as then, people are forced to leave their homes and countries to escape violence or to seek food and other necessities.

Today’s gospel suggests the incomprehension and even hurt that can arise in the most loving of families. Jesus is a young teenager who becomes so enthralled with the debates taking place among a group of teachers in Jerusalem that he fails to join his parents as they leave the holy city for home. Mary’s reaction when she and Joseph find their son speaks volumes about the way in which we can hurt one another in a family even when we don’t intend to. “Child,” Mary says to Jesus, “why have you treated us like this? Look your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” That Mary “treasured all these things in her heart” underlines the significance of the event for her.

That we do things that others in the family find difficult if not impossible to understand is an almost universal experience. The important thing is that we think about what has taken place, and try to understand and learn from it. Because the family is so fundamental to human life, it is something that religious traditions and religious leaders have always been concerned with and tried to foster.

Vatican II speaks of the family as “the domestic church,” a phrase that suggests that it is in the family and among families that the good news of salvation from God in Christ is to be experienced and lived in a special way.

The virtues that Jesus and after him Paul and the other authors of the NT emphasize are crucial for life in the family. “Be merciful,” Jesus says, “as the Father is merciful.” And again, “Love one another as I have loved you.” “Love,” Paul says, “is patient and kind; it is not envious or boastful or arrogant; it does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful.” Elsewhere he speaks of life in the Spirit as marked by “love, joy, kindness, faithfulness and gentleness.”

The feast of the Holy Family encourages us to do what we can to strengthen and build up our families so that they become life-giving, life-affirming communities in which people care not only for one another but also for friends and for the community at large.