

THE HOLY FAMILY'S RETURN TO NAZARETH

A REFLECTION BY
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The Holy Family – they are a timeless example of faith, humility, obedience, and love. As you traverse the path to the bluff, you are traveling back to Nazareth alongside Mary and Joseph after they’ve found Jesus in the temple. The heart of the Return to Nazareth Garden offers an opportunity to encounter the Holy Family in a new and profound way in the bronze monument, *The Holy Family’s Return to Nazareth*. You are presented with the opportunity to enter the Gospel, truly meeting the Holy Family, experiencing the fullness of their humanity.

MOLDING A CONCEPT

In conceptualizing and planning the piece I was presented with three criteria: First, Mike and Mary Alice Easterday, who conceived the garden as a place to encounter the Holy Family, wished to present a scene from the Gospel of Luke, “He went down with them and came to Nazareth...” (Luke 2:51). Second, the monks wanted the sculptures and garden to emphasize obedience in theme and tone. Finally, Margaret Jones and Adèle Bischel, Benedictine College Architecture students (now alumnae) and the designers of the garden, planned it with the statue of Jesus separated from the statues of Mary and Joseph. In this way, Christ is the first figure to welcome the viewer as they enter the garden. There was plenty of creative freedom within those parameters and I was able to build a very personal narrative of this historical and biblical event.



As I began praying with the scripture and meditating on this journey I was amazed by how deeply intricate the dialogue and interpretation could be from such a short story. This representation of the Holy Family, in this particular moment of their life, gave me the opportunity to bring the viewer into deeper understanding of who each member of the Holy Family is, what role they each play in the family unit, and what their family dynamic has to teach us about marriage and family life, even more than 2000 years later.

In developing the concept and design I wanted to introduce, with Christianity, themes such as the equality and complementarity between men and women; the universality of the Church and resolution of the tension between

historical realism and interpretation through the lens of cultural diversity; the importance of representation in art; healthy and holy masculinity; and the theology of the body.

With all of this considered, I was able to imagine a scene that would express not only what the Holy Family was likely going through in this moment of their lives together, but would also present the viewer with other themes and angles from which to enter the contemplation of this Family and the Gospel message in our modern time and in our particular area of the world.

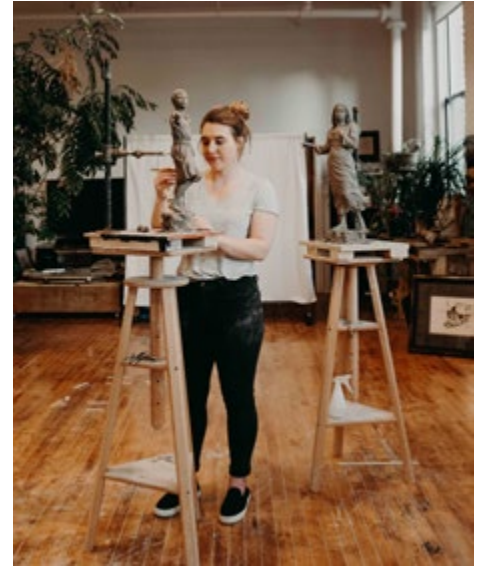
BRINGING THE HOLY FAMILY TO LIFE

Once I had grasped my concept and goals for the piece I began the process of bringing it to life visually. The first part of that process, for me, is selecting live models from which to model the figures. It was important to me to sculpt them with physical attributes that are more representative of the part of the world from which they came.

Traditional representations of the Holy Family often depict them with physical features more representative of European ancestry – primarily because those depictions were made by and for Europeans. While choosing the features and look of my representation of the Holy Family, I focused on the idea that I am an American sculpting this monument for a community in America. So, while I wanted to honor the heritage that the actual Holy Family came from, I also wanted to honor the place that this representation of the Holy Family would reside. One wonderful thing about our country is that it is a “melting-pot” of cultures with a beautiful blend of cultures and heritages coming together to make the diverse “look” of our people. That diversity lends itself to the expression of the universality of the Catholic Church. Christ came for all people, so I wanted to make the Holy Family look like they were from their own part of the world while balancing a multicultural look that makes them seem as if they could be from any part of the world. I wanted any visitor, no matter their ethnicity, to feel welcome to approach and belong within the Holy Family.

To achieve this I worked with many models from different ethnic backgrounds for each figure. I employed seven different models from different races to form the face of Mary. For Joseph, I referenced six men to find his face. Finding young models was more difficult, but for the face of Jesus I employed two brothers with a beautiful blend of multiracial ancestry and used the features I had found for Mary and Joseph to complete the features I chose for the young Christ. It was a wonderful challenge to use my understanding of anatomy and form to sculpt faces, not of each of my models, but of the Holy Family that I could see through all these actual faces.

It was important to use live models to create the forms and poses that I felt would best convey the story I was trying to tell. I wanted to represent an active Holy Family, all of them participating in the moment. In the gesture of each figure, the narrative is told. Each of them holds a posture that gives you a different point of entry into their story.



The statues began in miniature before being sculpted into the figures seen in the garden.

Clothing the figures was also a wonderful and creative part of the process because it gave me the opportunity to broaden the narrative by adding wind and motion to their garments – these are outdoor sculptures and everything around them is alive. The trees blow in the breeze, birds will sing, people will be walking the path. I wanted to bring some of that life into the bronze itself. The motion sculpted into the fabric is my way of visually representing the presence of the Holy Spirit – residing in them, but also dancing around them, guiding their way.

A MOMENT IN TIME

In my take on this moment from the Holy Family's life, I wanted to set a scene that incorporates the viewer into the story and composition. I imagined them journeying home to Nazareth after a very significant three days of separation. Jesus has stopped along the path because he has noticed you, the viewer, following closely behind – and he is inviting you to follow him. I imagined Mary and Joseph walking, intent on getting the family home safely. Mary, in her motherly instincts and deep connection with Jesus, was the first to realize that he has fallen behind. Joseph has kept a close eye on his family. Though focused on forward progress in the journey, he has kept them, constantly, in his watchful periphery and is about to realize that something has caught Mary and Jesus' attention.



It was my firm desire that the sculptures be installed directly onto the walking path with no barrier around the sculptures and no pedestals lifting them off the ground away from the viewer. This makes for less visual interruption to the scene and allows for our physical participation within it. As the viewer enters the garden they are welcome to walk right up to each figure as they prayerfully consider what each person of the Holy Family is communicating to them. This is also the reason for the space between each figure – rather than sculpting them to touch in any way. I wanted the viewer to be able to contemplate each character individually because each member of the Holy Family had their own unique experience of this moment and each has something unique to teach us.

As you enter the garden and follow the path leading to the Holy Family, you view the young Jesus, flanked by his parents. From this perspective, they stand together as two pillars guarding, nurturing, and supporting their son in his mission. On one side you see Joseph and from this viewpoint it appears as if his outstretched hand is coming to rest on Jesus' shoulder – a loving and supportive gesture. On the other side of Jesus you see Mary, turning towards him to see what is happening. Though her hand is reaching towards Joseph's, in this view it is meant to look as if it is coming to meet Jesus's outstretched fingers. It is a gesture of tenderness and an ode to Michelangelo's Creation of Adam. The viewer is offered a snapshot of the intimacy and love present in this family.

From beneath the shelter in the garden, looking back towards the Holy Family, another prominent perspective is offered. From this angle, the hands of each member of the family appear to join in the middle, with Christ's hand in the traditional gesture of blessing being at the center. This view emphasizes their unity; though three distinct individuals they are one under the covenant of marriage.

The cross arms of the garden path on either side of Mary and Joseph offer still another perspective. This gave me an opportunity to highlight the marital relationship between Mary and Joseph by situating them in the center of the cross. The viewer sees the profiles of Mary and Joseph's faces turned toward one another. The partnership between Joseph and Mary was essential in raising and loving Jesus. The intimacy between Joseph and Mary was deep and cultivated throughout their relationship. After all they had endured during those three days searching for Jesus, and faced with a long journey through the desert alone (as the caravan was already well ahead of them), I am sure they were leaning heavily on each other's strengths and the comfort they provided each other to make it through this trial, like so many other trials they had already faced as a family up to this point. This perspective gives the viewer the chance to engage with their specific relationship within the larger family unit.



Full-sized clay sculptures are created and cast in bronze to create the final rendering we enjoy in the garden.



SAINT JOSEPH

It was really Joseph who led the way in the development of the narrative I felt inspired to depict. Not knowing much about St. Joseph before beginning this project, this came as a surprise. He is a completely silent character in this passage and throughout the Bible, but he spoke the loudest to me in my initial prayer and contemplation. In Joseph I saw an opportunity to dialogue about healthy and holy masculinity.

I wanted to offer men an example to look to as they work to more fully realize their own masculinity. In my opinion, the world has told men many lies about what it means to be a man – but through St. Joseph (and hopefully my depiction of him) men are given an invitation into a different experience and understanding of themselves. Men are told it is not okay to be vulnerable, or to need other people's support. But this lie imprisons them and can lead to repression of their emotions and unhealthy outlets. This hurts not only themselves but also their families.

In contemplating all of this, in contrast with the example given to us by St. Joseph (throughout Scripture and tradition), I was able to understand how I needed to pose Joseph to visually represent the deeper layers of his personhood that I wanted to portray.



I tried to convey, in his gesture, strong leadership and a sense of determination in his forward movement. In leading his family safely home, he wouldn't have lost sight of their needs, so his head is turned toward them. This is meant to emphasize the attentive and protective posture of a father and husband. While his head is inclined toward his family it is also oriented upward as he lifts his prayers to God. I can't imagine what Joseph must have gone through as he searched for Jesus while also trying to console Mary and keep faith. That must have been so heavy – even now, as he has his son back in his watchful care, he may still be processing that burden. In my understanding of him, Joseph

wouldn't have hidden from those emotions, but would have been present to them in dialogue with God. We see this in Joseph's expression and parted lips as if he is in mid-conversation with the Lord. Joseph wouldn't have found this vulnerability before the Lord to be a weakness and he also wouldn't have been afraid to reach for Mary in vulnerability to ask for her love, support, and partnership. These acts of vulnerability create a stretching of Joseph in the pose. As his eyes reach to heaven and his arm to Mary, his heart is exposed. *This* is Joseph's strength.



THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

The rest of the composition flowed easily with St. Joseph as its foundation. From the scripture we know that Mary pondered and processed "all these things in her heart" which is conveyed in her pose: one hand resting gently on her heart while she beholds her son on the path. Jesus has separated from her again, this time to minister to us as he waits for us to join the Family's journey. I imagine that Mary would have felt this distance deeply, still stricken with the memory of their three days apart, and may have even wanted to move towards him or call him back to her. I had originally sculpted Mary with her lips parted as if she was saying Jesus's name. However, as I contemplated her further, I came to believe that she would have held that tension quietly within herself, not trying to control the situation or solve it, but rather, quietly beholding her young son stepping into his mission. So I sculpted her, lips closed, gazing watchfully on her son as she waits and wonders. I imagine that she is renewing her *fiat* in this moment.



Mary's posture is not only oriented toward her son, her momentum within the pose is still moving in the direction of Joseph, following her husband's lead on this journey. I wanted to portray their different, yet complementary roles within the family, as man and woman, while still representing their equality. Mary's outstretched hand lies on the same plane as Joseph's hand. He seems ready to catch it, to lift her up. Her hand awaits his receptively – ready to be held by the man worthy to hold it.

Mary's pose emphasizes her strength and expansive capacity in her role as wife and mother while also emphasizing her quiet wisdom and receptivity.



JESUS CHRIST

It was amazing to contemplate Jesus at age twelve. In this scripture we see him reaching adolescence, stepping into his calling with that passage into adulthood. There is a boldness in what he has just done for the last three days and I tried to translate that into this present moment on the path as he confidently reaches out to each of us.

Though the obedience of each of the Family members to each other and to the mission has been discussed and subtly represented in the compositional interactions between each of the figures, it is in the figure of Jesus that this

theme expands and becomes a larger part of the narrative. Jesus is obedient to his human parents and the direction they are leading him (in this present, physical journey, but also in the wider, spiritual sense) and this is evident in his gesture as his weight pushes forward, in the direction of his parents. He intends to follow them. His arm reaches towards them, hand gently gesturing in a way that communicates to them that he is coming. He is about to continue on with them. But Jesus is also obedient to his heavenly Father, and the mission he has been sent for: us. So he waits for us, with his other arm extended toward us, inviting us to follow. In these two acts of obedience his arms are extended almost equally to either side and his posture becomes cruciform, representing his obedience in every level of his call, to the very end. The pose I chose for Jesus reminds us of what this little boy will ultimately face for our sake. It reminds us that part of our journey is in taking up our cross and then continuing on with him.



IN CLOSING

My hope is that each visitor, no matter their background or beliefs, will be welcomed into an encounter with the Divine through this sculpture of the Holy Family, and that they might find rest and reassurance on their own personal journeys through the example of these holy people: Jesus, Mary and Joseph.



It has been an honor and a gift to sculpt this monument of the Holy Family. This work has been special to me for many reasons, but one of the biggest reasons is because it is for the monks of St. Benedict's Abbey. The monks meant so much to me for the 7 years I lived in Atchison, first as a student at Benedictine College and then later as an adjunct professor there. It was actually at the Abbey's Holy Week retreat that I received the clarity necessary to move to Florence, Italy to study sculpture. That retreat is forever tied to my memory of starting on this path so it is hard to put into words how much it means to me that my first professional work would end up residing here at the Abbey. It is an incomprehensible honor and joy to install a monument of love, gratitude, sacrifice, and prayer in a place that already holds such a large part of my heart. God writes the best stories and His generosity cannot be outdone. I will never be able to adequately express my gratitude and wonder. To him be the glory.