

HOMILY 12.18.2016

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT – ST. JOSEPH

One week from today we will welcome Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah, the Son of GOD, the Word made Flesh into the world but today we heard the story of how the birth of JESUS came about. Although most English translations speak of the “Birth” of JESUS, in today’s passage Matthew actually uses the Greek word *genesis* meaning “origin”. He is less concerned with the historical details of JESUS’ birth than he is with the origin of the CHRIST, for he has one and only one source – GOD. In no way diminishing the significance of this event, I would like to focus on a seldom mentioned nor seldom recognized person in today’s Gospel – St. Joseph. There is no record of Joseph having spoken a single word in all of scripture yet we can be certain he did speak. Then again, if you lived most of your adult life with the Mother of GOD and the Son of GOD, you would likely be reluctant to say anything!

Matthew tells us that *“while Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, since he was a righteous man, unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly.”* This passage begs for greater clarity. According to the Commentary from the St. Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, *“Betrothal in ancient Judaism was unlike modern-day engagements. “It was a temporary period of up to one year between the covenant of marriage itself and the time when spouses lived together. Because couples were legally married during this period, a betrothal could be terminated only by death or divorce.”*

Before we answer the question about *“divorcing her quietly”*, let’s focus on what we know about Joseph. Joseph is mentioned by name only five times in Matthew’s Gospel and not at all after Chapter 2. He is identified as *“the Son of Jacob and the husband of Mary and later as the son of David.”* We heard him described as a *“righteous man”* and in Chapter 13 we hear JESUS described as the *“carpenter’s son”*. Joseph was visited by an angel of the GOD no fewer than four times! We heard about the first one in today’s reading. The second time is after the wise men had departed. We are told *“an angel of the LORD appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take the family to Egypt.”* After the death of Herod, an angel again appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to take the child and his mother to the land of Israel. But on the way to Judea, he is warned in another dream about Archelous, the ruthless son of King Herod and so withdraws to the district of Galilee to the town of Nazareth. We also know Joseph was a chaste man. Although the last verse of today’s Gospel states: *“he had no relations*

with her until she bore a son". The Greek word used here does **not** imply that Mary and Joseph **had** marital relations following JESUS' birth but rather it emphasizes that Joseph had **NO** involvement with Mary's pregnancy. Mary's perpetual virginity is a dogma of the Church and can be traced back to the Latern Synod of 649. But Mary remaining a virgin means Joseph did as well. And not because he was forced into it but because he chose celibacy the same as Mary. There are certain things about Joseph we cannot know with historical accuracy: How old was he? Was he previously married? How did he respond when Mary told him she was with child by the Holy Spirit? But I believe we can answer these questions through the eyes of faith.

The portrayal of Joseph as an old man who had been previously married appeared in some apocryphal accounts and the fathers of the Church followed this legend rather rigidly after the fourth century. He is also frequently depicted in art as an old man with white hair. When we search for the meaning we discover this was done as a safeguard for Mary's virginity. But as Venerable Fulton Sheen explains in his book, *The World's First Love, Mary the Mother of GOD*: "Somehow, the assumption crept in that senility was a better protector of virginity than adolescence." Bishop Sheen continues: "*Joseph was probably a young man, strong, virile, athletic, handsome, chaste and disciplined. The kind of man one sees sometimes shepherding sheep or piloting a plane, or working at a carpenter's bench.*" *It is reasonable to believe that our LORD would have preferred a foster father who made a sacrifice as opposed to someone who was forced into it. There is also the historical fact that Jews frowned on disproportionate marriage. Instead of being a man incapable of loving, he must have been on fire with love! NO HUSBAND AND WIFE EVER LOVED ONE ANOTHER SO MUCH AS JOSEPH AND MARY. Mary and Joseph needed no consummation of the flesh for, in the words of Pope Leo XIII, 'The consummation of their love was in JESUS.'* Love usually makes husband and wife one; in the case of Mary and Joseph it was not their combined loves but JESUS himself Who made them one!" I love our statue of St. Joseph as it portrays him as a strong handsome athletic young man exactly the way Bishop Sheen describes him.

In answer to the question about "divorcing her quietly", consider that after Mary told Joseph about the supernatural nature of her pregnancy, he considered himself unworthy to be part of GOD's work in this unusual situation. His resolve to separate quietly from Mary is a reverent measure meant to keep secret the mystery within her. The angelic announcement directs Joseph to set aside pious fears that would lead him away from his vocation as the legal father of the Davidic Messiah.

I am certain he was the best of teachers. Teaching his SON the scriptures, especially the Sh'ma from Deuteronomy 6:4-6: *"The LORD is our GOD, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your GOD with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest."* Observant Jews consider the Sh'ma to be the most important part of the prayer service in Judaism and are obliged to recite it twice daily – in the morning and in the evening. It is traditional for Jews to say the Sh'ma as their last words, and for parents to teach their children to say it before they go to sleep at night.

I'm also certain he taught his SON the value and dignity of hard work. In addition to his Feast Day on March 19th, St. Joseph is honored on May 1st as "The Worker". JESUS in his divinity is the MESSIAH but in his humanity, he was a carpenter like his foster father. What a great example for all fathers! I heard this statistic a few weeks ago on Annunciation Radio: If a father takes his children to Mass, prays with them and raises them in the faith, there is an eighty percent chance the children will follow his example. If only the mother is involved in the child's spiritual upbringing this drops to twenty percent! Though in JESUS' case, Mary certainly would have been the exception!

St. Joseph is also the patron saint of a happy death as it is believed that both JESUS and Mary were present when he departed from his earthly life. Today please invite St. Joseph to intercede for you to be a better spouse, a better parent, a better worker, a more devout person of prayer, a stellar example of HOLINESS!