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The Fourth Sunday of Advent (A)

At the beginning of Advent, the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI published his second Encyclical letter. It is called *Spe salvi*, "Saved By Hope," and is a reflection on the nature of Christian hope in a way most fitting for the season of Advent. The Holy Father reminds us that:

Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope.¹

Today the Liturgy presents to us just such a light in the figure of Saint Joseph, "a righteous man" (Matthew 1:19).

Consider, if you will, the situation in which Joseph found himself.

His young wife, Mary, is evidently pregnant, even prior to their living together. Betrothal, for the ancient Jews, was not like our modern period of engagement prior to marriage. Engagement, for us, carries with it no legal status and be canceled by either party at any time prior to the marriage for any reason. Betrothal, on the other hand, was a period lasting up to a year in which couples were legally married but were not

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 49.

yet living together. The only way to end a betrothal was through death or divorce.

Because Mary was pregnant without having had relations with Joseph, it seemed to many that Mary had been unfaithful. Others - Joseph among them - knew she remained faithful for "she was found with child of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18).

But if Joseph knew Mary had remained faithful, if Joseph knew the child that Mary carried was of the Holy Spirit, why would he seek to divorce her? Why not keep her as his wife?

Being a just and righteous man, Joseph knew his unworthiness to be involved in such a masterful and sacred situation. Because of his reverence toward the fulfillment of the prophecy given to King Ahaz, Joseph wished not to separate Mary from himself, but he from her.

The phrase that we have translated as "expose her to shame" means something much less in the original Greek. It means not so much to expose as it does to exhibit. This righteous man wanted to keep the divine secret with Mary; by not putting her in the spotlight, as it were, he acted both with discretion and reverence. Joseph also sought to separate himself from Mary - and to do this quietly - so as not to draw any undue attention to him. Out of his deep humility and piety Joseph wished to excuse himself.

In doing so Joseph would inadvertently place Mary and the child she carried within her womb in a precarious situation, thus making the message of the "angel of the Lord" most urgent (Matthew 1:20).

The angel comes to Joseph in his dream because his cooperation is needed so that the Messiah would be "descended from David" (Romans 1:3). Joseph must cast aside his own fears of unworthiness in order to become the legal father of the Son of God.

But why did the Lord choose Joseph as the father for Jesus? Surely there was another more powerful, more influential, than Joseph? God chose Joseph because his heart was clean and because he did not desire what was vain (cf. Psalm 24:4). Because he lived righteously, he received "a blessing from the LORD" in this sacred and most important mission (Psalm 24:5).

The angel counseled Joseph with words that must have echoed in his ears until his death: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary, your wife, into your home" (Matthew 1:20). Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home" (Matthew 1:24). He did so because he learned what Saint Paul calls "the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5).

What is the obedience of faith? It is an act of faith by which "man completely submits his intellect and his will to

God."² This obedience of faith is a human response to God by which we "submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself."³

This listening to the Word of God, as Joseph clearly did, is not merely a passive activity; it requires our own desire to grow in union with the Lord. It requires that we actively seek his will in prayer by being attentive to what the Lord speaks to us in whatever way he wishes to reveal it. This obedience of faith is "the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child."⁴ Both of these we see modeled in Saint Joseph.

He does not question the word of the angel for he knows it to be true and he trusts in the Lord's will for him, taking Mary and the child who is God-with-us into his home. Only the loving commitment of a child, only "a loyalty that is deeper than mere sentiment," could allow Joseph to do so.⁵ In this act of humble obedience we see that Joseph is indeed a righteous man; his righteousness came from his obedience.

The light of his holiness shines before us, calling us to live righteously, to live obediently, as he lived. Saint Joseph says to us:

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 143.

³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2716.

⁵ Rich Mullins, "If I Stand," *Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth* (Edward Grant, Inc., 1985).

"Let the Lord enter" your life, your heart, your mind (Psalm 24:7). Do not weary the Lord, your God (cf. Isaiah 7:13). You, too, are unworthy of his call, but you are still "called to belong to Jesus Christ," you are "called to be holy" (Romans 1:6-7). He will save you from your sins (cf. Matthew 1:21). Do not be afraid! Let the Lord enter, that you may know grace and peace.