

Fourth Sunday of Advent, A – December 22, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 700 words

The Fathers of the Church were some of the greatest commentators on Scripture in the Church's history, and many of the most common orthodox interpretations today can be traced back to their writings. That does not mean, however, that there was always consensus among them about what a particular passage meant. Even as they covered the different "senses" of a passage – the moral sense, the allegorical sense and so forth – their understanding about what it literally meant sometimes varied greatly. That was certainly the case with the gospel for this Fourth Sunday of Advent, about how the birth of Jesus came about.

One interpretation in some of the Fathers is that Joseph knew that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. After all, he had already been betrothed to her; he had come to know her well. And thus becoming aware of the great mission that she had been given by God and his own lowliness in comparison, Joseph felt unworthy to be associated with that. This was not cowardice on his part; no – it was a very natural reaction, as one naturally tends to be intimidated by greatness and, in humility, does not presume to be able to correspond to it. Who in his right mind would claim that he had what it took to be a father to the Son of God?

There is another interpretation that the passage bears, which is also prominent among the Fathers. And that is that Joseph did not, in fact, know how Mary's pregnancy had come about. The reasonable presumption would have been that she was guilty of committing adultery. He then would have had either to proclaim that fact publicly, in order to dissociate himself from any implication in her sin, or choose to overlook it and proceed with their relationship, which would have cast suspicion on them both and shown him to be consenting to adultery. By electing to put her away quietly, though, he instead chose the path of mercy.

Before we draw some conclusions from these varying interpretations, let us give thanks that we are ordinarily not faced with such complex moral dilemmas! In fact, we can be certain that none of us will ever have this particular challenge. In any case, what emerges from both interpretations is that St. Joseph's heart and mind was set on doing the right thing and, indeed, the merciful thing. Whether he felt himself unworthy or simply did not fully know what was happening, he sought above all what was just. Yes, he did initially miss the mark. But God knew his intent, so he intervened. And then, St. Joseph promptly obeyed.

Being intent on doing the right thing in every situation, no matter how complex, is a recipe for success that many today have forgotten. So often, the first question asked is not, "What is the right thing?", but instead, "What is most expedient?", or even, "What will save our necks?". This certainly happened in the Church, with the scandals that emerged in recent years: often, the right thing was not the response criterion; in some cases, it was never even on the radar. That failure to seek the right thing extended not only to the victims but also to the accused. But this affliction is societal: it affects all spheres – possibly, even us at times.

The old saying goes, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions". Having the right intention is never sufficient for us to make the correct moral choices. But it is a pre-condition. Sometimes it is necessary also to take counsel – to seek guidance from wise and trusted peers or pastors, in order, in the end, to choose the best course of action. Sometimes, as in St. Joseph's unique case, the Lord must intervene in some way to guide things. But let our first concern always be for what is right and not for how we may evade certain outcomes or otherwise keep up appearances. I believe that one reason we are seeing such a surge of devotion to St. Joseph in our time is precisely so that he can help us be more just – seeking always, before all else, to do what is right.