

ADVENT FOURTH SUNDAY YEAR A 2010 HOMILY

(Isaiah 7: 10-14; Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1: 18-24)

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND OUR SALVATION

The Gospel today from St. Matthew speaks of Mary being “with child through the Holy Spirit” and the angel tells Joseph that it is “through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.” What is the Holy Spirit’s role in our salvation and why would Joseph have been convinced to do what the angel told him because of the involvement of the Spirit in this pregnancy?

Joseph and Mary were betrothed but not yet married. Their relationship would have been governed by the marriage customs of the Jews at that time of history. While marriages were arranged at young ages by parents or matchmakers, the betrothal took place about a year before the marriage itself. The couple did not live together until the marriage, but the betrothal was of great importance because it was a point of no return. The marriage took place automatically unless one of the couple died during the year of betrothal. In fact, the man or woman would be considered widower or widow if the other died during the betrothal even though they never slept together – giving rise to the unusual term “virgin widow.” Joseph would have been shocked to find Mary pregnant before he took her into his home and his presumption would naturally be that she had been unfaithful. He had only two choices in his culture – turn her in to the Jewish religious authorities (in which case she would be stoned to death) or divorce her. He had chosen the latter course, which was compassionate of him, when the angel intervened and informed the man that the Holy Spirit is responsible for Mary’s pregnancy. Again, why did this impress Joseph so that he went through with the marriage and welcomed Mary under his roof?

We Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. But the Jews of Jesus’ time also had a well-developed theology of the Holy Spirit. Joseph would have known that the Holy Spirit hovered over the watery chaos in the Book of Genesis when God was creating everything. Joseph would also have known that in the Jewish tradition it is the Holy Spirit who brings truth to people and who enables people to accept the truth – as, for example, through the Prophets whose vocation it was to remind Israel when they had strayed from the truth of God’s Law. And Joseph would have known that the Spirit is the agent of re-creation too. The prophet Ezekiel comforted the Hebrews when they were in exile in Babylon by his vision of the dry bones that came alive in the valley because God put breath into them. And both the Hebrew and the Greek words for breath also mean Spirit. So Joseph knew his Bible history well and he recognized that the Holy Spirit was associated with God’s creation and re-creation and with keeping alive the truth of God’s love and care for his people.

So the angel is appealing to the Jewish tradition and culture in convincing Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary into his home. Joseph would have trusted that the Spirit was able to make his wife pregnant just as he was able to create and bring back to life. It is good for us to recall on this Fourth Sunday of Advent when Christmas is very near that it is the same Spirit who, in our Catholic Christian tradition, works many transformations and radical changes. It is the Spirit who in this Mass and every Mass will change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. It is through the Holy Spirit that all the sacraments have their power and effectiveness. The Spirit of Pentecost who is also the Spirit of our Confirmation

helps us daily to live anew the vocation to follow Christ. The Spirit can continuously help us to see life in a new and more real way. In one of the novels of William J. Locke (1863-1930) [perhaps in his *The Joyous Adventures of Aristide Pujol*, 1908], he tells the story of a wealthy woman who travels the world and sees many sights but in the end, is bored to death. When she meets a Frenchman who has little money but an appreciation for beauty and a lot of excitement for living, the woman comes back from her emotional grave and is happy and fulfilled.

It is also the Spirit who can much more radically change our hearts so that we seek again the path to holiness and he can sometimes do this in dramatic and wonderful fashion. Perhaps you have heard of St. Maria Goretti (1890-1902). She is the saint who in 1902 as a young girl of twelve was murdered in her home in Italy by a man who made advances to her on a number of occasions and finally stabbed her and mortally wounded her when she would not give in to him. Maria, whose feast day is July 6, is the model of chastity and purity for all young people and for all of us. But the story of what happened to her assailant is as impressive as her martyrdom. His name was Alessandro Serenelli, a young man of twenty. He was convicted of this crime and sentenced to a long prison term. But he was aware that Maria had forgiven him on her death bed. A bishop came to visit him and this sparked a process of conversion which led him to seek forgiveness from Maria's mother – which she readily gave. He later became a Capuchin Franciscan brother and lived out his life in this vocation until he died in 1970. Most amazing of all was the fact that Alessandro attended the canonization of St. Maria Goretti in Rome in 1950. This true story shows the Spirit at work through forgiveness and repentance. Like Christ on the cross and many other saints, St. Maria's act of forgiveness reveals the power of the Holy Spirit.

In a few days we celebrate Christmas once again. This year may we have a renewed appreciation of the role of the Holy Spirit in our salvation which came through the Holy Body of the Virgin Mary and which came through the obedience of Mary and her chaste spouse Joseph! May we recall with profound gratitude the work of the Spirit in the church, especially in the consecration of the Mass. Finally, may we always be open to the Holy Spirit who can keep us (as he did St. Joseph) on the road to holiness and can even truly re-create us when we have forgotten who we are – the beloved sons and daughters of God who became flesh in order to love us to death!