

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent – (Year B) – December 24, 2017

2 SM 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16; PS 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29; ROM 16:25-27; LK 1:26-38

Back in the day, when my exercise of choice was **running**, I prayed the **Rosary...as I ran**. I learned quickly that it was dangerous to carry an *actual* Rosary while running because of the risk of whipping yourself in the face with it while your arms are swinging. So, I would keep “count” on my fingers instead of beads.

Quite a few people back then would ask me, “**How do you meditate on the Mysteries of the Rosary when you run?**”

I would answer, “**I don’t! I just devote the time to God in prayer instead of listening to music, or thinking about the cramp in my side.**”

At the time, I didn’t understand the importance of the **Mysteries of the Rosary**, so I felt **no** scruples about *not* praying them. *I was praying while I was running*—which itself is an unusually **good** thing, *especially for a guy in his 20’s living in secular Seattle*—and I was content with that, because **that’s just where I was** at that point in my spiritual life.

As my spiritual life matured, however, the **Mysteries of the Rosary** became more and more **important**...and, *naturally*, more and more **influential** on my soul. How could it be otherwise? After all, the Mysteries of the Rosary are **snapshots of the most central events in the life of Jesus from the Gospels**, which, when you pray the Rosary, you contemplate *with his mother, Mary*, as though you were **sitting** side by side with her...or in my case, *running* alongside her!

Immersing oneself in the **Living Word of God in the Gospels, through the Mysteries of the Rosary** shapes and forms the soul in ways that we may not notice **in the moment**, but which become clearer *over time*. Praying the Rosary **daily** leads to deeper intimacy with Jesus, through the **influence**...and **intercession**...of Mary.

The fact that both the **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent** and **Christmas Eve** converge on the same date this year provides us a unique opportunity to reflect on the first three **Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary**—the **Annunciation**, the **Visitation** and the **Nativity**— though it might not be obvious where the **Visitation** finds its way into our reflection, since it is only **hinted at briefly** in the Archangel Gabriel’s reference

to Elizabeth in today's Gospel. It is the words of **St. Paul** in our **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** today that draw **Mary's visit to Elizabeth** into our reflection...as we'll see shortly.

As we consider these **Mysteries of the Rosary**, we will see that these events in the life of Jesus and Mary were not just for the benefit of humanity in **general**, but they have a **direct application** to the life of every Christian—*if we have the eyes to see!*

So, let's start with the **Annunciation**.

Mary, as a devout Jew, would have been well-versed in the Scriptural prophecies predicting the **Messiah**, especially where the **Prophet Isaiah** proclaims that the Messiah would be born of a virgin.

The Gospel tells us that Mary was, nevertheless, **“greatly troubled”** (cf. Lk 1:29) by the angel's greeting. Since virtually everyone in Scripture who sees an angel is greatly troubled—in some cases scared nearly to death!—it should not surprise us that Mary was *taken aback*, to say the least! On top of that, the angel's greeting—**“Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you”** (cf. Lk 1:28)—had never been spoken to anyone else in Scripture. So, Mary naturally **“pondered what sort of greeting this might be”** (cf. Lk 1:29). She even questioned the angel—not **doubting** his message, but simply *wondering* how a virgin could conceive a child.

Here, **St. Leo the Great** helps us understand not only the great gift of God to all of humanity in sending his Son to save us, but especially, how intimately the Lord wants us to *participate* in his own divine life. Relationship with this divine child was not just for **Mary**, but is for *each one of us*. St. Leo writes:

**To every one, when he is reborn, the water of baptism is like the Virgin's womb, for the same Holy Spirit fills the font, who filled the Virgin, that the sin, which that sacred conception overthrew, may be taken away by this mystical washing.**

Ancient, Luke, p. 18

There is a **natural way** that God has created for human beings to be born. But we are **reborn** in a way remarkably similar to Jesus *in one particular aspect*. The waters of the **Baptismal font** are sanctified—**made holy**—by the very same Holy Spirit that sanctified the **womb of Mary**. We are **born** from our mother's womb, but reborn in the sanctified **“womb” of the Church**—the *Baptismal Font*—that has been made holy by **God the Holy Spirit** just like Mary's womb. So, when we call

Mary our Mother—and the **Church** our Mother—we can now see more clearly the **truth** of such a claim, not to mention the “**how**” and “**why**”.

As we turn to the **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** today, we can see how the **2<sup>nd</sup> Joyful Mystery** of the Rosary comes into play. **St. Paul** writes:

*To him who can strengthen you, according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages but now manifested through the prophetic writings and, according to the command of the eternal God, made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith, to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ be glory forever and ever. Amen.* (Rom 16:25-27)

The key words for us, here, are “**the obedience of faith**”.

And here we see the *particularly Catholic view of the role of works of charity as an expression of our faith*. Some Christians say that we are saved by “**faith alone**”. The problem with that claim is that the only place in the Bible where the words “**faith alone**” appear together are in the **Letter of James** where it says:

*You see that a man is justified by works and **not** by faith alone...* (Jas 2:24)

In the **Gospel of Matthew**, an angel tells **Joseph**—who was distraught at Mary’s “**surprise**” pregnancy—not only **not** to worry, because the conception of Mary’s child was “*through the Holy Spirit*” (cf. Mt 1:20)—but, especially, that **this** child would “*save his people from their sins*” (cf. Mt 1:21).

So, Christians who claim that we are saved by faith in Jesus alone, are well intentioned, but they make the common mistake of **taking certain passages out of context** and *drawing erroneous conclusions* as a result. **St. Paul** does, indeed, say clearly in various places, we are **not saved by the works of the Law of Moses**. But our **works of charity** are a *necessary response* of the **gift of new life** that God gives us in Baptism. **St. James** punctuates his warning against a false “**faith alone**” mentality with these chilling words:

*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.* (Jas 2:19)

In other words, even evil spirits **believe in** Jesus. But demons want nothing to do **with Jesus**. They **believe**...but they do not bear any visible spiritual fruit.

And here is where **Mary shows us the way of a genuine disciple**. No sooner had **the angel** left Mary after his earth-shattering announcement to her, then **she** left home to attend her elderly cousin Elizabeth, whom the angel had told Mary was now 6 months pregnant. So, when we pray the **2<sup>nd</sup> Joyful Mystery** of the Rosary—the **Visitation**—we are reminded of the requirement to **express** our faith in Jesus in **works of love for others**.

Here is Luke’s account of the **Visitation**:

*In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechari’ah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:39-43)*

Because of her faithfulness, Mary received the **additional** gift of the **confirmation of her vocation** as Mother of God when Elizabeth called her “**the mother of my Lord**”. Here we see how God **confirms** and **encourages** the faithful disciple who expresses his or her faith in works of charity—in the particular day-to-day circumstances of one’s state in life.

**By now, it should be evident that works don’t save us. But the works do reveal the saving power of Jesus is at work in us.**

**Praying the Rosary daily** helps us keep the Gospel message **straight**, not to mention **alive and well** in our hearts, minds and souls. Mary not only had faith. She had the “**obedience of faith**” which meant **submitting her will to God’s will in her every thought and action**. And we are called to do the same.

Finally, just a brief word about the **3<sup>rd</sup> Joyful Mystery** of the Rosary, the **Nativity**—the birth of Jesus—which we commemorate **this evening** and **tomorrow** and which we continue to celebrate during the entire **Christmas Season**. There are two key things to remember about the first **Christmas**.

First, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The name “**Bethlehem**” means “*house of bread*” in **Hebrew**. Secondly, he was laid in a **manger**—which is a **feeding trough** for animals. Since God does nothing random, we must realize that the Son of God is to be given to us not just as our **Savior** but as “**bread from heaven**” (cf. Jn 6:32)—true *food* for eternal life (cf. Jn 6:27). And where do we find that true food that leads to salvation?

In the **Holy Eucharist!**

**St. John of Damascus** shows us the **connection** between the Holy Spirits’ actions at the **Annunciation** and the **Eucharist** where he writes:

**The archangel Gabriel [said], “The Holy Ghost shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you.” And now you ask how the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine and water the blood of Christ. And I tell you that the Holy Ghost comes down and works these things which are beyond description and understanding.**

Ancient, Luke, p. 19

**Praying the Rosary *daily*** is the easiest way to keep the **Living Word of God**—the *Gospel of Jesus Christ*—alive and *active* in our souls.

The more we immerse ourselves in the **Mysteries of the Rosary**—meditating *with Mary the Mother of God* on the life of her Son, **Jesus** the more naturally we will find ourselves bringing Jesus to others...

Just as Mary did!