

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, it is most appropriate to reflect on the person of St. Joseph as we put the final pieces in place for the birth of the Savior. In the litany of St. Joseph, we say, "St. Joseph, Head of the Holy Family, pray for us." There is more hidden behind this invocation than meets the eye. From all eternity, Joseph was destined to be the spouse of the Blessed Virgin.

Joseph was Mary's husband, and she was his wife. While it is important for the Church to profess the virginal conception of Jesus, it is no less vital to uphold Mary's marriage to Joseph as real, because juridically Joseph's fatherhood depends on it.

In the Jewish matrimonial procedure, the formal exchange of consent before witnesses (Malachi 2:4) preceded in time the taking of the bride into the groom's family home. The consent or betrothal would constitute a legally ratified marriage, since it carried with it certain rights. Only later did the bride move into the husband's family home. In today's Gospel, we are dealing with a situation that takes place between these two stages.

It should not scandalize us that Joseph might have considered infidelity as a possible explanation for Mary's being with child. It seems realistic that he might reach a false conclusion. He was confused, puzzled and troubled by the demands of this faith. Joseph's calling by God was not what he had originally thought.

It is a tribute to God's faithfulness that He remains present to us even when we question and doubt. Even in times of fervor, we are aware that in many ways our Gospel message is at odds with the world, and like Joseph we may question whether we really want to continue that fight. In such times, St. Joseph will come to our aid. In his apostolic exhortation *The Guardian of the Redeemer*, St. John Paul II readily admits that Joseph did not know how to deal with Mary's astonishing motherhood. Above all he sought a way out of

what was for him a difficult situation. We see a parallel to the Annunciation. “The divine messenger introduces Joseph to the mystery of Mary’s motherhood.”¹ Like Mary he showed a readiness of will like Mary’s with what God asked of him through the angel.

The life of St. Joseph was totally determined by the mystery of the Incarnation, of which he, together with Mary, had been the first guardian. The Incarnation and Redemption constitute an organic and indissoluble unity, in which "the plan of revelation is realized by words and deeds which are intrinsically bound up with each other."

Precisely because of this unity, Pope John XXIII, who had a great devotion to St. Joseph, directed that Joseph's name be inserted in the Roman Canon of the Mass after the name of Mary and before the apostles, popes and martyrs.² St. Joseph is a wonderful model for fathers. Authentic married love demands that a husband shows profound respect for the equal dignity of his wife: “You are not her master,” writes St. Ambrose in the 4th century, “...but her husband; she was not given to you to be your slave, but your wife... reciprocate your attentiveness to you, and be grateful to her for her love.”³

In these final days of Advent, the pieces all come together. St. Joseph played an indispensable role, and from his place in heaven, he continues to assist us on our journey of faith. Let us continue to prepare a place for the Lord to dwell, by remaining faithful and attentive, just as did St. Joseph. Let us prepare the way. The time is drawing near.

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos*, “Guardian of the Redeemer,” Section I, para #3, (15 August 1989)

² Pope John XXIII, Sacred Cong. of Rites, Decree *Novis hisce temporibus* (13 Nov. 1962)

³ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, para. 25, quoting Ambrose Hexameron 5,7,19