

St. Joseph--2018
(2 Sam 7:4....16; Rom 4:13....22; Mt 1:16....24)

I was really in trouble this time. Last evening I was still clueless as to what to say in my homily today. Reluctant as I was, I called on St. Joseph for help. He seemed a little slow in responding, but when he did, he said, "I really shouldn't help you. I hear that you asked St. Scholastica for help and then reported that she was very gracious, but St. Joseph isn't always. What do you mean, I'm not always gracious?" "Well, two years ago you said, 'By now you should be able to do this by yourself.'" That's not exactly encouraging. And in 2014 you said..." "All right, enough. I'll help."

"But you always want to talk about a gospel story. Why not talk about my virtues?" "Your virtues? "Yes, my virtues. Since I'm a saint I must be virtuous." I asked, "Do you mean theological virtues or natural virtues? If natural, do you mean acquired virtues or supernatural virtues?" "Where are getting all this?" "From the Third Baltimore Catechism," I said, "I used to teach catechism to the first form at Abbey School." I think he was about to be ungracious, so I quickly asked, "What particular virtue?" "I think humility is my outstanding virtue. Yes, I can admit that without a seeming contradiction. The opposite of humility is pride. St. Paul countered the Corinthians' pride by asking them, 'Who confers distinction upon you? What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have

received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it?' (1 Cor 4:6-7). It's a matter of recognizing that everything we have comes from God, so that we cannot take pride in anything, especially not in virtue.

He went on, "Mother Teresa says, 'Humility is the mother of all virtues.' Although your catechism doesn't list humility as a cardinal virtue, St. Benedict treats it as one. Notice chapter 7 of the Holy Rule and the emphasis St. Benedict gives humility throughout his rule."

He continued, "Like the other virtues, it is gift from God, but we must also work at it. Obedience is a way both of acquiring it and of exercising it. So St. Benedict says 'The first step of humility is obedience without delay.' Certainly I was obedient. Every word that came to me from God (through the angel) was a command: 'Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife'; 'Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt'; 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel.' No one ever heard any backtalk from me." (I refrained from mentioning that we don't have record of talk of any kind from him.)

He went on, "St. Benedict recommends humility at every step. We can clearly see this when he suggests that one should desire what is good for another rather than for oneself. Like Abbot Giles Hayes, recently deceased, whose motto was, 'The other guy first.' Is that a rule you live by?" he asked. "I think of it as a kind of counsel of perfection." "That sounds like an evasion to me." I said, "I really think we need to move on to other virtues--for the integrity of this homily, I mean"

"Well, we can speak about silence." "Is silence a virtue?" I asked. "I happen to know that on one of your shelves there is a book called "Joseph the Silent" by Michel Gasnier, O.P. It surely treats silence as a virtue, doesn't it?" "I wouldn't know. I've never read it." "Well, you have the saying 'Silence is golden' on the wall in your coffee room, so silence is something to be valued. The great St. Benedict says "Let leave to speak be seldom granted," and he quotes Proverbs, ""In a flood of words you will not avoid sin" (19:10) and "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (18:21); he could also have quoted Sirach: "Honor and dishonor through talking! A man's tongue can be his downfall" (5:15); "When a sieve is shaken, the husks appear; so do a man's faults when he speaks" (27:4), and "Praise no man before he speaks, for it is then that men are tested" (27:7). Your community would be greatly improved if silence were better observed. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that the more the talking, the less the recollection. It has even been said that to reform a community, all that would be necessary would be the proper observance of silence. I think that implies that the discipline needed for proper silence would lead to the correction of all other faults."

I didn't want him criticizing my community, so I jumped in with, "How is it that everybody else in Luke's infancy narratives has something to say--the angel Gabriel, Mary, Elisabeth, Zachary, Simeon, Anna, the Bethlehem angels, even the shepherds--but not a word from you?" He sighed, then said, "I try to practice centering prayer in

every circumstance in which I find myself. That's hardly possible with conversation." "Centering prayer?" I asked. "I wouldn't expect you to know much about that," he said. "Well, you remember when Solomon dedicated the Temple, he said, 'The LORD intends to dwell in a dark cloud.' In that Temple the Ark of the Covenant was surrounded with curtains, and so was in darkness. At Sinai, too, the mountain was covered with a dense, black cloud. And isn't 'Holy, Holy, Holy' your favorite hymn? Remember the line, 'Though the darkness hide thee, though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see'--All this hints at the impossibility of knowing God." I said, "I know St. Paul wrote to Titus that God 'dwells in unapproachable light, whom no human being has seen or can see' (1 Tim 6:16). "That's another way of saying the same thing, that God is unknowable. That's why we speak of the 'cloud of unknowing.' That's why I simply place myself in the presence of God, in the depths of my being, in God, who is always in my heart; I keep my mind free of any other thought. If distractions arise, I repeat my mantra." "Ah, what do you use as a mantra," I asked. "Well, 'The Way of the Pilgrim favored' the Jesus Prayer, and John Main insisted on 'Maranatha,' but I go with 'Jesus, Mary, Joseph'." At my astonishment, he added, "Try it; you'll like it." I asked, "Is it all right to use more than one mantra?" "You'll have to ask a master of the spiritual life. I'm just a poor father and husband." Ah, there, I thought, is true humility. I said, "St Benedict didn't say much about personal prayer except that we should pray." "That's true,

but the lectio divina, of which he says much, if engaged in as he expects, can lead to centering prayer."

Then he went on, "Now, so close to Passiontide, it is worth remembering what is said of Isaiah's Servant of the Lord, that he was obedient and silent, "Like a lamb led to the slaughter he opened not his mouth" (53:7). He was a type of Jesus, who was silent before His accusers and went to His suffering and death in obedience to His Father. You should strive to imitate Christ; to the extent you do, you have those consoling words of St. Benedict: 'Faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve to share also in his kingdom.'" My virtues of silence and humility will teach you to do this.