

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 22, 2019

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Many of us learned Saint Luke's account of the Nativity by way of a Sunday school Christmas pageant. Was it "Cyrenius" or "Quirinius?" It depended upon the translation of the Bible your parish used. But it is important we have the "*other*" telling of Christ's birth. You have just heard St Matthew's account.

In Saint Luke's telling of the Birth of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin and her Child take center stage. And when you unpack your Christmas crèche, the figure of Joseph is often confused with the shepherds. But in St Matthew's Gospel *Saint Joseph is the central figure*. Nine months earlier, at the Annunciation, St Luke describes Our Lady's hesitation momentarily holding off the Incarnation. But in St Matthew's Gospel everything is all set except for Joseph. He has to be brought on board. *The Incarnation also waited for Saint Joseph*.

Almost everything we know about St Joseph comes from the infancy accounts. But we gain a great impression of him from these few lines. We are told Joseph considered divorcing Mary but then decided to sleep on it. How often that is a good idea for us as well! I have told some of you about a famous orchestra conductor in the mid-20th Century. Artur Rodzinski was music director in Cleveland, New York, and Chicago. He had a fiery personality which often made for exciting concert performances. But he also wrote fiery letters. Fortunately Dr. Rodzinski had a wise secretary. She would take dictation, type up the blistering letter for his signature, fold it and then place the sealed envelope in her desk drawer. Next day when the great man arrived in the office he would ask if she had mailed the letter. Her reply was "Oh, no, I forgot." And he would say "Good. Why don't we rewrite it?" We sometimes give or take that kind of advice. "Why don't you sleep on it. Make the decision in the morning."

In the gospel we are told Saint Joseph slept on it. He didn't have an office secretary. He had an angel who slipped into his quiet time and gave counsel and advice. When Joseph awoke, he now had the faith, humility, and resolve, to be obedient to what he may not have understood, but knew was the Lord's will. Not knowing the Lord's will in any given matter is perplexing. You know that. But *knowing in advance* that the Lord's will, whatever it may be, overrules his own will, became part of Joseph's soul. That is part of his greatness.

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Being involved with Almighty God, even with the right approach of humility and obedience, we are still not given the clear Divine plan. Learn from the Nativity accounts. More than once it is said Our Lady “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Blessed Mary would no doubt have preferred the safety of home life in Nazareth to what happened after Gabriel’s visit. But thank God she said “Be it unto me according to thy word.” In today’s gospel we have St Joseph doing the same. He is “flying on instruments,” *angelic* instruments, because, left to his own resources, Joseph cannot see clearly ahead. For us it is sometimes a matter of asking whether we really must follow the discipline of the Church when everything around us says the Church is out of step with the times. In the confessional, the rubber hits the road when the priest’s advice runs counter to what I really want to do! St Joseph recognized the angel’s authority to overrule.

In a few days we will look into the manger. But do not regard Joseph as one of the extra pieces of the crèche set you bought for a few more dollars! The scene we call Christmas is the mighty intervention of God become Incarnate. But the Incarnation came also because of *two* people: Mary and Joseph. Each of them chose to trust in God despite the inconvenience and confusion and anxiety. Christmas was an act of divine love *and human courage*. The gospel bids us show the same trust and response to God’s will for us. When we do that, Scripture tells us good things, *God’s things*, will come of it.