

#### FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, 2025

The news that St. Joseph received was good news, but also terrifying. It was good news, surely that Mary's Son, to be named "Jesus" or "God Saves", would save God's People from their sins. That Mary's Son was conceived by the Holy Spirit, however, was certainly terrifying. Joseph's chance at a normal life was over. He was now involved in tremendous and mysterious things. St. Joseph was excited and frightened at the same time.

When we think about it, we realize that the combination of fear and excitement is perfectly normal. Again and again, when we embark on something new we discover within ourselves that same combination of fear and excitement. We don't know how it will turn out. We don't quite know what we are getting into. We encounter minor examples of this almost daily. Whenever I manage to show up for Jiu-Jitsu and time for free rolling comes, there is a little bit of genuine excitement, but also a little bit of honest fear. What will happen? Major examples of this include such things as getting married. Fewer people get married today, and perhaps that is partly because they feel more fear than excitement; yet the fear and excitement go together, to the point that it may not be possible to have excitement without a certain kind and degree of fear.

The greatest example of this combination is the prospect of meeting the Lord Jesus face to face when this mortal life comes to an end. We will stand before Him simply ourselves, with no covering for the naked truth. Our evil deeds and our good deeds will both stand out starkly. With a thrill, not of horror but of shame, we will see the mixed motives and mixed results of even our best efforts. He will see that too, even more clearly than we. How can that thought not cause me to tremble, tremble, tremble? And yet . . . and yet, the Savior is Love Incarnate, the Word of God Who freely embraced mortal life and mortal death out of pure love for me, and you, and all of sinful and striving humanity. Not fully holy on our own, we trust in His holiness because He tells us to. Not yet pure as He is pure, we nonetheless see His beauty and goodness, and respond with joy to His invitation to eternal life. No more powerful and dramatic a combination of excitement and fear can be imagined than that great meeting.

The combination of fear and excitement at the prospect of meeting the Lord face to face is certainly understandable. Who would dare approach such a meeting without some fear? Yet, there are things we can do to reduce that fear. We can do some things to prepare ourselves.

The main way to prepare ourselves to meet the Lord is through prayer, and the right kind of prayer. The right kind of prayer expresses a humble and contrite heart. This is why the Roman Church early on attached the "Confiteor" (I Confess) or "Penitential Rite" to the Church's most important and solemn prayer, the Holy Mass. During the excitement (at times crossing the line into hubris) of the 1960s, some liturgical scholars urged Pope Paul VI not to include the "Confiteor" or "Penitential Rite" in his revised Roman Mass, because those did not exist, they thought, in the earliest forms of the Roman Mass. We cannot actually know for sure, and I suspect that they were wrong; but, even if they were correct, Pope Paul VI recognized that the Roman Church showed a genuine instinct of Christian Faith in putting a moment of prayerful humility and contrition at the start of the Mass. The starting point for all our prayer needs to be recognition, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, that "I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips", and yet I - we- dare to put ourselves in the presence of the One before Whom the Cherubim and Seraphim eternally sing "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord, God of Hosts!"

We put our sins before His mercy seat, the atoning Cross of His Incarnate Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Then we call out, as David did, "If You, o Lord, will hold sins strictly to account, who could survive it? But with You there is forgiveness!" With Him there is always forgiveness. It is with confidence that we confess our sins; but we must confess them, generically at the start of every Mass, and specifically in an occasional, at least yearly, celebration of the Sacrament of Penance.

There is a family tradition that great-great grandmother MacGillivray, who looked after the parish priest's house in Deadwood, South Dakota, refused to attend the last hanging in Deadwood, and instead took her daughter to church to pray for the condemned man's immortal soul. One of my brothers did some research that gave some support for this family tradition, in that newspaper accounts said that the condemned man, who had indeed committed murder, was baptized in prison by the town's Catholic priest. The newspaper accounts added that he went calmly and with dignity to the gallows. Having recognized and confessed our sins, and having then received God's mercy through the saving waters of Baptism, remembered at the start of Mass and renewed in the Sacrament of Penance, we proceed, with calm and dignity, not to the gallows but to the Table of the Lord, where He is both our gracious Host and our life giving Food.

All of our prayers prepare to meet the Lord Jesus in His true, glorious form. The best prayer of all for such preparation is meeting the Lord Jesus as He comes to us in Holy Communion, under the veils of Bread and Wine. The Holy Eucharist is the supreme form of His Presence until His glory is revealed. There are many Catholics who never receive Holy Communion, though Jesus Christ Himself both invites and commands them to come. This can only be either because they do not have Faith, or because they are afraid. Faith is given for the asking - ask, and you shall receive! If you want Faith, it is yours. For the fear, I have more sympathy. Knowing my sins, how dare I come, even to receive the Holy Eucharist, let alone to stand and pray as the Holy Eucharist's mortal vehicle, through whom, all unworthy, the treasure of the Bread of Life and Wine of Salvation flow to God's People! How can I not be afraid? Yet, does not the Apostle John tell us that perfect love casts out fear? I call out, "Lord, increase my love!" Let us all cry out, "Lord, increase my love!" Let the Catholic who is afraid to come to Holy Communion cry out, "Lord, increase my love!" Having confessed our venial sinfulness at the start of the Holy Mass, or having confessed our grave sins in the Sacrament of Penance, we can come forward to Holy Communion. We do not come forward without fear; yet we do come forward, for we have received a love that is stronger than our fear, a holy excitement that is greater than our anxiety.

This, indeed, is the spirit with which we are getting ready to celebrate Christmas. We know from experience that we are sinners, but we know by Faith that we are redeemed by Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Faith actually grows stronger than our experience. Having faced and confessed our sins, we approach the Lord's Table with joy and excitement. Having faced and confessed our sins, we celebrate with joy and excitement the Lord Jesus' first coming in the Flesh. Having faced and confessed our sins, we look forward with joy and excitement to our meeting with Him face to face.