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The Superior General's Advent Letter

Robert P. Maloney C.M.

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To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!

Joseph receives little attention these days, even in Advent. I have surely been slow to think about him myself, having turned, when I wrote past Advent letters, first to Mary the Mother of Jesus, then to John the Baptist, and last year to Isaiah. But if we read Matthew's infancy narrative carefully (this year, in the A cycle of readings, we shall hear it proclaimed on the Sundays of Advent and Christmas), Joseph stands right beside Mary at the center of the stage. In fact, his is the major role in Matthew's story.

We know very little about the historical Joseph. His beginning and his end are shrouded in obscurity. The gospel stories about him are a theological portrait, painted with delicate shadings, so that we, the readers, might learn from Joseph how to walk with God. In the light of the New Testament, let me share with you, as an Advent reflection, some thoughts about this great man, whom Mary chose to accompany her through life.

First of all, he knew how to listen to God's word. Matthew tells us of Joseph's four dreams (I sometimes wish mine were as clear as his!). Through these dreams, God speaks to Joseph at critical moments in the history of Jesus. In each instance, Joseph responds immediately and does what God asks. When the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, as soon as Joseph awakes he does as the angel of the Lord has directed him and receives her into his home (1:24). When the angel warns Joseph to take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt because Herod is seeking to kill Jesus, Joseph gets up and leaves that very night (2:14). When after the death of Herod the angel directs Joseph to set out for Israel, he departs immediately (2:21). When he is warned in a dream not to go to Judea, he changes his route right away and settles in Galilee (2:22). In his faithful response to God's commands, Matthew's Joseph parallels Luke's Mary. Both know how to "listen to the word of God and act upon it" (Lk 8:21).

Secondly, it is clear in Matthew's gospel that Joseph stands, with eager expectation, at the threshold of transcendence. From the darkness of his own limited understanding, he is continually peering into the mystery of God. Surely he cannot fathom the virginal conception of Jesus that the angel announces, but as a "just man" (1:21) he tempers the strict observance of the law with loving compassion and bows in reverence to God's incomprehensible ways. Surely he does not understand how this child, who seems like any other, could be "God with us" (1:23), but he abandons himself, in faith, to the task of loving the child and educating him. There is something very beautiful about Joseph's contact with the transcendent mystery of God. He was not a monk. He did not live a life cut off from ordinary daily contacts with the world. In fact, he was a carpenter (Mt 14:55), a neighborhood craftsman who did woodwork and made furniture, and he raised

his son in the same trade (Mk 6:3). Yet in the midst of his daily manual labor and family life, Joseph was surrounded by the mystery of God and he penetrated it with faith. He trusted in God's daily providence. He believed in God's revealing word. When he read the signs of God's will, he rushed to put them into practice.

For those who live in the Vincentian tradition, Joseph has much to say during this Advent time. Let me offer two Advent suggestions that flow from the life of this deeply believing man.

1. Could not all of us try to renew our love for the word of God this Advent. For Joseph, as for Mary his wife, the word of God is paramount. This word, as St. Vincent puts it (CR II, 1), "never fails." The clearest thing about Joseph in the gospels is that he was always listening for what God wanted to tell him and, once he knew it, he put it into practice. Abelly says a similar thing about St. Vincent: "He seemed to suck meaning from passages of the scriptures as a baby sucks milk from its mother. And he extracted the core and substance from the scriptures so as to be strengthened and have his soul nourished by them.... And he did this in such a way that in all his words and actions he appeared to be filled with Jesus Christ" (Abelly, Book III, 72-73). Is the word of God really central for us, as it was for Joseph and for St. Vincent? Is it water that gives us life, as Isaiah puts it (55:10-11), when our hearts and minds are dry? Is it a hammer for us, as Jeremiah puts it (23:29), when we are complacent, too set to budge? Is it food that is sweeter than honey, as the psalmist puts it (Ps 19:11), when we are hungering to know what God is asking for us? Is it a two-edged sword, as the author of Hebrews puts it (4:12), so that when we preach to others, it cuts into us too?

2. With Matthew's Joseph, I want to urge you this Advent to gaze into the mystery of God with courage. I say "with courage," because it is no easier for us to believe than it was for Joseph. Many of the outward signs that he saw seemed to contradict the promises that God was making to him. It is often that way for those who serve the poor. While there are many joyful moments in our ministry, there are also dark, fearful ones. The beatitudes tell us "happy are the poor," but we often see them oppressed and beaten down by injustice, as in Mozambique, Albania, and many other places. The word of God says that "the meek shall possess the land," but we often witness violent, even fanatical, strife that takes the lives of countless innocent non-combatants, as is occurring in ex-Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The gospels tell us that "those who are persecuted for justice sake will inherit the kingdom of God," but we often observe, as in China, that persecution is long, painful, and discouraging. Joseph knew similar experiences. He knew the pain and embarrassment of poverty when there was no room in the inn and he had to place his infant child in a manger. He witnessed violence when Herod unleashed his wrath against children in Bethlehem. He felt persecution, when he fled to Egypt with Mary and Jesus, and later to Nazareth. Yet he believed. He believed that God walked with him, that God is faithful to promises, that God is alive, that we can find God not only in the light but also in the darkness. He lived on the edge of mystery and was not afraid to gaze into it with courage in order to find God.

Advent is upon us. Imagine how Joseph felt as the birth of his mysterious son approached: puzzled, excited, awed. Yet, in his puzzlement, this carpenter of modest

means had enormous resources. The word of God was his strength. Deep faith was his light in the darkness. It enabled him to see the presence of God even where suffering, privation, and violence appeared to reign.

If love for God's word and lively, penetrating faith were indispensable tools for Joseph the carpenter, they are likewise so for all of us missionaries.

I pray that this Christmas time will bring you abundant peace and joy in the Lord.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General