

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Gospel introduces us to both Mary and Joseph with emphasis on Joseph. If the infancy narrative in Luke's Gospel focuses on Mary, the infancy narrative in Matthew's Gospel focuses on Joseph. The two Gospels present the same story from two very different perspectives.

At his opening press conference, Cardinal Tobin defined faith as the capacity to be surprised by God. Luke's Gospel tells us the story of the annunciation to Mary. In Luke's Gospel, Mary was surprised when she was asked to be the mother of Jesus, the mother of the Son of God. Because of her faith, she said yes to God's invitation. Joseph, on the other hand, was surprised that Mary was pregnant. We are told that he had decided to divorce her quietly since although he was a righteous man, he was unwilling to expose her to shame. He then was surprised by God when the angel appeared to him in a dream. Because of his faith, he went ahead with the marriage.

The angel told Joseph that Mary's pregnancy was to fulfill the words of the Prophet Isaiah which we heard in today's first reading: "*Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'*"

Matthew's entire Gospel revolves around God's presence in Jesus. At the beginning of the Gospel, we are told that Jesus is Emmanuel, which means "*God is with us.*" In the middle of the Gospel, Jesus says, "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" [18:20]. As Jesus sends out his disciples to evangelize, teach, and baptize, Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus' promise "*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*" [28:20b]. Jesus is God-with-us, he is present whenever we are gathered in his name, and he promises to be with us all days.

As Catholics, we traditionally defined sacraments as outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace. According to this definition, sacraments are signs that are more than signs. They are signs which cause or bring about what they signify. Expanding on the definition, Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx wrote a book entitled *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*. In other words, Jesus is the great sign of God. However, because of the Incarnation, because he is Son of God made human, he is not only the sign of God: he actually makes God real and present in our world. He is the sacrament, the sign and embodiment, of God, God's presence, and God's mercy in our world.

Likewise, if Jesus is the sacrament of God, the Church is the sacrament of Jesus. The Church is the great sign of Jesus' presence in the world. This is exactly what Jesus promised, "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*" Sometimes we make the mistake of applying these words exclusively to Liturgy. In other words, whenever Christians are gathered together in worship, Jesus is present. This view, however, is too restrictive. Whenever Christians are striving to live a Christian life in community, Christ is present. We make Christ present to the world when we live Christian lives in our families and communities! We make Christ's mercy present in the world when we are merciful, i.e., when we are compassionate and forgiving.

My brothers and sisters, as Christmas approaches, I think it would be good to reflect on Cardinal Tobin's explanation of faith as the capacity to be surprised by God: "If you look at Scripture, it is full of a lot of surprised people, people in exile, people forgotten, a world that thought that God lived worlds beyond the last star, only to discover that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son...We allow God to surprise us because we know that God is faithful."¹

¹Archbishop Joseph Tobin, Press Conference, October 18, 2012, Sts. Peter & Paul Cathedral, 11:00-11:30 minutes & 11:53 minutes, <http://www.archindy.org/archbishop/conference.html>.