

4th Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 7:10-14;
Romans 1:1-7;
Matthew 1:18-24
Little Flower - 12/22/13

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Fourth Sunday of Advent. All three readings today refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus, either directly or indirectly. In today's first reading, God through Isaiah prophesies that "*...the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*" In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote that Jesus was "*descended from David according to the flesh,*" an indirect reference to Mary. Finally, in today's Gospel, Matthew gives us his version of "*how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.*" The angel tells Joseph that Mary has conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit: "*She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*" The angel goes on to tell Joseph that this was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, the prophecy we heard in the first reading.

All of us are also familiar with the story of the Annunciation in Luke's Gospel, Luke's version of "*how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.*" The angel tells Mary that she is to be the mother of the Son of God. Mary asks how this can happen since she is a virgin. The angel explains, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*"

It seems to me that as human beings, we spend our whole lives trying to make sense of our lives and our experiences. In the faces of small children, one can often see them trying to process or make sense of what they are experiencing. In many cases, they seem like observers more than actors. As we get older, as our lives and experiences begin to make more sense to us, we begin to interpret everything in light of what we already know. However, at times things happen that cause us to question everything we know and understand. In some cases, we have to radically change our understanding of God, others, the world, or ourselves.

This is exactly what happened to Mary and Joseph when angels appeared to them. First of all, the appearance of an angel is startling in itself. Even more startling was the angel's message. This message did not fit into their plans or expectations at all. They were being called to see, understand, and live their lives in an entirely new way.

The world is fascinated by Pope Francis. This is evident in *Time* magazine's selection of him as the Person of the Year. One quality that distinguishes Pope Francis is his devotion to Mary, specifically to Mary, the Untier of Knots. Author and commentator John Allen tells us that when the Pope was in semi-exile in Germany in 1986, he took comfort in an image of the Virgin Mary he discovered in a church in Augsburg, the famous 18th-century image of "Mary Untier of Knots."¹ This is a reference to St. Irenaeus, who wrote that "the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosened by Mary's obedience."²

My brothers and sisters, it seems to me that the image of Mary the Untier of Knots is an image we can identify with today. Mary can help us untie the knots or the complications in our relationship with God, our relationships with others, our relationship with our world, and our relationship with ourselves. Many of these knots and complications are the result of our sins or the sins of others. For example, when we tell a lie, this often leads to more lies. However, many of these knots and complications are simply the result of the busyness and complexity of life in today's world. With his South American experience, Pope Francis understands that devotion fosters faith. Perhaps if we develop devotion to Mary, the Untier of Knots, she will help us simplify and uncomplicate our lives and our relationships.

¹John L. Allen, "Francis and Mary; Benedict the reformer; India's Christians; and Ukraine," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 13, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/francis-and-mary-benedict-reformer-indias-christians-and-ukraine>.

²St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book 3, Chapter 22, para. 4.