

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent - A  
Isaias 7:10-14;  
Romans 1:1-7;  
Matthew 1:18-24  
Little Flower - 12/18/22

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's first reading contains one of Isaiah's most explicit prophecies of the coming of the Messiah: *'Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.'* From today's Gospel, it is clear that Matthew and the early Christian community understood this prophecy to refer to Jesus. After telling the story of the angel's announcement to Joseph, Matthew concludes: *"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means 'God is with us.'"*

Actually, Matthew builds his Gospel around the theme of Emmanuel, "God is with us." Even before Jesus' birth, he is identified with Emmanuel in the prophecy of Isaiah. The final words of Matthew's Gospel are Jesus' final words to his disciples before ascending into heaven: *"'And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age'"* [28:20]. Even in the middle of the Gospel, Jesus explicitly promises to be with his disciples, *"'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them'"* [18:20]. This suggests that one of the key themes of Matthew's Gospel is presence—God's presence in Jesus and Jesus' promise of presence to us wherever and whenever we are gathered in Jesus' name until the end of time. Please note that we are gathered in Jesus' name not only when we gather for Liturgy or prayer but whenever we are striving to live a Christian life among other Christians.

Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx wrote a book entitled *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*. In this book, he argued that Jesus is the sacrament of God, i.e., Jesus is the sign and realization of God's presence among us. In other words, those who saw Jesus saw God in human form; those who heard his words heard the words of God in human form; those who witnessed his activity witnessed the activity of God in human form; those who touched him and were touched by him touched and were touched by God in human form.

Fr. Schillebeeckx went on to argue that the church is the sacrament of Jesus, i.e., the church is the sign and realization of Jesus' presence among us. In other words, Jesus fulfills his promise through his presence in the church. Of course, we are the church. Therefore, he fulfills his promise through us and through the community of the church and, especially, in the sacraments of the church. This is what we mean when we say that we are a sacramental church.

My brothers and sisters, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we prepare to celebrate not just his historical birth two thousand years ago but God's presence, Jesus' presence, within and among us today. One way in which we share this presence with others is when we make ourselves present to those whom we encounter in our lives. When we are with others, whether family, friends, acquaintances, strangers, or those in need, do we make ourselves present to them? Are we really attentive to them? In other words, are we compassionate? Are we sensitive and responsive to them and to their real needs, both spoken and unspoken?

In today's second reading, Paul uses the phrase *obedience of faith*? In his book *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith*, Cardinal Avery Dulles suggests that there are seven models, or seven dimensions, of faith, one of which is obediential faith. Mary, of course, is the perfect example of obediential faith. Obediential faith is a reverential, submissive hearing of God and radical discipleship. In other words, as Christians, God's word has a radical claim on our whole lives as it did on Mary's life.