

My friends in Christ, as we enter now into the final week of our Advent pilgrimage, today's Gospel text features the Annunciation (that is, the angel of the Lord announcing the Birth of Jesus Christ) – but it is *not* the more *famous* Annunciation scene, with Mother Mary; rather, it is the scene with the one who would become the Lord's earthly foster-father, Saint Joseph.... Joseph the silent one...Joseph the just one...Joseph the faithful one.

Joseph...the unheralded hero.... Let us consider the heroism of Saint Joseph. Now...what could possibly make *him* a *hero*? He is not *faster* than a *bullet*, nor is he more *powerful* than a *train*, and he could *never* leap over *any* building, tall or *otherwise*! He is *not* some caped crusader with an endless store of wonderful toys, *not* an avenger, *not* a wizard, *hardly* even a household name. So *what* makes *him*...a *hero*?

Well, what *is* a hero? What are some of the qualities for which we look and which we easily find in those men and women whom we recognize as heroes? To define "hero" as such could lead us into a philosophical debate that might last us several months. (I *know* that, because that actually *did* happen in my humanities class in high school!) And so, for our purposes today, I will propose *four* such qualities of the quintessential hero: fidelity to the mission; moderation of one's personal wants, preferences, and desires; prioritization of life; and sacrifice of self.... Now, there *probably* is some overlap here, but just humor me; and for our purposes today, let us consider these qualities, how we find them in Saint Joseph and how we might strive for them in *ourselves*, in our *own* lives.

Fidelity to the mission.... When Frodo Baggins realized that the mission regarding the One Ring no longer was a matter of keeping It secret, keeping It safe, but that It needed to be destroyed once and for all, he reluctantly stepped forward in the midst of the great ones – thus accepting that mission. He knew not what world of danger and death awaited him, but it did not matter. For the mission was thus, and he was the one who needed to do it – amen; so be it.

Saint Joseph, too, was given his mission: to take Mother Mary into his home (she who will bear a Son) and he is to name the Son “Jesus.” At first...he hesitated – for after all, who was *he* to assume such a grave and important responsibility? He could not *dare* put himself forward like that, and there were far *better* men than him – *greater* ones – upon whom the Lord should call... But the mission was thus, and the Lord chose *him*, and so he reluctantly stepped forward and accepted this mission. And when he was forced to travel with a pregnant wife some ninety miles for the Roman census – wondering how he could keep her *safe* and get to Bethlehem in time, he remained faithful to the mission. And when the Word of God was made flesh to dwell among us, and God the Son was born, he remained faithful to the mission. And when King Herod threatened all of them with death and they had to travel *not* a mere *ninety* miles but *hundreds* of miles to Egypt, still he remained faithful to his mission... No matter the many dangers of death, no matter the peril, no matter the disruptions of life, or the discomforts, or the inconveniences and his life’s version of “first-world problems,” *because* he said *yes* to God, *yes* to the mission, his fidelity *to* the mission was assured...

Moderation of personal wants, preferences, and desires... When Frodo was wandering lost in the nowhere of Mordor, starving for food and gasping for even a drop of water, he did have that *lembas* bread with him and perhaps a mouthful or two of water remaining in his water-skin. And he *craved* to just eat it all up, drink it all up, fall down and sleep, and not give a hoot that in doing all of that he effectively would just give up – eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow, we die! But it is an aspect of fidelity to the mission that we pace ourselves. I need to put off *today* what I *want* so as to get what I *really* want (what I *need*) for *tomorrow*. Craving a whole pizza and drooling to scarf down that chocolate cake, are you? Well, I reckon that you *can* have *that, today...or* you can *deny* yourself *that* because the thing that you *really* want is to win that cross-country race *tomorrow!*

Perhaps Saint Joseph wanted nothing more than to remain living his quiet country life there in that tiny town of Nazareth. And he *rather* preferred not to get mixed up in the machinations and

the goings-on of the great ones. And he desired simply to work his craft and say his prayers, do his devotions, and worship God *his* way, and otherwise be left alone.... But duty calls, as they say – the *mission* calls. And Mary needs him, and Jesus needs him, and *God* needs him.... And so, he can still work his craft – but in proper balance with what *Mary* needs and what *Jesus* needs. And he can still say his prayers and do his devotions – but for a while, that will have to happen on the road instead of in the comforts of home.... Balance. Moderation.... Yes, true: *his* personal wants, preferences, and desires are valid...but they must be weighed against the needs of those whom God has placed under his care...the *mission* to which he has already decided to be faithful....

Prioritization of life.... For Frodo’s friend Pippin, downing a pint of frothy, tasty beer while blathering stories at the bar was *more* important than keeping their identity and their mission a secret from strangers and potential enemies – and he almost blew it. And then Sam, Merry, *and* Pippin (all *three*) started cooking up “to-MAH-toes; a nice, tasty bake.” And apparently *that* was *more* important than remaining still and silent so that the Nazgul would not find them – and *they* almost blew it!

Once upon a time, the highest priority in life for Saint Joseph was, first of all, to worship the Lord, and second, to work his craft. But *then*, he was called to become the husband of Mary and the foster-father of Jesus – and though there were who knows *how* many carpenters and craftsmen in all of Galilee and Judea, there was only *one* husband for Mary, only *one* foster-father for Jesus. And yes, he still needed to work his craft, make his living, earn his bread, bring home the bacon (in a manner of speaking, of course). He still had to provide for his family...but here is that moderation thing all over again, striving for that proper balance so that he worships God on the Sabbath, spends time at home with the family, works his craft as needed in order to provide – and *yes*, in that order....

And then, sacrifice of self.... At the end of *his* days, Saint Joseph probably died peaceful and quiet in the comforts of home, in his own bed, surrounded by family. After all, among other things, he is the patron saint of a happy death, and what happier death can we possibly imagine than *literally*

having Jesus right there to bestow upon you one last benediction with Mother Mary praying for you at your bedside?

So what “sacrifice of self” do we find in Saint Joseph? Well actually, “sacrifice of self” is an eloquent summary of all that we have considered thus far: fidelity to the *mission*, rather than the *self*; moderation and healthy balance of personal wants and preferences and desires, and the *self* properly kept in check; prioritization of life such that *Jesus* is our *top* priority, *then* others, and *then* yourself (at the school, we call that JOY – Jesus, Others, Yourself).

And *all* of this basically amounts to a denial of oneself, in some instances even an *abasement* of oneself...which when it comes right down to it means *sacrifice* of self. We do not *literally* have to *die* in order to sacrifice ourselves for God, for others, for the mission at hand because self-denial is sacrifice enough.

So...applying all of this to *ourselves* then....

Fidelity to the mission. And our mission is *what*, exactly? It is to *be* disciples of Jesus. And *how* do we *do* that? By proclaiming His Gospel. And *why* do we do that? For the salvation of souls and the glory of God. And we begin to do this by attending to our *own* souls – because, in the end, we can only *control* ourselves, though we can *influence* our families and friends, and we certainly *should* have *concern* for the larger community, the wider world, the universal Church. And it all *starts* with our *own* souls. “Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with *me*.” True enough. Just so: let there be *salvation of souls*, and let *that* begin with me. For *that* is the *mission*; let us be *faithful* to *that*.

Moderation and balance of personal wants, preferences, and desires. I *want* to sit down and watch the latest Netflix for the umpteenth time (or Disney-plus, or Apple-TV, or whatever-it-is), but I *need* to *make* time for daily prayer. I *prefer* to stay at home today, sleep-in in the morning, but I *need* to get to Mass. I *desire* to skip confession this month and not have to “face the music” with grumpy Father Lewis, but I *need* that sacramental grace of absolution and a new start.

Prioritization of life. The Zags are playing tonight; cannot be bothered with Mass *now!* My football team is playing tomorrow morning; cannot be bothered with Mass then *either!* I am certain that God understands.... I see, well.... God, or sports? Family, or work? Joy, or sorrow? Life, or death? Heaven...or *not-Heaven?* One minor *infraction* as it were *might* not matter...but then again, who knows but that it *might?* And in *any* event, the *externals* are *one* thing, *sure* – and though *we* may look at outward appearances, *God* looks into the *heart*. And so, *maybe* skipping Mass – an outward, external matter – is *not* so serious in our *own* assessment...but what was the internal attitude of the heart that engineered the whole thing and resulted in that not-so-serious external matter?

Sacrifice of self. I *know* that proclaiming the Gospel and sharing Jesus with others just is so important...but they might say “no.” They might laugh. They might make fun of me like I am just another one of those “Jesus-freaks.” Because *that* is the fear of *many*. But, in response to *that*, I will quote our school’s interim-principal, Brian Hull: the worst they can say is “no.” And then to *that*, I would add that the *best* that can happen is *this*: salvation.

This is the “little way.” The “little way” to being a disciple; the “little way” to evangelization and proclaiming the Gospel. So small a thing; such a little thing...but truly the stuff of heroes, truly the stuff of saints.... Saint Joseph said *not...one...word* in all of Sacred Scripture. And yet, his whole life spoke *volumes*. But all that he did was live his life for God and for others, one day at a time, one foot in front of the other along his pilgrim’s journey through life; but he knew perfectly well *why* he did it: as I say...for God and for others. And all his life, one day at a time, he remained faithful to the mission, and he balanced his life in proper moderation thus to accomplish that mission, and he firmly established correct priorities with regard to everything in his life for the sake of that mission, and he denied himself (sacrificed his very self) because of that mission.... He did all of that for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.... Will *we* do the *same?*