

Dear Lay Missionaries of Charity,

As we enter into the Advent season, I thought it would be appropriate to reflect a bit on the Holy Family. This is the time that they come to center stage for a moment before they disappear back into the hidden life of Nazareth for 30 years. In both settings, we have so much to learn from them!

First, we must look to our Lady, whom Mother Teresa called the First Missionary of Charity. As Mother summarizes, after receiving Jesus in the Annunciation, she brings Him to the poor ones in the Visitation--truly the first seeds of the MC charism! Let us pause here and reflect a bit more on these mysteries. What was in our Lady's heart after receiving Jesus in the Annunciation? What fears may have tempted her as she departed to the hill country of Judea to carry Jesus in charity to Elizabeth? What was her experience of Jesus during the Annunciation, on the way, and with Elizabeth? We cannot know these things for sure, but we can glean and meditate and ask questions of the Lord. St. Bernard said that the Holy Spirit did not reveal everything in the Gospels because He wanted to share some things with us personally! This is an invitation to enter in and ask Him the details.

From what we know of pregnancy (though our Lady's was exceptional, it was also part of our human experience) our Lady likely had no evidence of the Lord's presence within her after she gave her Yes at the Annunciation. He was truly, substantially, bodily present, and yet she could not feel Him or see Him or otherwise sense Him. Perhaps she had a little morning sickness eventually--a dubious sign at best and already a share in the Cross. She had just had such a powerful encounter with the angel and she kept in her heart the promise of God, yet she was left in silence, in darkness. She had no evidence that it had occurred. In faith, she began to pray to the hidden, unfelt, silent Life, Who had begun to grow within her. Furthermore, she acted on the words the angel had spoken, running to her cousin who had conceived in her old age.

These are important lessons for us. When we encounter Jesus, we are often struck deeply, but then left in silence and darkness, no longer feeling the sweetness of His Presence that may have seized our hearts for a moment. Sometimes we are left with a word that remains in our hearts where we can ponder it like Mary. Sometimes we are given the grace to make an act of charity, though the fervor we have to act in prayer seems

to dissipate five minutes later. Like our Lady, we must be faithful to that grace, carrying it through even when the fervor leaves us. Finally, though we felt Him for a moment and we feel Him no longer, it is never because He leaves us. He never leaves us. Rather, like our Lady's experience, it is because He moves to a silent presence, very much present to us, even within us, but perhaps not seen or heard or felt.

As our Lady progresses in her journey, the Lord's presence becomes more manifest, first reflected in others. We know that when she reaches Elizabeth, John the Baptist recognizes Jesus's presence and leaps in the womb of Elizabeth. Then Elizabeth cries out, blessing our Lady for her belief. Sometimes this echoes our own experience as others see something has changed in us. In some way, Jesus within us touches the hearts of those around us. They see a sparkle of joy in our eyes, a peace on our faces, a strength in our walk. The grace that is given always has an effect in our lives. When the Holy Spirit visits us and the presence of Jesus is stirred in our hearts, it is often manifested in various ways in our bodies.

The next step in our Lady's journey can be one that is confusing for us. Jesus grows within her. He becomes more manifest. Her belly swells, He moves inside her, she is very aware of His presence. She can practically touch Him with her hand. She can feel the outline of His Body. She can sing to Him, speak to Him, and He responds in little movements, sometimes big movements. His Heart beats within her. She always eats for two. His whole Life is so intimately intertwined with hers. All this is a cause of great joy!

At the same time, it is a cause of much suffering. First, her pregnancy is a cause for physical suffering. Her back hurts, He is heavy to carry around. She has to eat more and she loses her tastes for various foods. He gets in the way and she tires more easily.

Second, her pregnant union with Jesus is a cause for emotional suffering: not only can she see Him, so can everyone else! Some of them accuse her, judge her, dislike her, look down on her. Some of them whisper behind her back, even accuse her family, accuse St. Joseph. Why did she go away to Judea? What did they do there? Her act of charity for Elizabeth has become a cause of scorn for her and for the ones she loves. The silent, active, visible presence within her has become a reason for mockery, for distrust, for

disdain.

Third, her pregnancy is a cause for spiritual suffering. This is possibly the most surprising for us. How can being so close to Jesus be a cause of spiritual suffering? Yet it is. The reason is that as close as she is to Him, with Him living bodily within her, she is still lacking something. She longs to see His Face! Though she holds Him so close, so intimately and so tightly, she cannot hold Him in her arms or touch her cheek to His cheek or hold Him out before her and look into His eyes. As much as she has, her heart still burns with desire, burns for more. She longs to see His Face. What will He look like? What will God look like?

We can learn so much for our Lady as we grow closer to the Lord. As we grow in faith and the Lord becomes so much a part of our lives, we do everything through Him, with Him, in Him. Our hearts begin to swell in love. Our thoughts wander back to Him again and again throughout the day. We sing to Him, speak to Him and sometimes we receive little movements in reply. We consume Him in the Eucharist and spend time with Him in adoration. His heart beats within us and our life becomes inseparable from His. This is all a cause for joy...and for suffering.

We too can experience physical pain--it can become burdensome to live with Him always. It can become difficult to make time for prayer or to fight our way through so many responsibilities and get to Mass. It can be a burden to run into moral boundaries and we can start to lose our taste for the "foods" that the world enjoys. All this causes us to feel more on the fringe. People do not understand who we are or why we have so much devotion for the Lord. They do not understand why we spend so much time in prayer or belong to this funny LMC group. Finally, we, too, can experience the suffering of having so much longing for the Lord. As much as He becomes so present to us, in the Eucharist, in faith, in prayer, in the poor, He is still so hidden from us. We long to see His Face, to hold Him in our arms, to press our cheek to His. While we have Him in our midst in the Eucharist, still we say in the Memorial Acclamation, "Christ will come again!" When we serve Him in the poor, still we want to see Him in His transfigured glory.

When we reflect on the Holy Family, of course, we cannot forget St. Joseph! At the same time, it is very easy to reflect over each of these points with St. Joseph in mind. As He shared Mary's joy, He also shared her sorrows. Physically he supported

her, emotionally he encouraged her, spiritually he prayed with her and his heart burned with hers for the Lord. The Lord brought them together and their shared suffering brought them even closer together. When no one else believed or understood, they had each other and they had the Lord. How sweet it is to imagine them sitting together, alone, reflecting on the prophecies that were being fulfilled right in their midst, right in Mary's womb! How sweet it is to imagine St. Joseph placing his hand on our Lady's pregnant belly and reading to her from the Prophet Isaiah (v. 7:14), "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel." What wonder must have stirred in their hearts, what joy they must have shared. This is a great example for our groups. We should ask the Lord to make each group a little Holy Family, sharing joys and sorrows and intimacy with Jesus. We must ask the Lord to make our families, and those we serve, into Holy Families, with Jesus at the center.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph wish to share their joy with us especially in this Advent season. They want us to be filled with the joy of God's Presence and to bring that to others. It may lead us into a darkness, but in faith we know He remains. As we let that Presence grow in us and expand into more of our lives, it may bring us suffering--physical, emotional, spiritual--yet it brings us joy and so much intimacy with Jesus at the same time. During this Advent season, may the Holy Family draw us into their secret hidden life--a life of sorrows that give way to joy. May Joseph and Mary teach us to rejoice in the Presence of Jesus even as we long for Him to come.

Let us cry with the early Christians and the whole Church, "Lord, we long to see your Face! Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!"

In Jesus and Mary, Father Boniface, OSB