

The Nativity of the Lord – Christmas – at the Vigil Mass
Fr. Chad S. Green
Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
25 December 2018

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 89
Acts 13:16-17, 22-25
("Tomorrow...") Matthew 1:1-25

Christmas: See God's Presence in Our World

The Gospel According to Saint Matthew is a masterpiece film created by an Italian director in 1964.¹ It earned a place on the Vatican's list of great films and, just a few years ago, a film critic for the Vatican City newspaper called it "probably the best film about Jesus ever made."² The movie is filmed in black and white and is a straightforward presentation of the Gospel of Matthew, with no embellishment, no combining with the other Gospels, and no dialogue added to what is contained in Scripture.

The movie's opening scenes depict "how the birth of Jesus Christ came about," according to Saint Matthew.³ The movie begins with a closeup of Mary's beautiful face, but she looks uncertain. Next, a closeup of Joseph's face, looking perplexed, afraid, maybe even a little bit angry. Next, in a wider shot, we see Mary standing in the small courtyard of her home in Nazareth, looking down toward her visibly pregnant womb.

This scene is beautifully shot. Mary is standing up, framed by a stone wall and arch just behind her. The way Mary looks is reminiscent of what we might expect to find in a painting of the Blessed Mother. An image of Mary that we could find ourselves venerating in a church, on a holy card, or on a sacred medal. We could easily find a statue of Mary in a stone grotto looking just as she does in the opening scene of this movie. It is an image of Mary that we today would venerate and look to for comfort and peace.

Yet, when the camera returns to Joseph, we don't see him venerating the beautiful and holy Blessed Mother. Rather than being comforted, we see him turning and walking away. He

exits the courtyard, walks down an unpaved path, and does not look back. Mary is left behind. As Joseph leaves her, she looks sadly toward him out over the courtyard wall. Not a word is spoken between the two. No words need to be spoken. So much is communicated by their eyes, facial expressions, and bodily gestures.

In the next scene, Joseph walks into the small town of Nazareth. Exhausted, he sits down in the path and lays his head against a large stone as he watches some children playing.⁴ His eyes close, the sounds of the children and the town go away and, in the next moment, he's awakened by the voice of an angel:

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”⁵

Joseph blinks his eyes and, as he begins to understand the angel's words, the expression on his face turns from exhaustion and confusion to excitement and joy. He makes haste to walk the path back to Mary and finds her patiently waiting for him where had left her earlier.

Once again, just as in the text of the Gospel, no words are spoken between the two. The look in his eyes shows that he now sees things *differently*. He now sees *Mary* differently. Whatever confusion, fear, or uncertainty that were there before have been lifted and replaced with *comfort* and *joy* for what God has done for His people through Mary. What Joseph *couldn't* see in Mary before...he *can* see now.

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We've all had times in our lives when we felt like Joseph. Having been confronted with a situation that was perplexing. That made us afraid. That made us angry. That wasn't what we thought life was supposed to be like. That made us want to turn and walk away. That made us wonder where God was or maybe even feel abandoned by God in the situation. Maybe we're

even facing some situations like that at this very moment. And on this Holy Night, we might feel a dissonance in our hearts.

On the one hand, we feel the peace and joy of Christmas. The peace and joy of Jesus' Birth. His coming into our world to save us. We see the Christ child resting peacefully in the manger and we adore and we believe. This peace and joy we feel *right now*...on this Holy Night...in this holy church...we want to experience that in *all* parts of our lives, don't we?

On the other hand, there might be something perplexing in life that we're carrying with us, in which we can't quite see Jesus. We can see the Baby Jesus in the manger on this Holy Night and in this holy church, but we can't quite see Jesus: in our family struggles; in pressures at work; in health problems; in our addictions; in financial problems; in the problems in our society. We look for Jesus in our troubled world...but we can't quite see Him.

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The question for us then is this: If sometimes we know what it felt like to be Joseph when he couldn't see God in a situation – are we willing to also follow his example and learn from him? To open ourselves to the possibility of seeing the situation *differently*. To allow God to come into our world...into all parts of our lives...into all of our situations...and bring us the peace, joy, and healing that only He can bring?

Joseph saw Mary, pregnant with a child that was not his, and didn't know what to do.⁶ Initially, he might've felt confusion, fear, or anger. He turned and walked away from the problem.

But he remained open to God.⁷

Even in the midst of confusion, fear, and anger, he was *open* to hearing God speak to him. He made *time* for God to speak to him. He made room in his heart for God to bring him peace, joy, and healing, and to see the situation *differently*. That's what made all the difference.

The peace and joy of Christmas that we want for our lives doesn't come from *never* having a problem or *never* having something difficult to work through. The peace and joy of Christmas come from asking God to help us see His Presence in *all* the situations of our lives: the good *and* the bad; the expected *and* the unexpected; the holy *and* the sinful.

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That is what Christmas is all about. Jesus came into our world to show us that God is always with us. To save us. To heal us. To change our perspective that might cause us to wonder if God is truly with us. That causes us to think that God is with us when we're at church or when we're doing holy things, but out in the world we're on our own.

That's one of the primary reasons why we gather here at this holy church on this Holy Night. Why we gather here at this holy church every Sunday – and every day of the week. To support one another. To pray for one another. To help each other see God in all the situations of our lives. To open ourselves to allowing God to speak to us and to show us His Presence in our world and in our lives.

Being here on this Holy Night...being here every Sunday...being here every day or as often as we can...we get more and more familiar with God's Presence and get better and better at seeing His Presence in *all* parts of our lives.

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When Joseph first saw Mary pregnant, Jesus was there, but Joseph couldn't *see* him. When God helped Joseph to finally recognize that Jesus was there, Mary was the same, but Joseph was *different*.

The image of the beautiful Blessed Mother that had perplexed him and made him turn away...became the image of the beautiful Blessed Mother that comforted him and brought him joy.

This Christmas, let's ask God to give us that same special gift. He has already given us the greatest gift of Himself and His Presence in our world.⁸ Let's ask Him to make us more and more open, and to give us the additional gift to better *see* His Presence in our world – and in *all* the situations of our lives.

Merry Christmas!



The Blessed Virgin Mary in the opening scene from *The Gospel According to Matthew (Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo)*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini.

¹ Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo (The Gospel According to Saint Matthew)*, released 4 September 1964

² On the 100th anniversary of cinema in 1995, the Vatican compiled a list of “great films” divided into three categories: Religion, Values, and Art. These are not “rankings” but, rather, a representative list of “great films” in these three categories.

Emilio Ranzato, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21 July 2014 (translated from Italian)

³ Matthew 1:18

⁴ See Matthew 18:3: Jesus “said, ‘Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.’”

Also see footnote at uscbb.org/bible/matthew/18: “**Become like children:** the child is held up as a model for the disciples not because of any supposed innocence of children but because of their complete dependence on, and trust in, their parents. So must the disciples be, in respect to God.”

⁵ Matthew 1:20-21

⁶ See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos (RC)* 3: “[Joseph] did not know how to deal with Mary's ‘astonishing’ motherhood. He certainly sought an answer to this unsettling question, but above all he sought a way out of what was for him a difficult situation.”

⁷ See *RC* 25: “The same aura of silence that envelops everything else about Joseph also shrouds his work as a carpenter in the house of Nazareth. It is, however, a silence that reveals in a special way the inner portrait of the man. The Gospels speak exclusively of what Joseph ‘did.’ Still, they allow us to discover in his ‘actions’ - shrouded in silence as they are - an aura of deep contemplation.”

⁸ See John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”