

Vigil of the Nativity of the Lord
December 24, 2018
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 1: 18-25

In our Gospel tonight we heard about St. Joseph changing his mind—not once, but twice. When he is introduced to us, he is engaged to be married to St. Mary. But we learn that before they actually got married, his fiancée was found to be pregnant. So St. Joseph changed his intention and decided to break off the engagement, assuming as any man would that his beloved had cheated on him. So that's his first change, from being engaged to deciding not to marry St. Mary. He changes back to his first intention after an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and assures St. Joseph that his fiancée is still a virgin, her Child is of the Holy Spirit, her Son will save His people from their sins, and the whole affair is the fulfillment of the prophesy from Isaiah, Chapter 7. Upon learning this, St. Joseph changes back, does as the angel had commanded him, takes St. Mary as his wife, yet does not consummate the marriage.

For St. Joseph, both changes were the reasonable response to the events at hand. The problem with his first change, however, was that he didn't have all the information he needed in order to make the right choice. And so he ended up going back to his first decision, the one God had willed for him all along. When he changed his mind, he was turning away from God's will; so he had to change back to avert disaster and to ensure he would not imperil his soul by rejecting God's will. How blessed we are that St. Joseph wasn't stubborn, that he obeyed the Lord's commands; and he now intercedes on our behalf, and for us in a particular way since this church is under his patronage.

The question of change is pertinent for Catholics, for we are often maligned for our unwillingness to change when it comes to the immutable truths handed down to us from the time of the apostles. But to say that Catholics don't like change or that the Church is against change is manifestly absurd, especially when we consider that the truth we celebrate tonight has so changed the world that we measure time according to what happened before this event (B.C.) and what happened since (A.D.). When we talk about change, we can look to the life of St. Joseph as our guide: If it is against God's will, we, too, oppose the change; and if it aligns with God's will, then we also desire the change.

What cannot change is what the Church has always taught, her teachings on matters of faith and morals. So, for example, just as St. Joseph accepted the truth of Jesus' virginal conception and birth, so the Catholic Church will always maintain with the angel of the Lord, "Behold a virgin [conceived] and [bore] a son." This teaching will never be altered or "updated", as materialists and modernists would have it. By faith we accept that Jesus was born of a virgin, and St. Mary remained a virgin throughout her life, one of the miracles upon which the Church is founded.

Nor will the Church alter her traditions, insofar as they relate to the communication of the faith they teach. Certainly there can be different traditions in the manner in which the sacraments are celebrated and offered. Our parish is a witness to this reality that disciplines from church to church can be different. But the traditions on which these varying disciplines stand will never change—for example, that there are seven sacraments offered to the faithful through the means of an all-male ministerial priesthood instituted by Christ Himself. This tradition will never change.

So where and when does the Church encourage and celebrate change? What change does the Church want to see, every day, even every hour? Our Gospel tonight gives us the answer: When *we* change to align our wills with God's will, the Church not only celebrates such change, but actually exists to help accomplish it. Just as St. Joseph changed at God's behest, so we who follow Jesus do the same.

The change then is from bad to good and from better to best. The economy of grace that Jesus came to earth to institute provides us, God's children, with the very means to become more like God, to turn away from sin and embrace righteousness, to become holy as the Lord is holy. Through the sacraments, we receive the grace we need to align our wills with God's own will, and then the additional graces to live into that will. God doesn't appear to us in a dream as He did to St. Joseph, for we get something even better—not just God's Word, but His very life, to do as He says.

The Church effects change, therefore, by changing the lives of its members. When God's grace softens our hardened hearts and turns us from miserable sinners into joyful saints, the societies that Christians inhabit change, as well. Earlier this month we celebrated the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which marked the day, December 12, 1531, when the change began in Mexico from a nation of blood-thirsty cannibals into a people willing to lay down their lives for Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Before the sixteenth century was over, the first Mexican martyr had died at the age of twenty-five in Nagasaki, Japan. St. Philip of Jesus had gone East as a missionary and gave his life for the Faith only sixty-six years after Mexico's conversion. To put that in perspective, consider that it took the United States two hundred and five years to produce its first martyr for the faith, Blessed Stanley Rother, killed in Guatemala in 1981.

Today Mexico is awash in violence because the United States is awash in drugs. South of the border at least 200,000 people have died in the drug war that began in 2006, and lately about 60,000 people a year die in our country from opioid abuse. Would not both nations like to see a change, the sort of change that leads people to die that others may live, a heritage that both Mexico and the United States once possessed, but today seem to have forgotten? Would not both nations be better served if their citizens changed from bad to good and from better to best? It is not the Church's teachings or traditions that need to change, but her people. Like St. Joseph, they need to go back to their first intention, to realign their wills with the will of God, to honor the Lord whose birth both nations celebrate tonight.

One great paradox of our Faith is that to effect the change God desires in the hearts and societies of His people, the Church He founded cannot change. Yes, her children can become holier, we can grow in our devotion to Him who became like us so that we can be more like Him. But He has changed the world by remaining unchanging. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever; and if we want our lives and our common life to be transformed, to be transfigured, we must begin each year by resolving to allow His grace to enter our hearts and change us for the better. We who worship at St. Joseph Church can be the first to advocate for the way of St. Joseph. If we want to avert disaster and bring new life to the world, we have to get back to the path we first trod.