

This column was originally printed in the March 2015 issue of New Earth, the magazine for the Diocese of Fargo.

## **Mary and Joseph: Models of Discipleship**

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The month of March is the heart of the season of Lent, but it also offers us two beautiful liturgical celebrations: the Solemnity of Joseph, Husband of Mary (March 19), and the Solemnity of the Annunciation (March 25). On both of these occasions, the Church considers the faithful response of two humble persons to the will of God: Mary and Joseph.

On Mar. 25, we will celebrate the Annunciation, the moment when God, through the angel Gabriel, revealed to Mary that she was to be the mother of his Son. And, in that pivotal moment, Mary uttered her yes and gave her consent to God's amazing plan: "Let it be done to me according to your word." Undoubtedly, Mary was surprised by the message of the angel. She could never have imagined what Gabriel would tell her about her role in salvation history. Mary was probably a teenage girl, the daughter of a humble family. She was betrothed to a carpenter and expected to be married and have a family, as most young girls did. But when she heard the news of God's plan, she set her own plans aside and allowed herself to be a vessel, a dwelling place for the Most High. The Incarnation of our Lord, which we celebrate on the Solemnity of the Annunciation, is at the heart of our faith. And, we come to this mystery only through the assent of Mary to God's invitation. She is accurately described as the first disciple of the Son of God.

### **Mary: woman of courage, strength**

We are all familiar with the many beautiful works of art that represent Mary, and unfortunately some of them present her as a sort of china doll: fragile and delicate. But, we should never forget that Mary was a woman of courage and strength. She willingly accepted God's plan to carry his Son. She travelled the long, rough journey to Bethlehem just days before she gave birth to Jesus. She fled with Joseph and Jesus to Egypt when the child was in danger. She spoke to Jesus in a moment of need at the wedding feast of Cana. She stood by her Son at the foot of the cross, and as Pope Francis tells us, she "also experienced the martyrdom of the Cross....She lived her Son's passion to the depths of her soul." Can there be any doubt of Mary's strength?

### **Joseph: compassionate protector**

Joseph is the quiet man of the New Testament who was privileged to hold and protect the incarnate Son of God. Joseph too had a plan for his life. He was betrothed to Mary, and obviously was surprised to find that she was with child before they were married. Here we see the compassion of Joseph, who wished to preserve Mary from harm. He could have fallen into bitterness and exposed her to shame, and then continued on with his life as he pleased. But, his love for Mary moved him to protect her, even before he knew the full truth of her situation. And when he finally heard the voice of God reassuring him, Joseph believed. He was a man of faith who put his trust in God, even though his own plans would have to change. He was a man of courage, who accepted a mysterious call from God to be a husband to Mary and a father to Jesus, with all the unknown perils that would come with such a calling. Joseph was a loving and protective father, who took his family to safety in Egypt and who went in search of Jesus when he was lost in the temple of Jerusalem. Joseph remains silent in the Sacred Scriptures, but his

silence speaks volumes about his character and his holiness. He allowed himself to be an instrument in the hands of God, a chosen disciple who would place himself at God's disposition.

### **Attentive, responsive to God**

Both Mary and Joseph were attentive to the voice of God, and they give us an example to follow in prayer. Each of them reflected on the path that God placed before them and his intervention in their lives. Pope Francis tells us, "St. Joseph, together with Mary, share a single common center of attention: Jesus. They accompany and nurture the growth of the Son of God made man...reflecting on everything that happened. In the Gospels, St. Luke twice emphasizes the attitude of Mary, which is also that of St. Joseph: she 'kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.' (2:19,51)." How easy it is in our noisy world to tune out the quiet but persistent voice of God in our own hearts, and how much we can learn from Mary and Joseph. No two persons looked upon the face of Jesus more than they did, and they show us the importance of our own contemplation of the Savior. They teach us to listen, to be attentive and to respond when God speaks. Most of us can't claim to be visited by angels, but none should doubt that God draws near to us and makes himself known to us.

In our times of exaggerated self-promotion, Mary and Joseph offer us a model of self-effacement and humble regard for others. During this holy season of Lent, when we hear the Gospel imperative to die to self, Joseph and Mary show us the way. Each of them had to die to self so that the Son of God might be born and grow to manhood as our Savior. They made personal sacrifices so the saving plan of God might come to fulfillment, even when they could not know all that would be required of them.

It might seem unusual to turn our attention to Mary and Joseph just as we begin the season of Lent. But, as we celebrate the great liturgical feasts of March, it seems to me that these two saints offer us excellent models of discipleship. They teach us generosity, docility, self-denial, prayerfulness, courage, diligence and the importance of sacrificial love. In their humble, ordinary way, they give us an extraordinary example of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. As we make our way through this holy season, Mary and Joseph can be our guides to Jesus. Let us learn from them, and with them follow our Savior more closely.