

“Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” The angel Gabriel says to Joseph. Joseph, the just man, had wanted to divorce her quietly because he was confused and troubled about the pregnancy of Mary. Did Joseph know, or could he even accept, that Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit? In Matthew we read that prior to Mary and Joseph living together “she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” Joseph, who thought he was in a normal betrothal and awaiting marriage, now sees that there is something different. We may not have absolute certainty but, Mt 1: 18 leads us to believe that it is a very real possibility that Joseph had come to know that the pregnancy was of God. His betrothed was consecrated to God, and now pregnant. Perhaps out of fear or humility, he did not want to touch her. He considered himself unworthy to care for her, this young woman upon whom the Holy Spirit had descended. Has God set her apart? Is she to be the mother of the Messiah? We must remember that St. Joseph had holy fear for he was a just man. He followed the ways of God. An angel sent by God, brings clarity and strength for Joseph to continue his betrothal which has become a sacred mission. St. Bernard of Clairvaux speaks to this in his writing of holy fear and humble unworthiness.

"Why did he wish to leave her? Listen, now, no longer to my opinion, but to that of the Fathers. The reason why Joseph wished to leave Mary is that same for which Peter distances himself from the Lord by saying, *depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner*; this is also the reason why the centurion left his home while saying: *Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof*. And so, Joseph, considering himself unworthy and a sinner, said to himself that such a great person, whose marvelous and superior dignity he admired, could not deign to live together with him. He saw, with sacred astonishment, that she bore a special quality of the divine presence, and while not being able to understand this mystery, he wished to leave her. Peter dreaded the greatness of the power, the centurion feared the majesty of the presence; Joseph, also, being human, feared the novelty of so great a marvel, the profundity of the mystery: that is why he wished to leave her secretly. You are astonished that Joseph considers himself unworthy of the company of that holy pregnant Virgin, and you notice that St. Elizabeth could remain in her presence only by maintaining a respected fear. She indeed says: *Whence is it that God should deem me worthy of this favor that the Mother of my God should come to me?* There is the reason Joseph wanted to leave her."

St. Joseph respected Mary's holiness and more importantly, the identity of the Son. He accepts the responsibility of guarding and protecting the family. This is no small easy task, as it demands holy virtue. In conjunction with this is the Church teaching on the perpetual virginity of Mary. The Church has always held the teaching of the perpetual virginity of Mary, and St. Thomas Aquinas can help us understand this in ST III. Q 28. art 3. It would have been abhorrent for Joseph to have known Mary carnally for four reasons: first, this would have been “derogatory to Christ's perfection: for as He is in His Godhead the Only-begotten of the Father, being thus His Son in every respect perfect, so it was becoming that He should be the only-begotten son of His Mother, as being her perfect offspring.” Secondly, it would have been an insult to the Holy Spirit, “whose shrine was the virginal womb, where God the Holy Spirit had formed the flesh of Christ.” Thirdly, this is

“derogatory to the dignity and holiness of God's mother: for she would seem to be most ungrateful, were she not content with such a Son; and were she, of her own accord, by carnal intercourse to forfeit that virginity which had been miraculously preserved in her.” Fourthly, carnal relations between St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary would dare to say that Joseph “attempted to violate her whom by the angel's revelation he knew to have conceived by the Holy Spirit.”

Joseph had to have virtue to stay with Mary during the betrothal and to protect and guide this small holy family. His mission in life does not end with the birth of Jesus. He will stand by Mary and her newborn son and in this is the strong and confident affirmation of the grace of God sent to act within him. Perhaps, this is a different way to look at Joseph in a day and age when humility before God is so absent. When we parade around on earth as if we were gods and the sources of our own existence, it is difficult to accept the humility of a man, weak and a sinner, who so relied on God's grace to be strong, chaste, and loving.