Meditations: 28 December, The Holy Innocents

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during these days of the Christmas season. The topics are: the Child Jesus is born amid suffering; Saint Joseph acts with faith and

realism; the Holy Innocents and their mothers' pain.

- The Child Jesus is born amid suffering

- Saint Joseph acts with faith and realism

- The Holy Innocents and their mothers' pain

RISE, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him (*Mt* 2:13). With these brief words, the angel awakens Joseph in order to save the life of the Child Jesus. Perhaps we have been struck by the fact that this time there are no words of comfort: *fear not*; this time there are truly reasons to fear because what is about to happen is dramatic. A king, out of envy and fear, seeks the Child to kill him. Jesus has mortal enemies while still just an infant.

But Joseph doesn't let himself be overcome by fear. He gently wakes up Mary. Yesterday they enjoyed so much the visit of the Magi. The aroma of incense and myrrh is still strong in the house. And yet now they have to flee quickly, to leave without attracting attention.

We can learn from the striking contrast in this Gospel scene, never losing sight of the suffering amid which God wanted to become a Child. "To contemplate the manger also means to contemplate this cry of pain, to open our eyes and ears to what is going on around us, and to let our hearts be attentive and open to the pain of our neighbors, especially where children are involved. It also means realizing that that sad chapter in history is still being written today. To contemplate the manger in isolation from the world around us would make Christmas into a lovely story that inspires warm feelings but

robs us of the creative power of the Good News that the Incarnate Word wants to give us. The temptation is real."[1]

IN THE HEART of Mary, the prophecy of Simeon begins to make itself felt: *a sword will pierce through your own soul also* (*Lk* 2:35). The mother of Christ is becoming used to leaving right away, without unnecessary delays. Now there is no time even to say goodbye. Why is Jesus a threat to Herod? Mary and Joseph may not understand it, but they don't try to judge the divine plans. They don't rebel. Before leaving they pray for God's protection and blessing on this new journey. The difficulties don't daunt them, although they fear for the Child's life.

Joseph perhaps is once again assailed by the same uncertainty as on previous occasions: when facing Mary's pregnancy, when they have to

leave for Bethlehem a few days before the Child's birth, the lack of room in the inn and now the need to flee in the middle of the night. Saint Josemaría was impressed by Joseph's reaction: "Have you noticed what a man of faith he is? ... How readily he obeys! *Take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt,* the divine messenger commands him. And he does it. He believes in the work of the Holy Spirit!"[2] Jesus' earthly father has accepted his mission and knows that a minute's delay can be harmful. He sees Mary's complete trust in God and in himself, and decides to leave in the middle of the night.

"Saint Joseph was the first to be charged with protecting the joy of salvation. Faced with the atrocious crimes that were taking place, Saint Joseph – the model of an obedient and loyal man – was capable of recognizing God's voice and the mission entrusted to him by the

Father. Because he was able to hear God's voice, and was docile to his will, Joseph became more conscious of what was going on around him and was able to interpret these events realistically ... Like Joseph, we need the courage to respond to this reality, to arise and take it firmly in hand."[3]

BY HEROD'S ORDER, a platoon of soldiers leaves Jerusalem to kill *all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men* (*Mt* 2:16). The entire city of David is filled with the cries of the innocent children and their mothers. *Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more"* (*Mt* 2:17-18).

These children have given their lives for Jesus.[4] They die without even knowing that they die. Their mothers see their innocent lives cut short and they don't know why. There is apparently no explanation for this event; it presents the seemingly useless and unjust suffering of children who seal with their own lives the truth that they do not yet know. Mary's heart embraces these mothers broken by pain, without enough tears to bewail so much suffering. She doesn't understand it, but she knows that it has a meaning and possibly begins to realize that God's plans will not go ahead without great sacrifice.

Human language is speechless in the face of such suffering. Mary will keep this event in her heart her whole life. Those Holy Innocents gave witness to Christ, *"non loquendo sed moriendo,"*[5] not by speaking but by dying, *as first fruits for God and the*

Lamb (*Rev* 14:4). Perhaps after her own Son had died Mary spoke with some of those women from Bethlehem. It would have been impossible to console them, but surely she would have had words to calm and cure those hearts. She knew that the lives of those Holy Innocents had now been united with that of her divine Son.

[1] Francis, Letter to Bishops on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, 28 December 2016.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *In Dialogue with the Lord,* meditation "Saint Joseph, our Father and Lord," no. 3.

[3] Francis, Letter to Bishops on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, 28 December 2016.

[4] Cf. Saint Augustine, Sermon 373 on the Epiphany.

[5] Collect of the Mass