

ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE PODCAST

## BE STILL: A CHRISTMAS REFLECTION

MSGR. FREDERICK DOLAN

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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Those words of Scripture help us today to enter this time of prayer. Those words that say very simply, “Be still and see that I am God.” *Vacate et videte quoniam ego sum Deus.* “Be still,” *vacate*. Our word “vacation” comes from that Latin verb, *vacate*. Come to a screeching halt. “Be still and see that I am God.”

We crave the silence of this prayer so that we can take in all the lessons that the Lord wants to teach us. We marvel at the rapt attention of Mary and Joseph. That focus of the shepherds and in a few days, the Magi. None of them can take their eyes off the newborn. God has showered us with his mercy.

As we, as we behold the child, we realize that God is showing us what he had in mind when he created the human being. After all, we are beholding perfect God and perfect man. God is showing us his mercy. As St. John the Evangelist says, “God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son.” And this is the child upon whom we are gazing.

We realize that everything about the arrival of the Christ child was carefully, divinely choreographed. Jesus came in the fullness of time. The place, the circumstances, everything was carefully prepared, which means that there are so many lessons for us to learn; lessons about how to live our humanity to the fullest. God has come not only to unleash our power of loving and adoring God, but also to give us a model on how to become more fully human.

There are very important lessons for our spiritual life. In the first place, a sense of mission in the world. Everyone in this very touching scene in Bethlehem has this very special, this palpable sense of mission, this seriousness of purpose. If any of us has been lucky enough to come in touch with an Olympic athlete, or at least someone who’s determined to get to the Olympics, we know what seriousness of purpose looks like. We see it in that person’s eyes.

They develop that capacity to focus on that which is really important and to dismiss with a single gesture the things that are not important. In the letter to the Hebrews, we read, “A body you have given me Lord. Behold, I come to do Your will.” For us, what this means is that nothing, nothing in our life lies outside the scope of our mission. And that mission, of course is to seek holiness and to bring others to God.

In the case of Jesus, that mission obviously was very, very special. There was a get-together in 1973, if I’m not mistaken, a get-together with St. Josemaria in Rome, when at a certain point, someone placed in the arms of St. Josemaria that model of the Christ child. This was something that took place every year. But in this specific moment, St. Josemaria looked at the child with a special seriousness.

And then said, in a rather low voice, “This child came to this Earth in order to die.” Every single other human being dies as a necessary result of, of living. But in the case of the Second Person of the Trinity, he came to this Earth specifically in order to die for us. Well, that gives us a fantastic model for our own self-giving, our own determination to fulfill the will of God.

And that leads us, we ask Jesus for this, it leads us to want to surrender ourselves to that will of God. You may have heard that very simple, very beautiful Spanish Christmas carol, that starts off, “Beautiful child. Beautiful child, in your presence, I surrender myself. I give up. You have conquered me completely.” This is a very loose translation, to say the least.

But going back to this seriousness of purpose for us, imitating not only the Christ child but those Olympic athletes. A book was published 30 years ago this year, you may recall, a book whose title speaks about seven habits, *The Seven Habits of Highly [Successful] People*. At a certain point in the book, the author talks about knowing how to distinguish between important things, unimportant things, urgent things, and things that are not urgent.

And as you may recall, he has a grid where one axis is precisely important versus not important, and the other axis is urgent and not urgent. And he says that most people spend way too much time in the quadrant of things that are not important. But they are urgent, or at least in the mind of the person, they have become urgent.

We know people like this, perhaps we wander in, we drift into that quadrant too often, where we find ourselves rushing around doing a lot of different things with a sensation that all of them are urgent, possibly because we’ve put them off too long.

But if we are honest with ourselves and we step back and take a look, we realize they really were not that important; whereas those who are highly successful, they find ways of spending most of their time in that other quadrant of doing things that are really important, that really address those ultimate goals of theirs. But at the same time, they are not urgent because they are doing them with plenty of lead time.

At this very moment, in this time of prayer, we are in exactly the right quadrant, doing something that is very important. And given the fact that it’s not urgent, gives us this joy of knowing we are doing exactly what we should be doing, adoring the Christ child, coming to a screeching halt, enjoying his presence, and learning from him.

Another lesson from this marvelous moment, as we look at Our Lady, this new mother, the virtue of hope. Mary never lost hope. And we can’t imagine how stressful it must have been, especially for St. Joseph, not only during the long trip to Nazareth, the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, but then searching for a place to stay, for a place for Mary to give birth.

And yet it is so easy for us to imagine Joseph going from one place to another, each inn crowded with people jammed there for the Census. Then looking at Mary, still seated upon the donkey, and seeing those eyes of reassurance and seeing that, that look in Mary’s eyes, “Don’t worry, Joseph. God will provide.” The fact is that Mary never forgot those words of the angel. Nine months earlier, the Archangel Gabriel

had said to her, “He will be great. He will be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him, the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom, there will be no end.”

Mary never forgot those words for the rest of her life. And those words gave her such assurance, such hop, such confidence, even in the midst of, of incredibly adverse turns of event leading up to Our Lord’s Passion and Death. Even as we gaze upon Mary and Joseph, and above all the Christ Child, we renew our confidence, our confidence in all that God is working in the life of each one of us.

And at the same time, we say to the Lord: “Increase my faith, increase my hope, increase my love.” Furthermore, with one glance at the circumstances of Our Lord’s birth, we can also say: “My Lord, increase my spirit of detachment,” because this is a very, very poor place for a king to come to the Earth. This is exactly what God had planned from all eternity. He wants us to be detached, detached to give us freedom, the freedom to love in spite of the negative circumstances.

There is a famous short story that is perfect for this time of year. The title of the story is the *Gift of the Magi*, written in 1906, and in all probability each one of us read this when we were in grade school. And without giving it away, this is a great homework assignment, but suffice it to say that the story begins in the apartment of a very young couple in New York City at the turn of the century.

The young woman is counting all that they had in their money box, \$1.87, the day before Christmas. She was absolutely determined to give a very special gift to her husband. The one possession he had, one possession of any value, was a gold pocket watch that he had inherited. And so, the young woman was determined to purchase for her husband a gold chain for the pocket watch.

And her treasured possession was a beautiful head of hair. Very, very, very long head of hair. Well, turns out that her husband was determined to buy that one thing that she treasured, which was a set of combs for that head of hair. Well to find out what happened in that very loving household, you have to read the story. But it is very moving as a sign, as a reminder, that what really, really counts is the amount, the extent to which we love each other.

It is a wonderful antidote to the commercialization of this feast day. The more we contemplate the scene of Bethlehem, the more we try to use our imagination to fill in the gaps and to appreciate the difficult, the objectively difficult, circumstances, the more we have to ask ourselves, “How did they do it?”

After all, everything conspired to produce all the ingredients for a classic case of anxiety, of stress, many other negative emotions. And yet we know that the atmosphere that flooded that cave, that very, very poor place was flooded with peace, with serenity, with joy. And so, we ask the question, “why and how?” because we want to get there.

In a recent get-together, the Prelate of Opus Dei spoke a lot about freedom. He reminded us about a very important thought from St. Thomas Aquinas: The greater our love, the greater our freedom. He went on to say that in any given circumstance, we have this freedom to love, and the greater we love, the more free we are.

It is a call to, as he put it, to reconquer our freedom, to rectify in any given situation, to, you could say, auto-correct any kind of negative sentiment or emotion that's trying to get in there, and reconquer our freedom by injecting love into that situation.

Well, we can imagine Mary and Joseph some days ago departing from Nazareth, joining a caravan of a lot of other people heading to Bethlehem, and finding themselves surrounded by all sorts of people who were grumbling, complaining, anxious, not at all happy with the fact that the ruler of the land had called for a census, forcing them to make that long journey.

Even in the midst of that negativity, Mary and Joseph were simply flooded with the joy of knowing that they were being accompanied, they were accompanying, the Son of the Most High. So, Mary especially but Joseph also obviously spent that whole trip saying, "I can't wait to see you." They were immune, oblivious to all the negativity taking place around them. We, with our spiritual life, we have all that it takes to reconquer our freedom; to, in a very real sense, become immune to negativity, especially on a day like today.

Well, finally, that momentous event in Bethlehem speaks volumes about being open to absolutely everyone. We consider the setting: A young couple that is very poor, some rough shepherds accustomed to spending most of their life outside showing up very shortly after Our Lord's birth. Some days later, a kind of royalty from the East, the wise men. The Lord has choreographed this for us also. He is showing us the importance of being open to absolutely everyone. Recently, the Prelate of Opus Dei wrote a long letter about friendship, speaking precisely about this.

At one point, he says, "Christian friendship does not exclude anyone. With a big heart, it needs to be intentionally open to every person. The Pharisees criticized Jesus, as though being a friend of tax collectors and sinners were something bad. [We who want to imitate Our Lord, within our own smallness], 'we too do not exclude anyone; we do not refuse any soul a place in our love for Christ.'"

These words of the Prelate can help us to think with a spirit of examination: "Do I have this kind of openness? Am I eager to deal with all different kinds of people?" As the Prelate goes on to say, "We need to foster a firm, loyal, sincere friendship, a Christian friendship, with all our colleagues. We have to do this with everyone regardless of their personal circumstances."

Even now, at this point in our prayer, we can be thinking about people in the neighborhood, people at the office. We have to be thinking with a great deal of gratitude, simply because we are surrounded by people from so many different countries, so many different cultures. This is a great richness. And there are so many, so many lessons we can learn as we dive into those different cultures, as we listen.

In this letter, the Prelate goes on to say, "True friendship also means making a heartfelt effort to understand the convictions of our friends, even though we may never come to share them or accept them."

The Prelate spent ten days here in Canada. In each of the cities he visited, he was asked more or less the same thing, different questions, different variations on the basic theme: "At my office, in my neighborhood, I come in touch with people who have very different opinions, very different visions of life. Many times, I don't agree with them. How should I handle that?"

And in every single case, the Prelate responded by saying, “Friendship. Be their friend. Get better and better at listening and coming to appreciate what they’re saying. And then through friendship, as their friend, you will have every right to let them know your point of view because you’re their friend.”

Well, going back to this letter that is so helpful: “Our friends help us to understand ways of viewing life that are different from our own, that enrich our inner world, and, when the friendship is deep, that enable us to experience the world in a different way.”

Well, these words obviously ring so true. That when we listen, and when we are really interested in learning, when we’re open, our world becomes vastly more interesting, more fascinating. “This is, in the end, a true sharing in others’ sentiments, which is sharing in their life and in their experiences. Loving others means seeing and affirming them just as they are, with their problems, their defects, their personal history, their social surroundings, their own times for drawing close to Jesus.”

Each of us can think of situations where we have experienced this. Where, by being patient, by really listening, by showing those to whom we are listening that we are really and truly listening with the desire to get to know exactly what they’re thinking, what they’re experiencing, great things happen.

And so, the Prelate finishes by saying, “Therefore, to build a true friendship, we need to develop the capacity to look at other people with affection to the point where we see them with the eyes of Christ. We need to cleanse our way of looking [at, of rejecting any prejudice, looking without prejudice, to] learn to discover the good in each person, and [to] renounce the desire to make them ‘in our own image.’” Well, this vision of friendship that the Prelate offers to us was there to a perfect degree, there in that stable, that cave, in Bethlehem; a total openness, a total acceptance of each person who was there.

Well, as we gaze upon the Holy Family, as we realize that they, each of those three marvelous people, each of them is looking at us with eyes of tremendous love, of understanding, of acceptance, we say to them: “Do whatever it takes to give me that same degree of love. Help me to contemplate. Help me to develop the capacity to be still, to see that you, Jesus, are God. Help me to grow in love so that I can grow in freedom. Help me to grow in detachment so that I can be happy regardless of the circumstances. And help me to become a better and better, more understanding friend of all those around me.”

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask for your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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