

Fourth Sunday of Advent

“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.” (Isaiah 9:5)

I’m very joyful because I just got to baptize my 18th nephew.

“Behold, Colette conceived and bore a firstborn son, and she named him... SEAMUS.”

Close enough.

He will be great, and today he became a **son of the Most High**.

The fruitful multiplication of my immediate family seems to be growing exponentially.

The same is true in a parish family. One of my favorite parts of being a priest is when couples tell me they are pregnant. And with thousands of parishioners, I get to hear an announcement almost every week. It never gets old. **New life is new joy.**

One of my friends even went to a papal audience with her husband, and when the Pope walked by, she showed him the sonogram on her iPhone. With a big smile, the Holy Father blessed her and the baby in her womb.

Sometimes couples are so grateful for the grace of the sacraments or the help they’ve received from the Church that they ask, “Father, how can I repay you?” If you know anything about me, I never waste an opening like that.

I always say the same thing: “The best gift you can give me is a new baby to baptize.”

I get a variety of reactions.

But it works. In fact, a few years ago, on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, two couples, who at one point had both been struggling with the Church's teaching on contraception, both told me they were pregnant.

One handed me an envelope with a picture of her sonogram. I have it framed. I'm so proud of them. It says, "Merry Christmas, Father."

It's amazing to see the joy of a couple when they find out they're pregnant. But it's also amazing to see how quickly they change, how quickly they grow and mature as they embrace their vocation as parents.

They don't change because a new idea has entered their heads, but because a **new life has seized their hearts.**

They have encountered a new person, a person they helped create, a person for whom they are now responsible, a person who gives their life and their marriage a decisive direction.

The three readings today share something powerful in common. **They're all about birth.**

The First Reading: "Behold, the Virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel, God-with-us."

The Second Reading: "Jesus Christ was born from the line of David according to the flesh."

The Gospel: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about."

This Sunday is all about the **joy of new birth.**

It's easy to talk about spiritual birth, but we can forget the power of physical birth. The presence of God enters Catholic families **concretely** through the birth of a new child.

As Christian parents, one of the most important ways you welcome Jesus is by welcoming new children.

Mark 9:37 says, "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me; and whoever receives me receives not me but the One who sent me."

So why are so few children born in the United States and Western countries? It's definitely not because of economic factors.

You'd think the birth rate would increase as a nation gets wealthier. But the opposite is true. The richer the nation, the fewer the children. Many Western countries are below replacement levels.

As we place our trust in wealth and comfort, we risk forgetting our vocation. We forget to trust God, that if He sends us new life, He will not only sustain that life, but make the whole family flourish.

But the reason is deeper than wealth. **It is the lack of hope.**

Getting married is always an act of faith. And bringing a child into the world is always an act of hope. Nothing can be done in the world without hope.

We need hope like we need oxygen.

Earthly hopes aren't enough, home, job, health, successful children. Even if we get these things, they will deceive us and betray us if there isn't a hope in God that supports them.

Our hope in God isn't just a dream, but a confidence that what God says will happen, will happen.

Mary had this hope, which allowed her to accept the gift of new life from God even in her poverty and lowliness. God enters her womb to become man, and she welcomes Him with joyful hope. This doesn't just change her. It changes history. It brings salvation to humanity.

Joseph had this hope when he accepted Mary and Jesus, although he couldn't explain her pregnancy. Joseph had joyful hope, that what God says will happen, will happen.

When hope is reborn in a human situation, everything looks different, even if circumstances haven't changed.

Hope is a theological virtue that comes directly from God. It is a force that works miracles.

God wants to work miracles in our families through the gift of new children. Because with new children comes new love, and with new love **always comes Christ.**

God draws near with His grace in a concrete way at the moment a new soul is created. Do we welcome Him? Do we let Him draw near, or do we reject Him and push Him away?

Remember that a woman's womb is one of the sanctuaries of the universe. Much like the sanctuary in a church, it is to be treated with dignity, respect, and profound reverence.

It's the only place where life grows in love. Spouses are called to protect this sanctuary, because the devil wants us to desecrate it and to sterilize it.

Even some doctors violate the Hippocratic oath to "do no harm." They pressure women with fear to stifle the gift of their fertility through contraception and even to seek sterilization.

Recently in Vietnam, a photo circulated of a newborn holding an intrauterine device (IUD), the very device his mother used to avoid pregnancy.

But if you were listening closely, I just lied to you.

An intrauterine device is not designed to avoid pregnancy. It is designed to prevent an already conceived embryo from successfully implanting in the mother's uterus: a process called nidation.

We need to call a spade a spade.

People may joke about a baby holding an IUD, but that image should stop us cold. Because these devices, and most chemical contraceptives, do not stop conception. They stop implantation.

Which means they cause abortions. Micro-abortions. Hidden abortions. But real abortions nonetheless. And an unknown number.

In fact, modern medical definitions shifted the meaning of pregnancy so that it begins not at conception, but at nidation, the moment of implantation. That redefinition allows methods that act after fertilization to be CALLED contraception rather than abortion.

No one can ultimately prevent pregnancy. Nature finds a way. God decides.

What we can do is make the womb hostile. We can poison the sanctuary. We can create conditions so toxic that a newly formed human life never has a chance to take hold.

And when we do that, we need to be honest about what we're choosing.

Mary gave birth to her Savior. As Catholics, openness to children is essential to our vocation, the health of our marriages, and our salvation. Our children are God's way of saving us, in whatever form they come, biological children, adopted children, or spiritual children.

Our culture likes to treat children as an inconvenient side effect of marriage, but children are the key to marriage. The Church even calls them **“the crowning glory of marriage”** (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1652).

They extract love from our hearts that we wouldn't otherwise give or even know how to give. They rip it out of us. They save us from our selfishness. They give us true wealth because they bring the presence of God.

What God says will happen, will happen. And here's what Jesus says: "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me."

This applies to whoever welcomes a poor and abandoned child, to whoever adopts and loves a child. But it applies above all to two parents who, loving each other in faith and hope, open themselves to a new life.

Think about it. Christ enters our world in the form of a child. He wants to give us new life, hope, and maturity, not because of some new idea, but because of an encounter with a new person who gives our life a decisive direction.

This Christmas, speak to your spouse. Pray together. Renew your vocation to be open to new life, to follow the amazing plan God has for your family.

And if you're a couple already trying and struggling, you're awesome.

If you are a grandparent, offer your prayers, but also babysit, visit, and remember, we never retire from this vocation and this gift. When you hear someone is expecting, celebrate and support them.

Then the Catholic couple, filled with hope at the news of a pregnancy, will spontaneously speak Isaiah's Christmas prophecy:

**"You have spread joy, you have made happiness increase,
for unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given!"**