

**REVERENTIAL FEAR**  
**Christmas Vigil, December 24, 2020**  
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The deacon formation process, from application to ordination, is five years. During this time, the Church looks at the candidate and the candidate looks to the Church, both discerning if there is a true call to serve God's people and faith community. Throughout my own formation journey I shared many of my hopes, dreams, disappointments, doubts and fears with my dad. During one such sharing time, I remember telling him, "I just don't know if I should continue on with formation... the more and more I learn about our faith and our church, the more and more I feel unworthy to be doing this," I said. "Being a deacon is a big responsibility and I'm actually fearful when I'm in the sanctuary... being so very close to God." Without taking a millisecond to think about what I had said, my dad responded, "Son, we're all unworthy and fearful... who is wholly worthy to stand before the Almighty?" These feelings of fear and unworthiness is what some saints and theologians believe Joseph was feeling as told in our

Gospel tonight. This particular feeling is called “reverential fear” and, believe it or not, this type of fear is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Saint Matthew opens his Gospel by telling us that Mary and Joseph are betrothed. Betrothal should not be confused with our modern-day engagement. In ancient Judaism, betrothal was the first stage of a two-stage marriage process. The man and woman exchange consent before witnesses and they are considered legally married but at this point do not yet live together. The woman would stay with her parents for up to a year before moving in with her husband and consummating the marriage... this was known as the “coming together.” Saint Matthew tells us Mary conceived before Joseph and her lived together... before the second stage in their marriage.

Since Mary is found with child before that coming together and while legally married, Joseph is finds himself in a great dilemma. Matthew describes him as a “righteous man” meaning he would be careful to follow Jewish law. The Torah prescribed stoning until death

for a woman had who committed adultery. However, the Romans of the time forbid capital punishment so, as it often was in these cases, a public trial would be held.

Several views on Joseph's quandary have emerged in Catholic tradition. If Joseph knew Mary was pregnant and certainly not by him, he would have suspected adultery. However, Joseph did not want to expose Mary to the shame of a public trial so he elects to divorce her quietly meaning private papers of divorce would be drawn up and presented to two witnesses. No public trial. No shame. No disgrace. Joseph would extend a mercy to Mary.

Another view is that Mary likely shared with Joseph the news that the Angel Gabriel announced to her. Aside of her joy, there was almost certainly apprehension on her part as to how Joseph would receive the news of her conception. Saints Aquinas, Basil, Ephraim and others say Joseph may have responded with religious awe over the mystery that God with working in Mary... he decides to release Mary from the marriage not out of anger or shame but out of humble, holy fear that

he's unworthy to be the husband of Mary let alone the earthly father of the Messiah.

We then hear the angel tell Joseph "Do not be afraid." The same message given to Mary, "Do not be afraid." The same message given to the shepherds in the fields, "Fear not." For those counting, the passage "be not afraid" or variations of it appears in the Bible at least 365 times. This reverential fear is not the same as common fear such as when we expect some sort of punishment for a wrong. Reverential fear is an awe in and of God, a love of Christ... a realization, faith and belief of being in the presence of the I AM – the Almighty, Creator of All, the Savior of the World. This, some theologians speculate, is what Joseph was feeling when Mary tells him the Good News.

And so, Joseph does as the angel commands... he takes Mary into his home and names the baby Jesus. Joseph, like Mary, shows perfect obedience to God, becoming a vital part of the Holy Family.

It takes an angel with the words "fear not" to calm Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, and we must follow their example, walk a mile in

their sandals. Yes, reverential fear is a gift from the Holy Spirit but this gift can be corrupted by Satan. We may feel, may hear God's call to serve the poor, visit the homebound, be a reader, Eucharistic minister or a catchiest only to silence that call by telling oneself, "I'm not worthy. I'm not smart enough. I get too nervous. Someone else will do it." Just imagine for a moment if Joseph let his doubts and suspicions get the better of him... if he fell prey to Satan corrupting his reverential fear with a mask of holiness and righteousness. We must fight this twisting of our love for Christ and church, and as Joseph did, follow God's call to wherever that may be. Reverential fear should never hold us back but should always propel us forward!

In my pocket is a now well-worn coin that bears an image of Pope Saint John Paul and a quote: "Have no fear of moving into the unknown. Simply step out fearlessly knowing that I am with you." I am still fearful when I am at God's altar or about to receive his Body and Blood... sometimes so much so that my hands shake. During those times, I know that the Holy Spirit is with me. You too can be filled with

Christ's love and joy by "simply stepping out fearlessly." I invite you to take Jesus' hand and walk with him.

As written at "Grace and Truth," our Gospel this evening is no sentimental fairy tale or some meaningless side story to Christmas... it is the Annunciation to Joseph. When Joseph follows God's command, we find that hope is born. And, as we learn tonight, that hope comes in the midst of scandal, stigma and fear. God will soon be born into straw poverty, into a world of fear and violence that he overcomes with his love. It is a message so very important to us to today: in a world of fear, love wins.