

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we're given a beautiful account from Matthew's Gospel on the nature of St. Joseph's humble cooperation with God's plan of salvation. And as the Angel of the Lord appears to St. Joseph in a dream, the angel identifies Jesus as *Emmanuel*, which is a title that is first used in the ancient book of the Prophet Isaiah sometime between the late 8th century BC and the beginning of the 7th Century BC.

This title, *Emmanuel*, which in Hebrew means "God is with us," is central to the Advent season and our preparations for Christmas and the Second Coming of Christ. We hear this divine title in the beautiful Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" which we sing every year. And this divine title, *Emmanuel*, is so appropriate for our Lord Jesus because it describes the powerful reality of the Incarnation, the fact that God became man and freely took on our human nature in order to save us from our sins and from death itself.

In Jesus, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, ***God is truly with us***. Brothers and sisters, one of the greatest expressions of love is

closeness—and closeness manifested through physical presence. Simply being physically present to someone can be a powerful act of love.

The nature of relationships, especially with regards to family and friends, is defined by closeness and physical presence—being in someone’s presence and sharing in their existence. In fact, another important aspect to the definition of love is *sharing in the being of another*. Naturally, we unite ourselves with those we love, our family and friends, by *physically* being in their presence: we enjoy meals together, we hang out, we play games, watch movies, go out to grab some drinks, smoke cigars, etc.

Closeness through physical presence is an undeniably central element to any relationship. And if we simply can’t be *physically* present to one another for whatever reason, God, through the beauty of the sciences, gave us the wonderful blessings of telecommunications technology to help us to be present to one another in some way and aid our relationships: telephones, the Internet, Skype, FaceTime, Viber, WhatsApp, etc.

I'll never forget the first time we saw some of my mom's family in Sydney, Australia through Skype in 2009. It had been 6 years since my mom saw one of her sisters, my Aunt Bernadette, and the second they saw each other through Skype, they started crying uncontrollably with great joy. And my mom kept saying in her Aussie accent: "God bless the man who invented Skype!" It was an emotional and awesome moment for my family. And ever since then, we've been able to *see* my mom's family and friends in Australia more through Skype and FaceTime and it's been a great blessing to us.

As awesome as these telecommunications technologies are, I think most would agree that *nothing* could ever replace the importance and the necessity of *physical presence and an in-person encounter* when it comes to human relationships. Brothers and sisters, this is the beauty and power of the Incarnation, the fact that God not only became *one of us, but one with us*. Through the Incarnation and our Lord Jesus Christ, God truly entered into our daily and ordinary human existence and *became physically present to us*. The Incarnation was such a radical and powerful expression of God's love for His human creatures.

The Incarnation was God's way of emphatically reassuring us that *we are not alone*. The Incarnation was God's way of saying, "I love you and I want to be *with* you. *I am close to you*. I want to accompany you, lead you, and guide you. I'm going to walk with you and bear you upon my shoulders." The Incarnation marked the beginning of our salvation, which of course would reach its climax in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ.

After the Paschal Mystery and right before our Lord's Ascension, He made a special promise to us, saying "And behold, *I am with you always*, until the end of the age." In other words, our Lord Jesus promised us that He would never abandon us—He promised that He would *always be close to us!* Now after hearing that, one might legitimately ask: "*how exactly is the Lord still with us always?*"

Well our Savior *always keeps His promises*. While Christ Himself is in Heaven with His glorified body sitting at the right hand of the Father, *He is still mysteriously and truly present with us now*, in 2019, *through* His One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church that *He* founded almost 2,000 years ago upon St. Peter and the Apostles! Our

Lord Jesus is present to us *through* His Church's Magisterium, which is the official teaching authority comprised of the Pope and the college of bishops that was established by Christ to help, heal, teach, and guide us in the midst of a complex and challenging world that's marred by sin, suffering, and confusion.

Christ *is truly present with us most especially through* the physicality of the 7 Sacraments that He entrusted to His Catholic Church, which are the best and most certain ways to encounter Jesus in this finite world. Our Lord Jesus is truly present to us *through* the Church's liturgy, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, *which is the source and summit of our faith precisely because we worship and receive Christ our Savior in the Most Holy Eucharist!* The Lord continues to be *Emmanuel* in the Most Holy Eucharist, where He is *truly and physically* present with us: Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. This is *not* a symbolic presence but an *actual* and *Real physical presence* under the appearances of bread and wine. So yes, brothers and sisters, through His Church, *Emmanuel—God is with us!*

In contemplating God's presence with us, I think we need to ask ourselves where in my life do I need God's presence the most? Where do I feel most alone in my life? Is it in a struggle against a particular sin that seems to plague me? Is it in a difficult relationship that's burdening me? Is it in any fears or doubts I may have? Is it in my own physical health with a particular illness or condition that I'm struggling with? Is it in my past wounds that need healing?

Brothers and sisters, ***God is with us*** and He wants to be present to us in those areas of our life that are the most challenging—those parts of our life that are the darkest or may be the most embarrassing and painful. ***God wants to be with us*** in those areas of our life so that He can heal us, sanctify us, and ultimately save us and bring us to Himself. So in a few moments, as we prepare to worship and receive our Lord Jesus, Who ***is*** Emmanuel in the Most Holy Eucharist, let's invite Him into those parts of our life where we need Him the most—because His closeness and presence changes everything.