A SIGN FROM ABOVE

A friend of mine once shared with me his experience of finally settling in married life. He was a guy who always sought signs from above whenever he was about to make big decisions in life. When he noticed that all of his friends got married and settled a family, he proposed to his longtime girlfriend. But first, he asked for a sign from God that would indicate that that time was the proper time for proposing. Consulting a Bible, he glanced upon the verse of 2 Corinthians 6:2: “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor... Further affirmed by the famous words of endearment ‘so tangad parahon’ and the song ‘God Gave Me You,’ my friend proposed to the love of his life.

Many of us, perhaps thinking it practical or perhaps afraid of a negative outcome for the decisions that we make, actively seek signs. Signs guide us and portend blessings as we make our choices. In a positive way, by signs we acknowledge God’s guidance and align our future with his plan for us.

The context of the First Reading has King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel attacking Jerusalem. Although they failed to seize Judah’s capital, the house of David and his people trembled upon learning the devilish alliance. Though Judah was ruled at the time by wicked King Ahaz, God never gave up on him and commanded the prophet Isaiah to tell King Ahaz that he must trust in God’s plan and ask for a sign: “Let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky.” King Ahaz hesitated. Then the Lord himself gave a sign that would indicate his continued care for his people. Despite the stubbornness of their leaders: “A virgin will conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.”

While signs are valid sources of divine knowledge, this does not mean we must rely on asking for them at every crossroad of our lives. God has already revealed himself and his will through various signs. St. Paul encourages us to put our faith and trust in the risen Lord, the greatest sign of divine love. This Sign should lead us rather to obedience of faith: “To obey (from the Latin ob-audire, to ‘hear or listen to’) in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, art. 144). We listen to God’s word and the instructions of his Church, and both direct us as to how to attain eternal life. “Our moral life has its source in faith in God who reveals his love to us... ur duty toward God is to believe in him and to bear witness to him” (CCC art. 2087).

St. Joseph in our Gospel reading is shown as a model of faith and trust. Obeying the angel’s message, Joseph took Mary as his wife despite her mysterious pregnancy. His obedient faith enabled him to see his role in God’s plan of salvation. Joseph’s Amen, his assent to God’s invitation to save mankind, was itself a sign that Mary’s and Jesus’ future would be secure.

Obedient faith through trust will lead us to God. Like St. Joseph we are also called to respond to God’s plan for us. Yet our response must not be limited to the good that God will bestow on us. Our response must also be a sign to God that he can rely on our sharing his goodness to others. Rather than constantly asking for signs, let us reflect on how we can be signs of God’s love to others. Then each of us will discover that the next greatest sign that God gives us is not some new sign from heaven, but our fellow men and women.

This Sunday, let us prepare to receive that greatest sign of God’s love: his Son. Let us prepare ourselves so that we may be worthy to be conformed to this Sign, and thus become signs of God’s love to others.

Fr. Lawrence de Peralta, SSP

Pastoral Catechesis for the Year of Ecumenism, Interreligious Dialogue, and Indigenous People

Many Catholics have inadequate and often confused ideas about ecumenism. The term is derived biblically from two Greek terms: oikodome (the household of God) and oikomene (the whole inhabited world). Thus, ecumenism is directed toward the achievement of unity among all Christian churches, and ultimately among all religious communities.

Ecumenism envisages unceasing efforts to draw Christians together through the renewal of the churches, in order to manifest the unity that Christ wills for his followers as well as for his one and only Church. The Second Vatican Council discussed ecumenism at length and on November 21, 1964 issued an entire document on the topic: Unitatis Redintegratio (Decree on Ecumenism).

Promoting Christian Unity was envisioned by Pope John XXIII (now a canonized saint) as one important goal of Vatican II. In fact, he established in 1960 a new department in the Vatican entitled: Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. Later, Pope John Paul II (also a canonized saint) issued an encyclical on ecumenism (May 25, 1995); it bears the title Ut Unum Sint (That All Would Be One). Note that this title echoes Christ’s prayer at the last supper: “Father, may they all be one in us” (John 17:21).
THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

Entrance Antiphon
[Cf. Is 45:8]
(Recited when there is no opening song)

Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One; let the earth be opened and bring forth a Savior.

Lighting of the Advent Candles
The lighting of the fourth candle of the Advent wreath may be made after the entrance song, with the following or similar prayer:

P — Father, as our Advent pilgrimage draws to a close, we relight the candles of hope, peace, and joy. And we light the candle of love. Grant us the courage to share your love: love for life and creation, love for sinners and saints, love for the poor and the little ones. We thank you for the hope your Son gives us, for the peace he bestows, for the joy your Spirit pours into our hearts, and for the love that redeems us and shows us the way.

All — Amen.

Greeting
(The sign of the cross is made here)

P — Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
All — And with your spirit.

Introduction
(The priest may address the assembly with these or other similar words)

P — Our Gospel today focuses on Joseph. He is needed to give legal paternity to the Child and to provide him and protection to Mary and Jesus. Though Joseph is distressed at first by the condition of his betrothed, he agrees when the angel enlightens him on the mystery that surrounds Mary’s pregnancy.

Penitential Act
P — Brethren (brothers and sisters), let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries. (Pause)

P — Have mercy on us, O Lord.
All — For we have sinned against you.
P — Show us, O Lord, your mercy.
All — And grant us your salvation.
P — May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.
All — Amen.
P — Lord, have mercy.
All — Lord, have mercy.
P — Christ, have mercy.
All — Christ, have mercy.
P — Lord, have mercy.
All — Lord, have mercy.
(The Gloria is omitted, except for the Agnus Dei Mass.)

Collect
P — Let us pray. (Pause)
Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
All — Amen.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (Ps 24)

R — Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

Responsorial Psalm (Ps 24)

R — Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

E. C. Marfori

1. The Lord’s are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it. For he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. (R)
2. Who can ascend the mountain of the Lord? Or who may stand in his holy place? One whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean, whose desires are not what is vain. (R)
3. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, a reward from God his savior. Such is the race that seeks for him, that seeks the face of the God of Jacob. (R)

Second Reading (Rom 1:1-7)

The apostle Paul tells us that the Lord Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies of old, as contained in the Scriptures.

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles, among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word of the Lord.
All — Thanks be to God.
Alleluia [Mt 1:23] (Stand)

All — Alleluia, alleluia. The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel [Mt 1:18-24]

P — A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew
All — Glory to you, O Lord.

THIS IS HOW the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.

— The Gospel of the Lord.
All — Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Homily (Sit)

 Profession of Faith (Stand)

All — I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven,

(At the words that follow, up to and including and became man, all bow)

and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Prayer of the Faithful

P — In Jesus who is Emmanuel: “God-with-us” the loving mercy of the Father is made visible and tangible. With confidence, we pray:

R — Lord, hear our prayer.

C — That in times of difficulty and trial for our country, our religious and political leaders may stand firm in their reliance on God who watches over his people, we pray: (R)

C — That fathers of families may be like St. Joseph who is just, concerned for Mary, and open to God’s will, we pray: (R)

C — That young people may learn from the example of Mary and Joseph, who make Jesus the center of their lives, we pray: (R)

C — That Filipinos who find themselves away from home and family this coming Christmas may be comforted by the prayers and affection of their loved ones and by the goodwill of their neighbors, we pray: (R)

C — That as Christmas draws near, we may experience the peace, comfort, and joy that Jesus, our Savior and Emmanuel, brings, we pray: (R)

C — Let us pray for the urgent concerns of our community and our personal intentions (pause), we pray: (R)

P — God our Father, hear the prayers of your people. As we await with eager longing the coming of your Son, fill us with peace and joy in your presence.

Through Christ our Lord.
All — Amen.

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Presentation of the Gifts (Stand)

P — Pray, brethren...
All — May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and the good of all his holy Church.

Prayer over the Offerings

P — May the Holy Spirit, O Lord, sanctify these gifts laid upon your altar, just as he filled with his power the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Through Christ our Lord.
All — Amen.

Preface II of Advent

P — The Lord be with you.
All — And with your spirit.
P — Lift up your hearts.
All — We lift them up to the Lord.
P — Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
All — It is right and just.
P — It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God, through Christ our Lord.

For all the oracles of the prophets foretold him, the Virgin Mother longed for him with love beyond all telling, John the Baptist sang of his coming and proclaimed his presence when he came.

It is by his gift that already we rejoice at the mystery of his Nativity, so that he may find us
watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise.
And so, with Angels and Archangels, with Thrones and Dominions, and with all the hosts and Powers of heaven, we sing the hymn of your glory, as without end we acclaim:

All — Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

(Kneel)

**Acclamation (Stand)**

All — Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free.

**THE COMMUNION RITE**

The Lord’s Prayer

All — Our Father...
P — Deliver us, Lord...
All — For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever.

Invitation to Peace

Invitation to Communion

(Kneel)

P — Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.
All — Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

Communion Antiphon
(Is 7:14)

Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son; and his name will be called Emmanuel.

Prayer after Communion

(Stand)

P — Let us pray. (Pause)

Having received this pledge of eternal redemption, we pray, almighty God, that, as the feast day of our salvation draws ever nearer, so we may press forward all the more eagerly to the worthy celebration of the mystery of your Son’s Nativity.

Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
All — Amen.

**THE CONCLUDING RITES**

P — The Lord be with you.
All — And with your spirit.

Solemn Blessing

(Pause)

May the almighty and merciful God, by whose grace you have placed your faith in the First Coming of his Only Begotten Son and yearn for his coming again, sanctify you by the radiance of Christ’s Advent and enrich you with his blessing.
All — Amen.

P — As you run the race of this present life, may he make you firm in faith, joyful in hope, and active in charity.
All — Amen.

P — So that, rejoicing now with devotion at the Redeemer’s coming in the flesh, you may be endowed with the rich reward of eternal life when he comes again in majesty.
All — Amen.

P — And may the blessing of almighty God, the Father, and the Son, (†) and the Holy Spirit come down on you and remain with you for ever.
All — Amen.