

PROTECTORS AND TEACHERS OF THE YOUNG

As we mark the fourth week of Advent, while the world goes about preparing to celebrate Christmas, let's take some time to consider the children in our communities and around the globe who can only hope to have a home, to live and be healthy. Let's also take time to appreciate the children in our midst who yearn to be loved and to live meaningful lives.

In the past few months, floods ravaged Louisiana. While Baton Rouge was still drying out, a hurricane of powerful force tore across Haiti; and the same hurricane, slightly diminished in force, caused flooding in many communities on the East Coast. How frail is the security of the poor in the face of natural disaster! Children are the most vulnerable and most susceptible to diseases such as cholera and to the mental and emotional scars inflicted by such calamities. We contemplate with awe the efforts of health care organizations whose members help victims of disasters all over the world to recover materially, mentally, spiritually and emotionally.

When Joseph learned that Mary, his betrothed, was going to have a baby, he had no feeling of connection with that child. In order not to be embarrassed, he decided that he would divorce Mary quietly. That way neither of them would be exposed to shame.

But something happened. A dream happened, and everything changed for Joseph. In the dream, the Lord spoke to Joseph and told him not to be afraid to take Mary for his wife. *"For it is through the holy Spirit that the child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus."* Upon waking, Joseph did as the Lord commanded and took Mary into his home to prepare for the birth of the child. Thus, Jesus was born, experienced the life of a refugee from the murderous Herod, and grew up strong and whole with Joseph as his protector and teacher.

As we prepare for the birth of Jesus and the celebration of Christmas, let's consider all those children around the world who yearn for a safe home, a full belly and hope for the future. May the words of the aging Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, point us to the culmination of God's plan of salvation so that all may grow and become strong in the spirit:

*Because of the tender mercy of our God,
By which the daybreak from on high will visit us,
To shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow,
To guide our feet into the path of peace.*