

Home Retreat on St Joseph: Guide and Intercessor

24 April 2021

This short talk provides a reflection on St Joseph and his importance as an example of Christian faith and as an intercessor.

On 8 December last year, Pope Francis issued his Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* – ‘With a Father’s Heart’ – in which he proclaimed a ‘Year of St Joseph’, the Patron of the Universal Church. This year dedicated to St Joseph is an opportunity for us to reflect upon the life of this great saint – the husband of Mary and the stepfather of Jesus – and how his example can help us to deepen our faith. Pope Francis encourages us in this, saying: ‘Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in time of trouble.’

A key characteristic that we notice about Joseph in the Gospels is his willingness to give up his own ideas and plans – to accommodate himself to God’s way of thinking – and thus his participation in God’s plan of salvation for humankind. Pope Paul VI said that Joseph made ‘his life a sacrificial service to the mystery of the incarnation and its redemptive purpose.’ St Matthew provides us with this account:

This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take

Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.’ Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel

a name which means ‘God-is-with-us.’ When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord told him to do: he took his wife to his home and, though he had not had intercourse with her, she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus.

Joseph’s fidelity is quite remarkable and speaks of a deep faith that enabled him to accept that the Lord had acted, and was acting, in his life and the life of Mary his betrothed, in a quite unimaginable way. Despite what must have been his deep upset and shock, disappointment and disbelief, leading to his decision to divorce Mary informally, Joseph was nevertheless able to listen and respond to the Lord speaking through his angel, giving up his own way of thinking, surrendering his plans and his desires to the Lord, trusting that despite all appearances to the contrary the Lord was present and active in his life, Mary carrying in her womb the child of God – and not only that, the Saviour of the world.

Joseph found that all expectations of normal family life had been set aside and along with Mary was facing an uncertain future, both of them subject perhaps to all sorts of suspicion and gossip, as they held on in faith and hope to the promises made them through the angel. St John Chrysostom noted that in doing this, Joseph put himself ‘at the service of the entire plan of salvation’ – and, we might add, not without some considerable personal cost.

For ourselves, as we reflect on these events, perhaps we can identify times in our own lives when things have not gone as we planned – to the extent, even, that it felt as though our world had been turned upside down and we had to endure

considerable difficulty, anxiety and distress, combined perhaps with an inability to recognise how God was present in all that was happening to us and going on around us. Joseph seems to have held on in faith and in hope, rather like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, who accepted the Father's will despite all that it entailed. As St Marks recounts:

They came to a small estate called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Stay here while I pray.' Then he took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. And he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here, and keep awake.' And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. 'Abba (Father)!' he said 'Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it.'

Just as Jesus gave himself up to the will of God, Joseph, like Mary, gave his assent to the Lord's will, and in so doing found what it was that the Lord was asking and intended for him. His assent, his *fiat*, allowed him to be conformed to the Lord – his consent involving, it would seem, something of a foretaste of and sharing in Jesus' passion, the experience of suffering met creatively in faith serving to refine and purify his intentions and desires, so as to become more focused on the Lord. In this, Joseph showed himself truly to be a man of faith, docile and obedient to the will of God, and also a loving spouse ready in all circumstances to care for and protect Mary and her child. As a result, he was granted the gift of Jesus. St Luke writes:

So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David's house and line, in order to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born.

He of whom Simeon was to say:

Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace, just as you promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel.

Joseph's obedience in faith to the word of God spoken to him through the angel made him a participator in God's great act of salvation for the human race made known in the Incarnation and brought to its completion in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, also foretold by Simeon, saying to Mary:

You see this child: he is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, destined to be sign that is rejected – and a sword will pierce your own soul too – so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.

In giving himself up to the will of God, Joseph became a sharer in Christ's life – and not just as Jesus' stepfather and the husband of Mary – but also a participator in Jesus' experience of surrendering himself to the will of the Father for the salvation of humankind, a self-surrender, a self-sacrifice, that brought with it tribulation and distress, but ultimately had as its reward the vision and presence of God Himself in Christ.

In his Apostolic Letter, Pope Francis quoting Pope John Paul II comments that:

All this makes clear that 'St Joseph was called by God to serve the person and mission of Jesus directly through the exercise of his fatherhood' and that in this way 'he cooperated in the fulness of time in the great mystery of salvation and is truly a minister of salvation.'

Joseph was not simply passive, he did not simply resign himself to God's will, but rather cooperated with it. He was courageous in his faith: he accepted God's word as true – despite what experience would have suggested; he responded

wholeheartedly and obediently in hope – accepting Mary and her child unconditionally, taking them to the safety of Egypt, and returning with them to Nazareth where they lived as a family; he loved Mary and Jesus with a love that came from God; and he was patient in enduring trials through which he was granted a share both in the work of redemption for which Jesus had been born and also in the joy of his life and the salvation he would bring.

St Joseph, then, provides us with an example of faith that because it is rooted in human experience we can not only admire but also try to imitate; he can be our guide. Moreover, in the same way as he loved and cared for Jesus and Mary as part of God's plan of salvation, we know that as a participator in Jesus' work of redemption – 'a minister of salvation' – he loves and cares for us too, interceding for us with his and our Lord. Recognising the power of his intercession, Pope Francis tells us, 'We need only ask St Joseph for the grace of graces: our conversion':

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted his only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.
Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself a father
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.

Suggested Reading

St Teresa of Avila, the great sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and reformer of the Carmelite Order, had a great love of and strong devotion to St Joseph. The following extract from her *Autobiography* is provided below for private reading and reflection.

I took for my advocate and lord the glorious St Joseph and earnestly recommended myself to him. I saw clearly that as in this need so in other greater ones concerning honour and loss of soul this father and lord of mine came to my rescue in better ways than I knew how to ask for. I don't recall up to this day ever having petitioned him for anything that he failed to grant. It is an amazing thing the great many favours God has granted me through the mediation of this blessed saint, the dangers I was freed from both of body and soul. For with other saints it seems that the Lord has given them grace to be of help in one need, whereas with this glorious saint I have experience that he helps in all our needs and the Lord wants us to understand that just as He was subject to St Joseph on earth – for since bearing the title of father, being the Lord's tutor, Joseph could give the Child command – so in heaven God does whatever he commands.

Because of my impressive experience of the goods this glorious saint obtains from God, I had the desire to persuade all to be devoted to him. I have not known anyone truly devoted to him and rendering him special services who has not advanced more in virtue. For in a powerful way he benefits souls who recommend themselves to him. It seems to me that for some years I have asked for something on his feast day, and my petition is always granted. If the request is somewhat out of line, he rectifies it for my greater good.

I only ask for the love of God those who do not believe me to try, and they will see through experience the great good that comes from recommending oneself to this glorious patriarch and being devoted to him. For I don't know how one can think about the Queen of Angels and about when she went through so much with the Infant Jesus without giving thanks to St Joseph for the good assistance he then provided them both with.

Those who cannot find a master to teach them prayer should take this glorious saint for their master, and they will not go astray.

Please God I may not have erred in being so bold as to speak about him, for although publicly I am devoted to him, I have always been lacking in serving and imitating him. For he being who he is brought it about that I could rise and walk and not be crippled; and I being who I am used this favour badly.

The text of Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter on St Joseph, *Patris Corde*, can be found here:

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html