

# *Saint Joseph, the Saint for our Times*

**Saturday, June 5, 2021 ~ St. Joseph, Most Chaste, Obedient, and Just**



A few years ago I stood right here and started my novena talk with the simple statement: “I’m so glad to be Catholic.” Though the content of that talk and the content of today’s are vastly different, I am going to begin with the same statement: “I am so glad, so grateful to be Catholic!” Our faith is so beautiful, our traditions so rich, our practices so helpful. Our veneration and devotion to the saints is just one example of that; it is a treasure not shared by most of our Protestant friends and that is a shame because they are missing out on so much.

We are blessed to be standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, giving us an example of holiness, of how to love and serve God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Without their human example of this we would easily feel overwhelmed and incapable of the undertaking.

The Church has consistently taught us the Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, is the holiest of all and no human person will ever surpass her in holiness. In fact, the Church teaches us that she is holier than all others combined! Because of this she is worthy of the highest of all honors to be paid to a human person. Truly – as long as we do not worship her as God – we cannot honor her too much.

Next to her is St. Joseph. After Mary, he is the first and highest of all saints. Simply stated, saints are those who lived holy lives and are now enjoying the Beatific Vision in Heaven. How then would we define a holy life? The Second Vatican Council defined holiness as the perfection of love, as loving. And that makes sense since that is the greatest of all commandments. Paul said it very succinctly: love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:10). We can thus look to Saint Joseph as an example of how to love. How he lived his life solely for Jesus and Mary can teach us how to do the same. His devotion to these two greatest treasures

of the Heavenly Father indicates and points to his love and devotion to that same Heavenly Father.

Now, to be clear...what is it to love? Love means we must give of ourselves, not just when it is convenient or enjoyable or when I am feeling generous. Giving of myself means making a gift of myself. That has a different sound to it; it is a decision and an habitual way of acting, not dependent upon emotions or feelings. That means it may be terribly inconvenient, quite uncomfortable and very sacrificial. Precisely. "Becoming self-gift means that God has entrusted to each and every one of us the task of giving ourselves in love to Him and to one another. We are, in fact, to become increasingly like God, who, in his very essence, is self-gift: Three Persons giving themselves eternally in love to each other." (Emily Stimpson Chapman, "Theology of the body: Making a gift of self", August 18, 2010) The Cross is the perfect icon of self-gift: Jesus' total gift of self, His sacrificial love, His holocaust for our redemption. True love knows no half measures.

Now, let us "go to Joseph;" in his silent example, he can show us the quintessence of self-gift, the very embodiment of love and devotion without limit.

Looking in detail at three of his most notable virtues will paint a pretty complete picture of this reality: justice, obedience, and chastity.

When we first meet Joseph in the Scriptures, in the Gospel of Matthew (1:19), he is described as a righteous man, a just man. This is in the context of Joseph's dilemma as he considers his role in regards to Mary. Mary, his betrothed, is with Child. Her virtue and fidelity are unquestionable. There is only one possibility. He recognizes within her the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: A Virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son (7:14). I cannot give better wording to the explanation of Joseph's decision to separate himself from Mary than is given by a sixth-century author:

Joseph was just, and the virgin was immaculate; but when he wished to put her away, this happened from the fact that he recognized in her the power of a miracle and a vast mystery that he held himself unworthy to approach. Humbling himself therefore before so great and ineffable a phenomenon, he sought to retire, just as Saint Peter humbled himself before the Lord and said, 'Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man,' and as the ruler confessed who sent word to the Lord, 'I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, ...,' or as Saint Elizabeth said to the most blessed Virgin, 'And how have I deserved that the mother of my Lord should come to me?' In like manner did the just

man Joseph humble and look to himself and fear to enter into union with such exalted holiness. (as found in St. Joseph: Our Father in Faith, Father Frederick Miller, Catholic Information Service, pages 18-19)

Joseph was filled with awe at what was happening in Mary; he knew his own unworthiness to be involved so intimately with the greatest promise ever given to mankind: a Savior, and to think that this promise would be fulfilled by God becoming Man ... This was beyond anything anyone ever considered. He was over-awed and amazed with reverential fear of God's mighty work in Mary. And he knew that "this prophecy only spoke of a virgin conceiving and bearing a son; [no man was mentioned in the prophecy,] Joseph should therefore step aside. When Joseph had previously offered himself entirely to Mary, Mary had responded to this gift by explaining to him that God had every claim on her, and Joseph had accepted that. Now the time had come for him to respond in turn... Without looking back, Joseph makes his silent fiat to [what appears to be] the will of his God. He accepts that Mary takes precedence and that he withdraw into silence. The Virgin belongs to God alone and God has every claim on her... Out of his love for Mary and his respect for the will of God, Joseph decides to give Mary back her liberty, and to do so with the utmost discretion." (Father Marie-Dominique Philippe, OP, The Mystery of Joseph, Zaccheus Press, 2009, page 12) He did not think himself worthy to be considered this Child's father, therefore, in justice, he decided to step away, to give Mary all the freedom she needed to be obedient to all that God would ask of her. By making that decision, Joseph surrendered to God all his dreams, desires and love for Mary.

But Joseph, being just, must also be obedient, for justice is giving to another his due. God is due our obedience. And so when the angel comes to Joseph in a dream and assures him that his intention and purpose in separating himself from Mary are pleasing to God, the angel also informs him that the Lord does will that Joseph take Mary as his wife and the Child she carries as his own. And so, God accepted his gift, blessed it and then rewarded him a hundredfold by returning it. Joseph had chosen Mary as his wife, and God gives him as his wife the mother of the Savior ... and with that, through Mary, He gives Joseph His own beloved Son to be his son also. (Philippe, 14)

Pope Saint John Paul II states as much in his encyclical on St. Joseph: "Even though he decided to draw back so as not to interfere in the plan of God which was coming to pass in

Mary, Joseph obeyed the explicit command of the angel and took Mary into his home, while respecting the fact that she belonged exclusively to God.” (*Redemptoris Custos*, 20)

Truly, his justice is intertwined with his obedience. Let us continue looking at this same occasion, the dilemma of Joseph, and consider more explicitly Joseph’s obedience. Perhaps it would be helpful to refresh our memories of the Scripture passage.

Now 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 just 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 be with child 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. (Matthew 1:18-24)

Look at this in connection with the Annunciation to Mary. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and asked her to become the mother of the long-awaited Messiah she “surrendered herself, without reservation, to the Lord’s plan by stating: I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word (Lk 1:38).” (Miller, 11) Here, during the three months Mary was in the hill country of Judea helping Elizabeth prepare for the birth of John the Baptist, Joseph, discerning that he give Mary back her freedom, was corrected by the Lord through the ministry of an angel. Herein lies a beautiful example of obedience. Having considered, prayed, fretted, worried, he comes to his decision. And then? The Lord reveals to him that he made the wrong decision. In response to this, “Joseph, without uttering a word, did exactly what Mary had done. In faith, he surrendered his entire life to the mystery of the Incarnation. In a matter-of-fact way, Saint Matthew writes: When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord told him to do” (Matthew 1:24). (Miller, 11) Giving no consideration to his previous, prayerful discernment, trusting, he humbly and immediately changed his course of action. Saint Joseph willingly, though with great sadness, was ready to renounce his betrothal to Mary, his greatest joy, and offer it back to God; God in his providential design, accepted Joseph’s gift and gives it back to him! What joy this must have given Joseph!

Both Mary and Joseph “made an identical act of faith” (Miller, 11), of trust, and of loving obedience to the will of God. We have the authority of Pope St. John Paul II behind this statement, he wrote: “Joseph took Mary in all the mystery of her motherhood. He took her together with the Son who had come into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way he showed a readiness of will like Mary’s with regard to what God asked of him through the angel.” (RC 3)

“The accounts of the Annunciation to Mary in the Gospel of Luke, and to Joseph in Matthew’s, reveal that God accomplished his greatest work through the cooperation of two human beings through the obedience of faith. Jesus, the Eternal Son of the Father, became the son of Mary through her faith in the Word proclaimed by Gabriel. In his readiness to receive Mary into his home as his wife, and to adopt her unborn child, Joseph joined Mary in her act of faith ... Through Mary’s faith, the Son of God became man. Through Joseph’s faith, Mary’s child became Son of David, the Messiah of Israel” (Miller, 13) for it was Joseph, of the House of David, who would give the Child his name and insert him into the lineage of David, the kingly line from whom the prophet said the Messiah was to come. And so, with Mary, at the very dawn of our salvation, “we find the model of obedience made incarnate in Saint Joseph, the man known for having faithfully carried out God’s commands.” (RC 4)

Two other Gospel passages, both from the Gospel of Matthew and both from the Infancy Narratives highlight Joseph’s obedience to the will of God as it is made manifest to him, both times through dreams. We read of the Flight into Egypt and then the return from Egypt:

When [the Magi] had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.” Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” ... When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazorean.”

“[Scripture] reveals to us ... Joseph’s complete docility to the will of God; he exercises his authority in total obedience to God’s messenger... [He] exercises his authority in a personal union with the will of the Father. What matters to him is not what he wants but rather what God wants.” (Philippe, 27). Simply stated, Joseph never used himself as the measure or the reason for his actions. He was only concerned for Jesus and Mary. Everything centered on them, their protection and well-being. “He lived for them alone.” (Philippe, 28) Wouldn’t we all want that written on our tombstone? Isn’t that how we’d like to be described? Saint Joseph’s obedience displays his self-gift, his loving donation of self to both God and Mary.

Perhaps the clearest indication of Joseph’s total self-gift to Mary, the Child Jesus, and to the Heavenly Father is his chastity.

Mary consecrated herself to God from an early age – some say at her Presentation in the Temple, the Feast we celebrate on November 21 – and in doing so she gave herself unreservedly to God. Thus, she had made her vow of virginity previous to her betrothal to Joseph. In all honesty she could not have kept this as a secret from Joseph. She would have had to reveal this to him, and she could have, for it was her secret to reveal. Joseph therefore would need to be informed that this would not be a normal marriage.

The fourth book of the Bible, the Book of Numbers, states, “If [a young woman] marries while under a vow ... [by] which she bound herself, and her husband learns of it, yet says nothing to her on the day he learns of it, then the vow ... remains valid. But if on the day her husband learns of it, he opposes her, he thereby annuls the vow she had made ... and the Lord will release her from it.” (Numbers 30:7-9) We can thus be certain that Joseph knew of Mary’s vow of virginity, that he did not negate it or annul it, thus he must have agreed, recognizing that Mary belonged entirely to God. By agreeing to his wife’s vow of virginity, he undertakes the same vow, extending it to himself, thus giving himself totally, not only to Mary to be her protector and provider, but also to God, completely and wholly.

He loved Mary so much he accepted her, received her into his home as one dedicated to God, agreeing to protect, provide and love both her and her Child. It thus becomes obvious that Joseph’s love for Mary was a true love, loving her for herself, not a selfish love. He was not centered on himself or what he might gain from this relationship. He did not seek to possess

Mary. He recognized that she belonged to God and that pleased him. Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter entitled “With a Father’s Heart,” explains that chastity is “the summation of an attitude that is the opposite of possessiveness. Chastity is freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of one’s life. Only when love is chaste, is it truly love. ... Joseph knew how to love with extraordinary freedom. He never made himself the center of things. He did not think of himself, he focused instead on the lives of Mary and Jesus.” (*Patris Corde* 7) Chastity enables one to love without the desire to possess or to use another for one’s own gain or pleasure. In other words, chastity is freeing. As Pope Francis said, the only true love is a chaste love, that is, a love that sees the beloved as first belonging to God, as being His and destined to be with Him for all eternity, not as an object to use or merely enjoyed. It is a love that is freely given without expecting anything in return.

As I said earlier,

“Joseph could not have known by himself that Mary had made a personal gift of herself to God in this way. But from the very moment Joseph chose Mary and loved her, Mary could only receive this choice and respond to it by communicating her secret to Joseph, telling him that she surrendered herself totally to God’s gracious will for her. Joseph must respect Mary’s radical self-abandonment to the Father if he is to take her to be his wife. In choosing her as his wife, he must thus live the same mystery as she does – a mystery of self-abandonment and of total surrender of one’s entire life into the hands of the Father [that is, in obedience and as self-gift]. In becoming her spouse, ... he lives her secret, this secret which binds her so personally to the Father. Sharing this same intention is the foundation of their love of friendship – a love which is so divine, so strong and so unique.” (Philippe, 8)

Because Joseph loves her so deeply and with a chaste, non-possessive love he cannot consider the possibility of asking her to rescind her vow of virginity. He in no way wants to stand between her and God; no, it reflects his own love for the Lord and it becomes his heartfelt desire that she belong body and soul to the Lord. God must always come first. God is always first.

As shown in his resolve to step away and separate himself from Mary when he learned of her pregnancy, thus restoring Mary to the freedom he thought she would need to fulfill God’s will, so to here we see that Joseph “loves her for herself ... He does not love her for

himself; his love gives him no claim on her.” (Philippe, 13) His love for Mary is so great, so chaste, that he desires only the Father’s will for her, again, nothing for himself.

Truly, for him to be the most chaste spouse of the Virgin Mary, he too must have the same disposition of heart: he too must have offered himself, his entire life, in complete abandonment to God and the completion of His holy will. Only then could he have entered into a true marriage with Mary; one in complete freedom, no possessiveness, with deep affection, and with life-long fidelity. As her most chaste spouse he could and would be the guardian of her virginity.

“It really is a total and personal gift of self that they make to each other, under the [inspiration and action] of the Holy Spirit – a gift which prolongs the gift that each one has made to God.” (Philippe, 40) Their hearts are truly united; as it was said of the first Christian community, it was true even here in the Holy House of Nazareth: they were of one mind and heart. This one mind and heart were united in the love and service of the Child with which they were entrusted, the Child they would nourish, shelter, protect, and raise as their own, the Child that had come into the world to bring mercy, forgiveness, and redemption.

Joseph and Mary, united in the mystery surrounding their Son, made and lived the total gift of self to each other, to their Son, the Incarnate Word, and to the Heavenly Father who called them to this task, entrusting to them the Redeemer of the World. Joseph’s heart was given totally to Jesus and Mary and everything he did reflected that. His gift of self was made manifest through his obedience, his justice and his chastity, and evidenced through his love, his devotion and his service of Jesus and Mary.

Who better to entrust ourselves than to the one the Heavenly Father entrusted His greatest treasures: the Infant Incarnate Word and the Immaculate Conception? Saint Joseph’s devotion to Mary truly echoes his devotion to God Himself. His hidden life is an imitable one, though our life circumstances are vastly different than his. We, too, are called to love and serve ... and, yes, even guard, Jesus and Mary. By our own justice and true love, our own docility and obedience to the will of the Heavenly Father, we too can live a life pleasing to God and, hopefully, also imitate Saint Joseph in a happy and holy death.

To close this talk, I would like to lead us in a prayer of entrustment to St. Joseph. (Prayer of Entrustment to St. Joseph)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dearest St. Joseph, I consecrate myself to your service.

I give myself to you, that you always be my father,  
my protector and my guide in the way of salvation.

Obtain for me a great purity of heart, a fervent love of the interior life,  
and the spirit of prayer.

After your example may I do all my actions for the greater glory of God,  
in union with the divine Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

And you, blessed St. Joseph, pray for me,  
that I might share in the peace and joy of your holy death. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.