

# *Saint Joseph, the Saint for our Times*

**Sunday, June 6, 2021 ~ St. Joseph, Most Courageous**



“God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Son, so that all who believe in Him may have eternal life.” Jn 3:16

Jesus is the one Person in history who came into the world precisely to die. He didn't have a “death-wish”, He had a death mission. Of course, He was planning on dying to give us life and give it to us abundantly, to manifest the inexpressible love and mercy of the Father for the fallen creature, man.

Those closely associated with the Incarnate Word, were destined to share in that mission of redemptive suffering and death. “The disciple is not better than his Master, if they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Though sinless, Mary, more than any other human being, shares in this suffering. After her is the man closest to Christ, Joseph, whose mission was to protect the Son of God become man in His infancy and childhood. The curse of the sword of the House of David, would not just be Mary's (Lk 2:32); Joseph shared in the sword of sorrow that pierced his spouse's soul.

Joseph receives the command to “take the Child and his Mother and flee to Egypt.” (Mt. 2:13) Already Herod's soldiers are on the way. They must quickly gather the few essential belongings they can carry with them. How many exiles, especially in the last ten years, have experienced this narrow escape at the beginning of their long sojourns as refugees in a foreign land.

We received a small taste of the sudden transition from normal everyday life to exile in the sudden ban of Mass and communion for the laity in March 2020 and all the Covid restrictions of this past year. We were able to stay in our homes, but the fragility of life was clearly exposed. It is telling that in some states and countries the Mass has still not been restored to the laity because secularized governments see religion and religious worship as

non-essential. You can get a tattoo, go to the cinema or dine in a restaurant, but churches remain closed.

We can also see in the emerging cultural climate, a derisive contempt of Christian understanding of human dignity, marriage, and sexuality. The right to religious freedom is not in favor. More and more Christians are being ostracized as “haters” and “racists”, banned from social communication, their businesses threatened, charitable organizations shut down because they cannot in conscience accept the great moral evils that have become “rights” recognized and defended by the government. Yet this harassment is miniscule compared to what our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering throughout the world.

In the Middle East, persecution has all but wiped out the presence of Christians. In the Holy Land, Christians represent less than 1.5% of the population. In Syria and Iraq, where the Christian community dates back to St. Paul and St. Matthew, the Christian population has shrunk from 1.5 million in 2003 to less than 120,000. Some Christians are returning to the area, but the “caliphate” mentality of Islamic neighbors makes them insecure in their decision to stay. (John Pontifex and John Newton, *Persecuted and Forgotten? A Report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2017-19*, Aid to the Church in Need, 2019.)

In Nigeria, “1,470 Christians were murdered and over 2,200 were abducted by jihadists in the first four months of 2021. (persecution.org)” In neighboring Niger, just three weeks ago Catholics fled to the capital of Niamey to escape Al Qaeda attacks ([fides.org/en/news/70138](https://www.fides.org/en/news/70138)). A sad fact is that 60% of targeted Christians are women and children. The men and boys are killed while the women and children are sold into slavery, prostitution or forced marriage. The jihadists are bent on destroying Christianity in the region.

Although Islamic extremists might account for eight of the top ten countries for persecution of Christians, according to the Open Doors 2021 World Watch List, communism and agnosticism are also part of the problem. North Korea has been in the number one spot for persecution for the last 20 years. However, the good news is that Christianity is growing with an estimated half a million underground Christians in the country. Iran, eighth on the list for persecution of Christians, has a conversion rate of about 5.2% to Christianity despite persecution. As of last year the number of Christians in Iran now numbers around a million.

(Lowry, Lindy, The 10 Most Dangerous Places for Christians, Jan. 13, 2021, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/10-most-dangerous-places-christians/>)

What Tertullian says about the blood of martyrs being the seed of Christians, seems to be proving true, not just in Korea and Iran. The tragic killing of the 21 martyrs in Libya, on February 12, 2015 has led to a beautiful sequel of renewed faith in the Coptic Church of Egypt and around the world. Twenty of the martyrs were from Egypt. The twenty-first was a man from Ghana, who was converted by the peace and prayerful witness of the twenty Coptic Christians while they were being held for their execution. Even one of the captors was moved at their witness—he was willing to kill for his faith, but they were willing to die for theirs. Sharing in the baptism, the cup, the Cross of Christ is the sign of a true disciple of Christ. The Church, the mystical Body of Christ participates in the sufferings of the Head. Though Christ's sacrifice is complete, we "fill up what is lacking" for our time, our part in the ongoing story of mankind's redemption. The cloud of witnesses that spurs us on to victory is ever growing. Let us encourage our persecuted brethren, above all by praying for them and letting them know they are not forgotten. We can do this through organizations like Aid to the Church in Need and Fides.

Let us also live our faith more courageously and if the opportunity comes to us not be afraid to witness even to the shedding of our blood, raising our children to do the same.

In his apostolic letter *Patris Corde*, Pope Francis says,

Often in life, things happen whose meaning we do not understand. Our first reaction is frequently one of disappointment and rebellion. Joseph set aside his own ideas in order to accept the course of events and, mysterious as they seemed, to embrace them, take responsibility for them and make them part of his own history. Unless we are reconciled with our own history, we will be unable to take a single step forward, for we will always remain hostage to our expectations and the disappointments that follow.

The spiritual path that Joseph traces for us is not one that explains, but accepts. Only as a result of this acceptance, this reconciliation, can we begin to glimpse a broader history, a deeper meaning. We can almost hear an echo of the impassioned reply of Job to his wife, who had urged him to rebel against the evil he endured: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (Job 2:10). (*Patris Corde* 4)

The beginnings of the Church were marked by persecutions and sufferings that would have seemed to have killed it even as Herod tried to kill the infant Jesus. Yet the Church eventually converted its persecutors. Throughout the centuries the Church has seemed to be on its death bed only to be revived by the Spirit moving in the saints of the time. She has buried her undertakers many times.

The Christian share in the sufferings of Christ repeats itself down the centuries. However, the book of Revelation tells that the end will come with a crucifixion and resurrection of the Church. Every Christian generation expects the Second coming of Christ. But, what of the signs of our times. More people died for the Faith in the 20th century than all the rest of Church history combined, more than 26 million documented cases of martyrdom. (Strategic Alliance reports, <https://www.gsaministries.org/>)

The 21st century seems to be at a rate that will swiftly surpass the 20th. Just in the decade of 2005 to 2015 there have been 1 million Christian martyred for the Faith (Gordon-Conwell's Center for the Study of Global Christianity's annual report (<https://www.foxnews.com/world/nearly-1-million-christians-reportedly-martyred-for-their-faith-in-last-decade>)). But as the angel said to Joseph, "be not afraid..."

St. Louis de Montfort says that just as Mary (and I would add Joseph) played a major in Christ's first coming, so they will play a key role in His Second Coming. It is not a coincidence that this is the year of St. Joseph. With their help, let us fearlessly and joyfully go forth to witness anew to the redeeming and life-giving death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is with us even unto the end the age, especially in His Eucharistic Presence and the Sacrifice of the Mass that we celebrate today on Corpus Christi Sunday.