

Saint Joseph, the Saint for our Times

Monday, June 7, 2021 ~ St. Joseph, Zealous Defender of Christ



Opening Prayer (from Year of St. Joseph Pilgrimage Booklet): “To you, O blessed Joseph, do we come [...]. As once you rescued the Child Jesus from deadly peril, so now protect God’s Holy Church from the snares of the enemy and from all adversity; shield, too, each one of us by your constant protection [...]. Amen.”

Eager... ardent... fervent... passionate: such is God’s love for us; such is the nature of zeal. This evening we will consider the title of St. Joseph, “Zealous Defender of Christ”. We will reflect upon the meaning of the title itself, how it applies to St. Joseph, and how it applies to us.

First, there is the title itself: “Zealous Defender of Christ”. This can also be translated “Diligent Protector of Christ” or “Faithful Guardian of Christ”. The word “zealous” indicates an intensity that is eager, ardent, fervent, and passionate—in a word, whole-hearted. Zeal is not necessarily dramatic or vocal; for example, St. Joseph expressed his zeal in prompt, consistent, and responsible action. The term “defender” describes someone who drives away danger from another person, whether a threat or an imminent attack. A defender may also maintain or support people, being vigilant to preserve them and keep them safe.

Saint Joseph is called “Zealous Defender of Christ”. He put his whole being into his vocation as husband and father, protector and provider. Like Mary, he knew and lived the Scriptural command, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Dt. 6:5). St. Joseph’s zeal sprang from reverential love for God.

Scripture records no words of St. Joseph, so we might have the impression that he was quiet—but he was certainly not timid. The Gospel shows him to be prudent, discerning, and courageous; whenever God manifested his will, St. Joseph responded with prompt and decisive action. Mary would have noticed and appreciated the zeal of St. Joseph. Like Mary, St. Joseph communicated his own whole-hearted “Fiat” repeatedly. By his actions he said, “Behold, I am

the servant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” Pope Francis notes in his recent apostolic letter *Patris Corde* (A Father’s Heart): “At the end of every account in which Joseph plays a role, the Gospel tells us that he gets up, takes the child and his mother, and does what God commanded him (cf. *Mt* 1:24; 2:14, 21)” (n. 5). St. Joseph was a man of integrity, a member of God’s chosen people, and he lived his vocation with unwavering dedication.

The Gospel testifies to his zealous integrity. St. Joseph demonstrated self-discipline and virtue; he is described as a “just man”, indicating his right relationship with God and neighbor. He listened to his conscience and he listened to God. He obeyed civil law, as seen during the Roman census at the time of Jesus’ birth (cf. *Lk* 2:1-5). St. Joseph’s decisions and actions flowed from the context of his personal integrity. His character was formed in part by his participation in communal prayer and worship.

St. Joseph belonged to a faith community, the Jewish people, and he had the quiet zeal of daily fidelity in his faith life. He obeyed Jewish law, as seen in his visits to the temple to present Jesus as firstborn Son and to make the annual Passover pilgrimage (cf. *Lk* 2:22-24, 41f). St. Joseph went to the synagogue every sabbath and took Jesus along; years later Jesus kept this weekly custom during his public ministry (cf. *Lk* 4:16). St. Joseph would have listened every sabbath to Scripture, and he prayed the same psalms we pray today.

When St. Joseph faced challenges in zealously defending Christ, perhaps he recalled the Scriptures. God commanded Joshua, Moses’ successor, to lead the Hebrew nation into the Promised Land, saying, “Be firm and steadfast. Do not fear or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (*Josh* 1:9). God inspired young David with tremendous faith and courage in the face of Goliath and the Philistine army who had insulted the army of the Living God (cf. *1 Sam* 17:26, 45-47). Like Mary, St. Joseph must have pondered these things in his heart, drawing strength from them to faithfully guard and diligently protect the Messiah.

St. Joseph was a man of zealous dedication in his vocation. For the good of his family he responded swiftly and responsibly to unfamiliar circumstances, regardless of the inconvenience or discomfort to himself. St. Joseph protected Mary and Jesus from being stoned to death when his fiancée Mary was found with child (cf. *Mt* 1:18-19). He traveled with his pregnant wife because of the Roman census. He found alternative lodging when Bethlehem’s inn had no

room. St. Joseph took the Child and his Mother by night to flee to Egypt, and he sustained them in a foreign land indefinitely until God told him to return to Israel.

Saint Joseph faced many situations beyond his control, with great composure and whole-hearted virtue. He zealously put his strength, intelligence, and will at the service of Almighty God, the Child Jesus, and his beloved wife Mary. Pope Francis points out, “Joseph is certainly not passively resigned, but courageously and firmly proactive. [...] Only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life at it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments” (*Patris Corde*, n. 4).

Two thousand years ago God called St. Joseph to be the zealous defender and protector of Christ; today God calls *us* to be zealous defenders and *proclaimers* of Christ. St. Joseph lived and served during Jesus’ hidden years, before Jesus became known to the world. We, on the other hand, have a different privilege and responsibility; we have heard the command of the risen Jesus: “Go, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19a).

As Jesus entered profoundly into the life of St. Joseph, so He wants to be central in our lives as well. Pope Benedict XVI testifies to the power of Christ’s presence in our lives: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1, quoted in Directory for Catechesis, n. 68). This encounter with Christ is meant to be shared as good news! Pope Francis says in *The Joy of the Gospel*, “In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without him; what you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and given you hope, is what you also need to communicate to others” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 121). We are called to preach the Gospel in season and out of season, whether convenient or inconvenient (cf. 2 Tim 4:2), just as St. Joseph zealously defended Christ in joy and in suffering, whether convenient or inconvenient.

How can we be zealous defenders of Christ today? Christ needs to be defended in many ways: Jesus within us; the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church; Jesus in the Most Holy Eucharist; the name of Jesus Christ; the teachings of Jesus Christ; the objective truth found in natural law; and Jesus dwelling within other people. As we reflect on these, notice what captures your attention; it may be a grace, an invitation to zealously defend Christ.

The quality of our life and heart will affect how we approach everything else, so let us consider first how we can defend the life of Christ within us. Subtle threats might include temptations to selfishness, exposure to biased media, overindulgence in technology use, and materialism. We can zealously defend Christ in our hearts with Mass and the Sacraments, with efforts at virtue, with healthy relationships, and by doing God's manifest will. Saint Paul exhorts all Christians to a proactive vigilance. He says, "My brothers, your thoughts must be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous, or worthy of praise" (Phil. 4:8). Our personal formation affects the rest of our lives. Monsignor James Shea writes about this in his recent book *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*: "The things we do, the kind and manner of activities we engage in, the way we organize our lives, [...] how we order our time, all will have a great deal to do with what we think and believe" (49). With our free will we either help or hinder the life of Christ within us.

Author Matthew Kelly writes in *Rediscovering Catholicism*, "If we wish to speak effectively to the modern world about God, the Christian life, and Catholicism, we must be thriving, blossoming, and flourishing in that life" (64). As our spiritual father, St. Joseph wants to help us flourish (Calloway, 167). Personal holiness is an excellent witness to the truth of God's existence, the power of Christ, and the divine foundation of the Catholic Church.

God calls us to zealously defend the Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ and our extended family. Our Lord provides us with the Church to form our character and outlook on life, just as He provided St. Joseph with a Jewish community to form his character and outlook. Threats to the Church, inside or outside, include division, gossip, scandal, heresy, slander, and persecution. We can protect and build up the Mystical Body of Christ with charity, forgiveness, mutual respect, prayer, and fasting. Pope St. John Paul II exhorts us to foster unity within the Catholic Church, and also to foster unity with other Christians (*Ut Unum Sint*, 98).

God is zealous in his self-emptying love, which reaches incomprehensible depths in the Incarnation and in the Most Holy Eucharist. Pope Francis writes in *Patris Corde*, "The Son of the Almighty came into our world in a state of great vulnerability. He needed to be defended, protected, cared for and raised by Joseph" (n. 5). To this very day Jesus makes Himself disarmingly vulnerable and approachable in the Blessed Sacrament. In the Eucharist our Lord

subjects Himself to disbelief, indifference, sacrilege, and desecration. We can zealously defend Christ and make reparation especially by our own faith and conduct. When we go to Mass, what is the quality of our preparation, our clothing, our participation in the liturgy, our thanksgiving after Holy Communion? Some people treat the Eucharist as a piece of bread—but the Eucharist is Jesus, an eternal, infinite, divine Person. He comes to us with tremendous, hidden love—for us and the for whole world.

When we receive our Eucharistic Lord with faith, He strengthens in us his own zealous love. Pope Benedict XVI writes about the intrinsic connection between the Eucharist and mission in *Sacramentum Caritatis* (The Sacrament of Charity):

“The love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. What the world needs is God’s love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him. [...] Truly, nothing is more beautiful than to know Christ and to make him known to others. [...] The more ardent the love for the Eucharist in the hearts of the Christian people, the more clearly will they recognize the goal of all mission: *to bring Christ to others*” (n. 84, 86).

Why not invite people to Mass so they can encounter Jesus themselves?

God allows us to call Him by name; how greatly we need to zealously defend God’s name! The name signifies the person, and God’s name is sacred. God’s second Commandment is: “You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain” (Deut 5:11). And yet how often are the names “God” and “Jesus” treated carelessly as slang in conversations, text messages, publications, movies, and songs? God counts on us to zealously defend the name of Christ and the holy name of God. Let us pray God’s name with greater reverence, in the Sign of the Cross, the Glory Be, and the Lord’s Prayer, the powerful name of Jesus, and the Divine Praises. (By the way, we pray the Divine Praises after Benediction precisely to make reparation for offenses against God’s name.) We can raise awareness about respecting God’s name. Fr. Mike Schmitz, a university chaplain, discusses boundaries in a YouTube video; he says that you will get the behavior you tolerate. It takes courage to be frank with others and to say things like, “Please respect God’s name when I’m talking with you,” and then excuse yourself from the conversation if they don’t.

Jesus teaches us about the Kingdom of God, God's love and eternal life, and how to share in these; He calls upon us to zealously defend and proclaim what He has taught us. Threats to Jesus' teaching include confusion, ignorance, minimalism, and selective acceptance [sometimes called "Cafeteria Catholicism"]. We can zealously defend Christ's teachings with the help of personal and liturgical prayer, study, spiritual reading, Catholic CDs and podcasts, and ongoing faith formation programs in our parishes. Pope St. Paul VI writes in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (The Announcement of the Gospel), "The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself. She is the community of believers, [...] the community of brotherly love; and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe [...] if she wishes to retain her freshness, vigor, and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel [...] with credibility" (n. 15).

The world is often hostile to Christ and the Gospel. When Jesus first came into the world, Herod tried to get rid of Him. When He grew up, the Romans and leaders of his own people tried to get rid of Him. Ever since then, throughout the centuries, different leaders in various nations have shown antagonism toward Jesus Christ and Christians. Today's situation is nothing new. During the childhood of Jesus St. Joseph responded prudently and zealously in hostile situations; in our own day St. Joseph's example and intercession can help us wholeheartedly defend and proclaim Christ.

Jesus teaches us the truth; in fact, He is the Truth in Person. At the Last Supper Jesus declared, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (cf. Jn 14:6). God is the Author of all truth; we need to defend objective truth in our confused and searching culture. Threats to truth include ideologies such as atheism and relativism, and all kinds of actions against human life and dignity, such as abortion, embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia, human trafficking, pornography, and gender identity issues.

We must not be afraid to defend the truth with charity and clarity. By divine revelation we know some foundational truths that our society at large does not recognize. For example: God creates human beings in his own image, and therefore every person has inherent human dignity; God creates human beings either male or female, without confusion, admixture, or mistake; life begins at conception and continues until God in his wisdom calls a person to

Himself. These truths lay the foundation for moral standards found in natural law: every human being deserves to be treated with respect.

Jesus identifies Himself with the poor and downtrodden, and He expects us to defend Him in them. He says, “Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me” (cf. Mt 25:40). All people are made in God’s image and therefore worthy of respect, but some are threatened because they are poor, outcast, abused, addicted, imprisoned, unborn, elderly, or ill. We can defend Christ in these persons by exercising the corporal and spiritual works of mercy (cf. Mt 25:34-40).

Jesus is also hidden in our persecutors, and he teaches us to pray for them (cf. Mt 5:44). Jesus died and rose so that they, too, might have eternal life. He zealously thirsts for their salvation, and they don’t know it... or they have rejected Him. They are not the enemy; the enemy is the devil, who has deceived them. What are we doing to help them? Our prayers and sacrifices matter! Our charity and our witness matter! Those who persecute Christians or harm their fellow human beings need to hear the Gospel, to witness it being lived, and to experience the love of Christ.

Pope St. Paul VI writes in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,

“[T]he presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church. It is the duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved. This message is indeed necessary. It is unique. It cannot be replaced. It does not permit either indifference, syncretism or accommodation. It is a question of people’s salvation. It is the beauty of the Revelation that it represents. It brings with it a wisdom that is not of this world. It is able to stir up faith by itself—faith that rests on the power of God. It is truth. It merits having the apostle consecrate to it all his time and all his energies, and to sacrifice for it, if necessary, his own life” (n. 5).

Pope Francis says that “[i]n virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). [...] Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 120). He cites the examples of St. Andrew, the Samaritan woman at the well, and St. Paul; all of them immediately proclaimed Jesus after a life-changing encounter with Him. In a talk on the New Evangelization, Dr. Marcellino D’Ambrosio points out that we don’t have to be experts in

the faith before sharing Jesus with others. Living for Christ is a dynamic adventure, and we will be unpacking the riches of Christ eternally! (*What's New About the New Evangelization?*) We scatter seeds in the form of hospitality, prayer, conversation, service, and sharing books, CDs, and websites about the faith. We never know when those seeds will sprout in people's lives.

God calls us to evangelize right where we are. Bishop Kemme has a Pastoral Plan for the Diocese of Wichita. The "Vision" is: "All God's children will respond to Christ's call so as to become fully alive as missionary disciples." The "Mission" is to "Go forth faithfully to preach the Gospel to all God's children and to evangelize today's culture." St. Joseph had his marching orders, and we have ours. Where do we start? Let's take that question to our Lord in Holy Hour and ask Mary and Joseph to intercede for us.

With St. Joseph at our side, let us set out to be zealous defenders of Christ! Let us be eager, ardent, fervent, and passionate! For the sake of God and our neighbor, let us be wholehearted and always motivated by love.

Saint Joseph, Zealous Defender of Christ... pray for us.

Immaculate Heart of Mary... pray for us.

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