

Saint Joseph, the Saint for our Times

Thursday, June 3, 2021 ~ St. Joseph, Pillar of the Family



In this year of St. Joseph, one cannot but help growing in one's devotion to St. Joseph. As a diocese, we have been making a concerted effort to honor him as well as to learn more about him. He is a Saint to look to for his example as well as one to whom each person can feel his protection and help. I have always looked forward to his feast days; on these days, we sing some of my favorite songs. I am sure that St. Joseph would be humbled by the praises that are sung on these days. I would imagine that he saw himself as just doing what he was supposed to do in the everyday aspects of life. Yet this is what we need from St. Joseph today, an example of faithful, generous service. We need an example of one who lived the same life and faced the same challenges – and did all of this with Jesus and Mary, especially in the area of family life.

There are two specific titles in the litany of St. Joseph that mention the family; we invoke St. Joseph as Head of the Holy Family and Pillar of Families. I would like to reflect with you tonight on St. Joseph's role in the Holy Family and why this is so important for us to reflect upon in the midst of our family life.

I am not going to sing for you this evening one of those songs of St. Joseph but I would like to read to you the words as a sort of prayer to begin this talk. The song is "O Joseph, mighty patron" and I will use some of the lines throughout my talk.

O Joseph, mighty patron
Your love and strength bestow
Upon a pilgrim people
Who are the Church below.
You were the Father's image,
Great prince of David's line;
Obtain for us God's blessing
That we may be his sign.

Great Saint, you cherished Mary,
Who loved and cared for you;
You taught and nurtured Jesus,
Oh teach us to be true,
True to the Church he founded,
Until we form above
A family united
In bonds of lasting love.
(Sr. Marie Michael, 1970)

I think this sums up who Joseph was, what he did and continues to do for us.

Great Saint, you cherished Mary, Who loved and cared for you

St. Joseph was called to be the Head of the Holy Family. In Matthew's Gospel, we hear of something disconcerting; he wishes to divorce Mary (1:19). I have to admit that I have no patience with the idea that he thought Mary had been unfaithful; I cannot imagine anyone in contact with Mary thinking badly of her, the Immaculate Conception and the most perfect of all creatures. The Heavenly Father chose St. Joseph because he was such a faithful and just man; the betrothed of Mary would have known what kind of individual she was and he would have been able to see a deeper meaning behind her pregnancy. Church Father, Origen, connects this story of Joseph with the story of St. Peter after the great catch of fish, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Calloway, 2020, p.147-8). This is Joseph's reaction in the face of Mary's pregnancy. He does not feel worthy to be part of such a great plan. Also, he may not have felt like he was needed as this was God's son. However, once the angel appears to him in a dream, telling him not to be afraid, that he is to name the child Jesus, to be a true father to this child in Mary's womb. His response was to do what the angel directed him to do. He does not question God or try to figure things out; he merely acts (Matthew 1:20-24).

I think of David's response to God when he hears that he is going to have the Messiah in his line. A descendant of David, St. Joseph was also a man after God's own heart. David exclaims, "Who am I, Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you should have brought me so far? And yet even this is too little in your sight, Lord GOD! For you have made a promise regarding your servant's house reaching into the future, and giving guidance to the people, Lord GOD!" (2 Samuel 7:18 – 29). This was a great task! Yet, this is what God called Joseph to do and God would give him the grace to fulfill his mission.

St. Joseph's first role in God's plan was to be the spouse of Mary, to cherish her. The love he had for Mary was great, and Mary, in turn, loved and valued Joseph. While it was a celibate marriage, it was a true marriage nonetheless; Pope John Paul II (1989), in *Redemptoris Custos*, explains, "At the culmination of the history of salvation, when God reveals his love for humanity through the gift of the Word, it is precisely the marriage of Mary and Joseph that brings to realization in full 'freedom' the 'spousal gift of self' in receiving and expressing such a love" (§7). In looking at God's plan for family, its basis is marriage. This is how He established life here on earth and it is into a family that Jesus was born. Joseph was to be a father to Jesus. Our song continues,

You taught and nurtured Jesus

As Joseph led the Holy Family, he was a witness to Jesus of how to be a man. The life of the Holy Family was not an easy one. For the first years of Jesus' life, they travelled to many different places, something unique in ancient times. From Nazareth to Bethlehem, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, back to Bethlehem; flee to Egypt, return to Bethlehem; no, go to Nazareth and settle there. Joseph took it all in stride; he didn't complain. We do not have any recorded words of Joseph; he was a man of action. He discerned what he was to do and he did it. All of this showed to Jesus and Mary their importance in the family. He was willing to lay down his life for both of them. Pope Francis (2020) wrote in his document, *Patris Corde*, inaugurating the Year of St. Joseph, "In every situation, Joseph declared his own "fiat", like those of Mary at the Annunciation and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane" (§3). Continually on his lips were the words of Joshua from the Old Testament, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15).

Joseph, in his youthful strength, was called to protect Mary and Jesus, and to him, they were obedient. While many in our society vie for power, this was not something that Joseph desired and yet he did it. He cared for the pregnant Mary as they travelled to Bethlehem, found a place for the birth of Jesus, continued working to provide for the Holy Family, led them to safety in Egypt after the threat of Herod. Tradition gives that they were in Egypt for over three years (Peters, ND). He had to be a support to Mary and Jesus, even while they were a

great comfort and consolation to him. He served them as Head of the Holy Family and they looked to him for his leadership.

Bishop Olmsted (2015) in his document on the role of the Christian man, *Into the Breach*, writes: “A father’s role as spiritual head of the family must never be understood or undertaken as domination over others, but only as a loving leadership and a gentle guidance for those in your care” (p. 20). St. Joseph was humble and generous, continually looking out for the needs of his family. It is very easy to become selfish, to want to give one’s needs priority. Joseph teaches us that by putting another person’s needs first one can participate in salvation.

He took them to a foreign land known for paganism, away from all that they knew and treasured. He did not become bitter. When it was safe to return, he could not take them back to Bethlehem. He had to trust God to take care of making it known Jesus’ birthplace, even though He grew up in Nazareth, an uncultured town that was looked down upon. God had revealed through the prophet Micah that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, and God had provided a way to get the Holy Family to Bethlehem for Jesus’ birth. The Heavenly Father was the one who would make these things known at the proper time and in the proper way.

Another event that was a challenge for St. Joseph was the loss of Jesus for three days (Luke 2:41-52). The Holy Family would make the pilgrimage journeys to Jerusalem for the feasts. The year Jesus was twelve marked a turning point. Jesus had always known He was God and that He came for a reason. Joseph was going to get a glimpse into this mystery; he was going to experience what Mary was going to experience at Jesus’ burial. It was a suffering for St. Joseph: I can’t always be there to protect Him – He must be about His Father’s business. Joseph shows what all parents are called to – to be able to let their children go and follow their God-given vocation. While it says that Mary pondered this in her heart, we know that Joseph took this to heart as well.

As far as time, he was with the Holy Family for barely thirty years. This seems like such a short time to spend with Jesus and Mary on earth. What was life like for the Holy Family during these hidden years, the years from the finding in the Temple to the death of St. Joseph? Pope Paul VI (1964) has a beautiful reflection on the “school of Nazareth” and all that can be learned

from the Holy Family: silence, family life, and work. We should all spend time at the school of Nazareth, reflecting on the life of the Holy Family.

Oh teach us to be true, / True to the Church he founded, / Until we form above / A family united / In bonds of lasting love.

Again, it is into the family that Jesus came. He didn't appear as a thirty-year-old man when it was time to begin His public ministry. Pope John Paul II (1981) states in *Familiaris Consortio*, "The future of the world and of the Church passes through the family" (§75). The family holds such an importance for each one of us. This life of communion prepares us for the life of communion with the Blessed Trinity.

Bishop Olmsted (2018), in his document on marriage and family, *Complete My Joy*, wrote, "Family is likely where we feel the deepest joys as well as the deepest pain. This is because of the deep love that comes with family; it echoes our deep human need for love" (§2). The union of Jesus, Mary and Joseph teaches us how to love, how to give of ourselves within our families. Family is about persons and about the best place for human flourishing, the way God has ordained, the way Christ Himself lived. It is not always going to be perfect; we are dealing with fallen human beings.

Sometimes our families seem like the last place for holiness. Matthew and Luke give us Jesus' lineage and it isn't one that was free of sinners. Jesus came in the midst of our mess and struggle. While there are certain things that Jesus did not experience, He does share many of the sufferings involved in being part of our human society and family life.

In the family, we learn about love. Pope John Paul II (1981) stated in *Familiaris Consortio*, "The essence and role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride" (§18). It is for this reason that we need to protect the family in our society.

It is in the family that we are helped to know who we are. It is in the family that we are taught security. Security that comes from being able to receive love and give love. In knowing one is loved, one will be able to go out because one knows he or she will have a safe place to return, to be encouraged and affirmed. The child needs to know that the parents delight in him

or her. This requires a forgetfulness of self, a concern for the other person. The ability to let go as well as provide for the times the child needs the attention (Circle of Security, 2014).

Pope Francis (2014) gave a catechesis on the Holy Family in Nazareth. There he stated, “Each Christian family can first of all — as Mary and Joseph did — welcome Jesus, listen to Him, speak with Him, guard Him, protect Him, grow with Him; and in this way improve the world. Let us make room in our heart and in our day for the Lord” (p. 2). If we treat each member of our families as we would treat Christ, we would find much peace.

Family life can be very difficult, especially as our culture stresses such individualism. This is a reason to turn even more to the Holy Family, with St. Joseph as head and pillar. Pope Francis (2014) continues,

“It is no coincidence, then, that “Nazareth” means “She who keeps”, as Mary, who — as the Gospel states — “kept all these things in her heart” (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). Since then, each time there is a family that keeps this mystery, even if it were on the periphery of the world, the mystery of the Son of God, the mystery of Jesus who comes to save us, the mystery is at work. He comes to save the world. And this is the great mission of the family: to make room for Jesus who is coming, to welcome Jesus in the family, in each member: children, husband, wife, grandparents.... Jesus is there. Welcome him there, in order that He grow spiritually in the family” (p. 3).

Jesus came in the midst of a family and he comes to us in our own families. In imitating the Holy Family, we can see how father, mother, children can work together to realize God’s love in their midst. With St. Joseph as Head of the Holy Family, we know that he will guide us in our desire to live as obedient members of our family.

In conclusion, I would like to go back to our song, “O Joseph, Mighty Patron” to conclude this topic.

“O Joseph, mighty patron
Your love and strength bestow
Upon a pilgrim people
Who are the Church below.
You were the Father’s image,
Great prince of David’s line;
Obtain for us God’s blessing
That we may be his sign.”

(Sr. Marie Michael, 1970)

St. Joseph, be our support in our families; show us how to love Jesus and Mary as you did.

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