

Saint Joseph, the Saint for our Times

Thursday, June 10, 2021 ~ St. Joseph, Lover of Poverty



A common topic of conversation in the classroom is the evangelical counsels, or the three vows that religious take: poverty, chastity, and obedience. It has been my experience that these can be lovely conversations, and the students really grasp the beauty of the vows. They especially grasp the fact that they are not three no's—no husband, no stuff, and no doing what you want—rather, they are one all-encompassing yes to Jesus, the Bridegroom. Like anyone who decides a certain trajectory for his/her life, there are no's involved, but that is not really a big deal. When a wife chooses a husband, she is not worried about all the men she is saying no to. And the students understand this and see it until someone asks about a cell phone. “You don't have a cell phone?” You can almost feel the sheer terror that overcomes the room, and for half a second you wonder what monstrous heresy just came from your mouth or maybe I really did turn into a two-headed monster. This semester I was subbing for another teacher, and an 8th grade girl and I were having this cell phone discussion. She was quite an extremist and was trying to convince me that it was actually sinful not to have a cell phone. “What if someone was in trouble and I needed to call for help?” I just looked at her and said: “Jesus didn't have a cell phone.” I won that argument, and it ended the conversation rather abruptly.

Tonight, we are going to reflect on St. Joseph under the title of Lover of Poverty. I think most Catholics would know that when discussing the virtue of poverty, the Church is not extolling destitution or impoverishment. It is not wrong to have a cell phone. In fact, in this progressive day and age when socialism and socialistic-type structures seem to be growing more and more, it is usually the Church who is first to remind people that owning private property is a basic human right, a legitimate good that cannot be taken away by any

government for any reason. While Jesus did not have a cell phone, He did have a carpentry business and the Holy Family probably owned some things like food, clothes, and the Holy House of Loretto. They owned these things because they worked for them and made a living for themselves. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph had life's necessities, and as father of the family, St. Joseph would have had the obligation to desire and work for these possessions for his family. So clearly "Lover of Poverty" cannot possibly mean "Lover of Destitution."

However, you cannot define something by what it is not. That would be like defining a pew by saying, "Well, it's not an elephant." That is true, but it is not a very helpful way to define things. So, what is poverty? It is not destitution, true, but what is it and how does that relate to the virtue of poverty, the habitual way of being poor. Poverty is defined by Webster's Dictionary as the "state of being inferior in quality or insufficient in amount," so poverty clearly is some sort of going without, some sort of lack. Even though we are very quick to say that the virtue of poverty is not strictly "being poor," we cannot fall into the first world trap of thinking, "Well I have things, I'm rich in fact, but I'm still a good person and so I'll just give money to the Church so I don't go to hell." No. We cannot forget what Jesus said: It is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to get to Heaven. Oh, how consumerism loves to forget about that! The virtue of poverty does require us to go without and it does not seem as if poverty is optional when it comes to getting to Heaven.

St. Joseph, the Great Provider, could not provide a proper place for his wife to deliver a baby, a legitimate need. Not only was it beneath his dignity as God to be born in a stable, but it was beneath Jesus' dignity as a human to be born in a stable! Joseph and Mary would have suffered because of this. It was not right, not just. But they did not turn to demanding their rights and their needs from God or others. They were content with what they had, with what God gave them. They have done their best, and they have obeyed. The rest is up to God. This virtue of contentment, the "being content" part of poverty, is very difficult to discern. It is the middle between laziness and demanding – placing demands on others or on God to fulfill your needs. So while yes, owning things is a good thing, standing up for your rights is a good thing, being content with what you have is also a good thing and a virtue to be fostered. For example, is a cell phone good? Yes. Do you need the iPhone 47 because it has one more emoji than the

iPhone 46? Probably not. Consumerism is this attitude that makes up needs in the face of possibilities and it infects the materially rich and the materially poor alike. It infects the religious or the non-religious alike. It is possible to get ten jars of pickles for ½ price, but do I need ten jars of pickles? Consumerism tricks us into saying yes for this reason or that. In addition, not only does consumerism make up false needs, it demands that all my needs be met. Sometimes it is good to let our needs go unmet so our wants do not become needs. We need food, but sometimes it is okay to skip a meal, or skip the better part of a meal so I can keep my natural desire for food in check. Therefore, I can see what is really important. This is one of the reasons we have an annual Lent, to get this interior greed—which we all have—under control.

Having said all this, we have to go back to the fact that destitution is not a good thing. It is always this Catholic “both/and” that holds two seeming opposites in juxtaposition at all times. For example, the Incarnation holds Jesus’ humanity and divinity, his two very different natures, always together in one divine person without confusion, change, division, or separation.¹ So with the virtue of poverty, we have to remember that while we are not talking pennilessness, we do know that material poverty does have some part to play.

We have been taking the themes for these Novena talks from the Litany of St. Joseph and it says at the end of that litany that God has made St. Joseph lord of his household, and prince over all his possessions. St. Joseph was not and is not a pauper and in fact he was rewarded with all of God’s possessions! So there’s something more to poverty than material things. There just has to be. If someone is poor, truly poor, a lover of poverty poor, what do they look like? What is it that the virtue of poverty not have? In other words, what does the rich man, the camel and the eye of the needle rich man, have that keeps him out of Heaven?

I’ll go to our Holy Father, Pope Francis, for the answer. He says in a 2019 Advent Angelus address, (St.) Joseph is poor because he lives of the essential...it is the poverty typical of those who are aware of their dependence for everything on God and place all their trust in

¹ Richard Price; Michael Gaddis (2006). *The acts of the Council of Chalcedon* by Council of Chalcedon. pp. 1–5. ISBN 0-85323-039-0. Retrieved 5 June 2021.

Him.² The answer lies in trust! The poor person trusts God and his will while the rich man trusts himself. He trusts his own talents, his own wit, his own money, his work ethic, his way of thinking, his way of doing things. The poor man is the exact opposite. St. Joseph's trust, adds the Holy Father, led him to be deeply sensitive to God's will. St. Joseph had his own plan for his life. He was going to marry Our Lady, be a carpenter, and they were good to lead God-fearing, just lives. It was a good plan, a holy plan. Then God made his will more fully manifest, Mary became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit and as has been brought out, St. Joseph wanted to depart from her out of a deep, deep humility and it took another act of God to convince him to stay. The purpose of St. Joseph's life was being revealed to him, and he only followed it because he trusted in God more than he trusted in himself, because he was poor.³

We have a great lie underlying our culture, a social sin perhaps. Now that statement should not be news to anyone in this room! We have many cultural lies, but there is one that is less detected and one that we feed our children in schools from a very young age: "You can be anything you want to be, just set your mind to it." This sounds great and is very inspiring. It makes people feel so good, but it doesn't matter how much I set my mind to being an NFL quarterback it is never going to happen. I can spend my life wanting and willing to be Patrick Mahomes, but in the end it will only lead to unfulfilled desires, which, my friends, is the definition of unhappiness. The posture of a disciple, a steward, of a poor person, is to first receive. We recognize and receive God's gifts, receive the purpose of our lives, receive his plans for us. Then we set our minds to that, trusting that we will find true joy and happiness there. Pope Francis says St. Joseph was a man who "always listened to the voice of God...He did not persist in following his own plan for his life...rather he was ready to make himself

² Francis, Angelus Address (22 December 2019) at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2019/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20191222.html.

³ Francis, Angelus Address (22 December 2013) at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20131222.html.

available to the news that, in such a bewildering way, was being presented to him.”⁴ St. Joseph trusted, received, and in turn was able to fulfill God’s will. He was not filling himself with his own needs, plans, or desires. This is the portrait of true poverty.

I think the last point I would like to make about St. Joseph is perhaps the hardest to swallow. It is the one that needs to be prayed over and contemplated at a deep, deep level and one that cannot be explored significantly in a twenty-minute talk, but only in the deep recesses of the human heart. This mystery of poverty is given to us at the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple forty days after his birth. Simeon, the holy old prophet, met Mary and Joseph in the Temple, recognized baby Jesus as the Messiah, and prophesied that He would be a light to the nations! Yeah! Good news! Then comes the bad news. Simeon said Jesus would be a sign that would be contradicted, and that a sword would pierce Mary’s own soul. This raises an interesting question: Did Joseph and Mary know that Jesus’ mission would mean suffering and death? That is surely a topic for debate. I tend to think yes, because they would have known the scriptures that speak of a Suffering Messiah. Regardless, they know now after Simeon's prophecy. Jesus will suffer, as will Mary. But what about Joseph? Where is Joseph in all this? There is no mention of him suffering. In fact, Simeon has no words for Jesus’ father. The Son will be scorned, the Mother’s heart will be crushed, but Joseph? Joseph will not be there. The two people you love the most in this world - you would die ten times over so they would not have to prick their finger - but they are going to undergo unexplainable torments and God is asking you to be absent. What this would have done to St. Joseph's fatherly heart! The trust it would have taken! The daily reminding of yourself that God’s plan is the best one! St. Joseph would have had to perfect his poverty, this trust, throughout the rest of his life, and we know that he did because he did not take his family and run. Any father would have said “I am taking over God. We are getting out of here! If you cannot protect us, I will.” And at one point they were asked to run to Egypt to save Jesus’ life, but not this time. Additionally, St. Joseph was not just any father. He was a Lover of Poverty and so he was a Lover of Trust. He trusted God and

⁴ ibid.

his plan for himself and his beloved family. He trusted enough to stay and suffer, and asked his family to do the same.

No, Jesus did not have a cell phone and neither did his mother or father. They did not need one. They listened to God, did what was asked of them, worked their hardest doing all they could. The rest they entrusted to God. Possessions and plans and doing what is the best for your family are very tough paths to think through and I do not think we ever quite figure them out for sure. What we can do is examine our lives, our daily decisions. Am I listening to the right voice: God's, or the enemy's? The enemy's voice includes Satan for sure, but also myself and the world. I have to keep in check what society and my own fallen nature feed me. We also have to examine if we are doing my best, doing all we can? Do I work hard both materially and spiritually for those under my care? For most people in this day and age this probably includes using a cell phone! But are we using it well? However, most importantly, in whom am I placing my trust: God or myself? Do I live according to God's plans or my own? Do I try to see things from his point of view or do I insert my own way of thinking into everything? We need help wading these waters because they are so vitally important for us and those for whom we are responsible. So let us ask St. Joseph, the Lover of Poverty, to show us the way and be the leader in our homes and in our lives.