

CATECHESSES
ON
SAINT JOSEPH

(17 November 2021 – 16 February 2022)

POPE FRANCIS

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— CHAPTER I —

**Saint Joseph and the Environment
in Which He Lived**

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 17 November 2021*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

On 8 December 1870, Blessed **Pius IX** proclaimed Saint Joseph Patron of the Universal Church. One hundred and fifty years on from that event, we are living a special year dedicated to Saint Joseph, and in the Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, I gathered together some reflections on him. Never like before, today, in this time marked by a global crisis made up of several components, can he offer us support, consolation and guidance. Therefore, I have decided to dedicate a cycle of catecheses to him, which I hope may further help us to let ourselves be enlightened by his example and by his witness. For a few weeks we will talk about Joseph.

There are more than ten people in the Bible who bear the name Joseph. The most important among them is the son of Jacob and Rachel who, through various vicissitudes, went from being a slave to becoming the second most important person in Egypt after the Pharaoh (cf. *Gen 37-50*). The name Joseph is Hebrew for “may God increase, may God give growth”. It is a wish, a blessing based on trust in providence and referring

especially to fertility and to raising children. Indeed, this very name reveals to us an essential aspect of Joseph of Nazareth's personality. He is a man full of faith, in providence: he believes in God's providence, he has faith in God's providence. His every action, as recounted in the Gospel, is dictated by the certainty that God "gives growth", that God "increases", that God "adds": that is, that God provides for the continuation of his plan of salvation. And in this, Joseph of Nazareth is very similar to Joseph of Egypt.

The first geographical reference to Joseph, Bethlehem and Nazareth, also assume an important role in our understanding of him.

In the Old Testament, the city of Bethlehem is called *Beth Lechem*, that is, "House of bread", or also Ephrathah, after the tribe that settled there. In Arabic, however, the name means "House of meat", probably because of the large number of flocks of sheep and goats in the area. Indeed, it is not by chance that when Jesus was born, the shepherds were the first to witness the event (cf. *Lk* 2:8-20). In the light of the story of Jesus, these allusions to bread and meat refer to the mystery of the Eucharist: Jesus is the living bread descended from heaven (cf. *Jn* 6:51). He will say of himself: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (*Jn* 6:54).

Bethlehem is mentioned several times in the Bible, as far back as the Book of Genesis.

Bethlehem is also linked to the story of Ruth and Naomi, told in the short but wonderful Book of Ruth. Ruth bears a son named Obed, to whom in turn Jesse is born, the father of King David. And it was from the line of David that Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, descended. Then the prophet Micah foretold great things about Bethlehem: “You, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are so little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel” (*Mi* 5:1). The evangelist Matthew would take up this prophecy and connect it to the story of Jesus as its evident fulfilment.

In fact, the Son of God did not choose Jerusalem as the place of his incarnation, but Bethlehem and Nazareth, two outlying villages, far from the clamour of the news and the powers of the time. Yet Jerusalem was the city loved by the Lord (cf. *Is* 62:1-12), the “holy city” (*Dn* 3:28), chosen by God as his dwelling (cf. *Zech* 3:2; *Ps* 132:13). Here, in fact, dwelt the teachers of the Law, the scribes and Pharisees, the chief priests and the elders of the people (cf. *Lk* 2:46; *Mt* 15:1; *Mk* 3:22; *Jn* 1:19; *Mt* 26:3).

This is why the choice of Bethlehem and Nazareth tells us that the periphery and marginality are preferred by God. Jesus was not born in Jerusalem, with all the court... no, he was born in a periphery and spent his life, until the age of thirty, in that periphery, working as a carpenter like Joseph. For Jesus, the peripheries and marginality were favoured. To fail to take this fact

seriously is equivalent to not take seriously the Gospel and the work of God, who continues to manifest himself in the geographical and existential peripheries. The Lord always acts in secret in the peripheries, even in our souls, in the peripheries of the soul, of feelings, perhaps feelings of which we are ashamed; but the Lord is there to help us move forward. The Lord continues to manifest himself in the peripheries, both geographical and existential. In particular, Jesus goes in search of sinners; he goes into their homes, speaks with them, calls them to conversion. And he is also rebuked for this: “But look, this Master”, say the doctors of the law, “Look at this Master: he eats with sinners, he gets dirty”. He goes in search also of those who have done no evil but have suffered it: the sick, the hungry, the poor, the least. Jesus always goes out to the peripheries of our heart, the peripheries of our soul, this is, that slightly obscure part that we do not show, perhaps out of shame.

In this respect, the society of that time is not very different from ours. Today, too, there is a centre and a periphery. And the Church knows that she is called to proclaim the good news from the periphery. Joseph, who is a carpenter from Nazareth and who trusts in God’s plan for his young fiancée and for himself, reminds the Church to keep her eyes on what the world deliberately ignores. Today Joseph teaches us this: “Do not look so much at the things that the world praises, look into the corners, look in the shadows, look at the peripheries, at what the

world does not want”. He reminds each of us to accord consider important what others discard. In this sense he is truly a master of the essential: he reminds us that what truly matters does not attract our attention, but requires patient discernment to be discovered and appreciated. To discover what matters. Let us ask him to intercede so that the whole Church may recover this insight, this ability to discern, this capacity to evaluate what is essential. Let us start again from Bethlehem, let us start again from Nazareth.

Today I would like to send a message to all the men and women who live in the most forgotten geographical peripheries of the world, or who experience situations of existential marginalisation. May you find in Saint Joseph the witness and protector to look to. We can turn to him with this prayer, a “home-made” prayer, but one that comes from the heart:

*Saint Joseph,
you who have always trusted God,
and have made your choices guided by his
providence
teach us not to count so much on our own plans but
on his plan of love.
You who come from the peripheries
help us to convert our gaze
and to prefer what the world discards and
marginalises.
Comfort those who feel alone
and support those who work silently to defend life
and human dignity. Amen.*

— CHAPTER II —

Saint Joseph in Salvation History

*Saint Peter's Basilica - Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 24 November 2021*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last Wednesday we began a cycle of catecheses on Saint Joseph – the year dedicated to him is coming to an end. Today we will continue this journey, focusing on his role in salvation history.

Jesus in the Gospels is indicated as the “son of Joseph” (*Lk* 3:23; 4: 22; *Jn* 1:45; 6:42) and the “carpenter’s son” (*Mt* 13:55; *Mk* 6:3). Narrating Jesus’ childhood, the Evangelists Matthew and Luke dedicate space to the role of Joseph. Both of them compile a “genealogy” to highlight the historicity of Jesus. Addressing himself above all to the Judeo-Christians, Matthew starts from Abraham and ends up at Joseph, defined as “the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (1:16). Luke, on the other hand, goes all the way back to Adam, beginning directly with Jesus, who “was the son of Joseph”, but specifies: “as was supposed” (3:23). Therefore, both Evangelists present Joseph not as the biological father, but in any case, as fully the father of Jesus. Through him, Jesus fulfils the history of the covenant and salvation between God and humanity. For Matthew this history

begins with Abraham; for Luke, with the very origin of humanity, that is, with Adam.

The evangelist Matthew helps us to understand that the person of Joseph, although apparently marginal, discreet, and in the background, is in fact a central element in the history of salvation. Joseph lives his role without ever seeking to take over the scene. If we think about it, “Our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines. ... How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small ways, and in everyday ways, how to accept and deal with a crisis by adjusting their routines, looking ahead and encouraging the practice of prayer. How many are praying, making sacrifices and interceding for the good of all” (Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, 1). Thus, everyone can find in Saint Joseph, the man who goes unnoticed, the man of daily presence, of discreet and hidden presence, an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of difficulty. He reminds us that all those who are seemingly hidden or in the “second row” are unparalleled protagonists in the history of salvation. The world needs these men and women: men and women in the second row, but who support the development of our life, of every one of us, and who with prayer, and by their example, with their teaching, sustain us on the path of life.

In the Gospel of Luke, Joseph appears as the *guardian of Jesus and of Mary*. And for this reason, he is also “the Guardian of the Church”: but, if he was the guardian of Jesus and Mary, he works, now that he is in heaven, and continues to be a guardian, in this case of the Church, for the Church is the continuation of the Body of Christ in history, even as Mary’s motherhood is reflected in the motherhood of the Church. In his continued protection of the Church – please do not forget this: today, Joseph protects the Church – and by continuing to protect the Church, he continues to protect *the child and his mother*” (*ibid.*, 5). This aspect of Joseph’s guardianship is the great answer to the story of Genesis. When God asks Cain to account for Abel’s life, he replies: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (4: 9). With his life, Joseph seems to want to tell us that we are always called to feel that we are our brothers and sisters’ keepers, the guardians of those who are close to us, of those whom the Lord entrusts to us through many circumstances of life.

A society such as ours, which has been defined as “liquid”, as it seems not to have consistency... I will correct the philosopher who coined this definition and say: more than liquid, gaseous, a properly gaseous society. This liquid, gaseous society finds in the story of Joseph a very clear indication of the importance of human bonds. Indeed, the Gospel tells us the genealogy of Jesus, not only for a theological reason, but also to remind each one of us that our lives are made up

of bonds that precede and accompany us. The Son of God chose to come into the world by way of such bonds, the way of history: he did not come down into the world by magic, no. He took the historic route we all take.

Dear brothers and sisters, I think of the many people who find it difficult to find meaningful bonds in their lives, and because of this they struggle, they feel alone, they lack the strength and courage to go on. I would like to conclude with a prayer to help them, and all of us, to find in Saint Joseph an ally, a friend and a support.

*Saint Joseph,
you who guarded the bond with Mary and Jesus,
help us to care for the relationships in our lives.
May no one experience that sense of
abandonment
that comes from loneliness.
Let each of us be reconciled with our own history,
with those who have gone before,
and recognise even in the mistakes made
a way through which Providence has made its
way,
and evil did not have the last word.
Show yourself to be a friend to those who struggle
the most,
and as you supported Mary and Jesus in difficult
times,
support us too on our journey. Amen.*

— CHAPTER III —

Just Man and Husband of Mary

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 1st December 2021

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our journey of reflection on the person of Saint Joseph. Today, I would like to deepen his being “just” and “Mary’s betrothed spouse”, and thus provide a message to all engaged couples, and newlyweds as well. Many events connected with Joseph fill the stories of the apocryphal, that is, non-canonical gospels, that have even influenced art and various places of worship. These writings that are not in the Bible are stories that Christian piety provided at that time and are a response to the desire to fill in the empty spaces in the canonical Gospel texts, the ones that are in the Bible, which provide you with everything that is essential for faith and the Christian life.

The evangelist Matthew – this is important. What does the Gospel say about Joseph? Not what these apocryphal gospels say which are not something ugly or bad, no! They are beautiful, but they are not the Word of God. Instead, the Gospels that are

in the Bible are the Word of God. Among these is the evangelist Matthew who defines Joseph as a “*just*” man. Let us listen to his account: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly” (1:18-19). Because those who were engaged, when the fiancée was unfaithful, or became pregnant, they could accuse her! They had to. And the women were stoned back then. But Joseph was just. He says: “No, I am not going to do this. I will go away quietly”.

To understand Joseph’s behaviour toward Mary, it is helpful to remember the marriage customs of ancient Israel. Marriage included two well-defined phases. The first was like an official engagement that already implied a new situation. In particular, while continuing to live in her paternal home for another year, the woman was in fact considered the “wife” of her betrothed spouse. They still did not live together, but it was like she was already someone’s wife. The second phase was the transfer of the bride from her paternal home to that of her spouse. This took place with a festive procession which concluded the marriage. And the friends of the bride accompanied her there. On the basis of these customs, the fact that “before they came to live together, Mary was found to be with child”

exposed the Virgin to the accusation of adultery. And, according to the ancient Law, her guilt was punishable with stoning (cf. *Dt* 22:20-21). Nevertheless, a more moderate interpretation had taken hold after this in later Jewish practice that imposed only an act of repudiation along with civil and criminal consequences for the woman, but not stoning.

The Gospel says that Joseph was “just” precisely because he was subject to the law as any pious Israelite. But within him, his love for Mary and his trust in her suggested a way he could remain in observance of the law and save the honour of his bride. He decided to repudiate her in secret, without making noise, without subjecting her to public humiliation. He chose the path of confidentiality, without a trial or retaliation. How holy Joseph was! We, as soon as we have a bit of gossip, something scandalous about someone else, we go around talking about it right away! Silent, Joseph. Silent.

But the evangelist Matthew adds immediately: “But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins’ ” (1:20.21). God’s voice intervenes in Joseph’s discernment. In a dream, He reveals a greater meaning than his own justice. How

important it is for each one of us to cultivate a just life and, at the same time, to always feel the need for God's help to broaden our horizons and to consider the circumstances of life from an always different, larger perspective. Many times, we feel imprisoned by what has happened to us: "But look what happened to me!" – and we remain imprisoned in that bad thing that happened to us. But particularly in front of some circumstances in life that initially appear dramatic, a Providence is hidden that takes shape over time and illuminates the meaning even of the pain that has touched us. The temptation is to close in on that pain, in that thought that good things never happen to us. And this is not good for us. This leads you to sadness and bitterness. A bitter heart is so ugly.

I would like us to pause to reflect on a detail of this story recounted in the Gospel that is often overlooked. Mary and Joseph were engaged to each other. They had probably cultivated dreams and expectations regarding their life and their future. Out of the blue, God seems to have inserted himself into their lives and, even if at first it was difficult for them, both of them opened their hearts wide to the reality that was placed before them.

Dear brothers and dear sisters, our lives are very often not what we imagine them to be. Especially in loving and affectionate relationships, it is difficult to move from the logic of falling in love to the logic of a mature love. We need to move

from infatuation to mature love. You newlyweds, think about this. The first phase is always marked by a certain enchantment that makes us live immersed in the imaginary that is often not based on reality and facts – the falling in love phase. But precisely when falling in love with its expectations seems to come to an end, that is where true love begins or true love enters in there. In fact, to love is not the pretension that the other person, or life, should correspond to our imagination. Rather, it means to choose in full freedom to take responsibility for one's life as it comes. This is why Joseph gives us an important lesson. He chooses Mary with "his eyes open". We can say "with all the risks". Think about this: in the Gospel of John, a reproof the doctors of the law make to Jesus is: "we are not children from that", referring to prostitution. They knew how Mary had remained pregnant and they wanted to throw dirt on Jesus' mamma. For me, this is the worst, the most demonic passage, in the Gospel. And Joseph's risk gives us this lesson: to take life as it comes. Has God intervened there? I accept it. And Joseph does what the angel of the Lord had ordered: "He took his wife, but knew her not" – without living together she is expecting a son – "until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus" (*Mt* 1:24-25). Christian engaged couples are called to witness to a love like this that has the courage to move from the logic of falling in love to that of mature love. This is a demanding choice that instead of imprisoning life, can fortify love so

that it endures when faced with the trials of time. A couple's love progresses in life and matures each day. The love during engagement is a bit – allow me to use the word – a bit romantic. You have all experienced this, but then mature love begins, love lived every day, from work, from the children that come... And sometimes that romanticism disappears a bit, right? But is that not love? Yes, but mature love. “But you know, Father, sometimes we fight...” This has been happening since the time of Adam and Eve until today, eh! That spouses fight is our daily bread, eh! “But we shouldn't fight?” Yes, yes, you must. It happens. I am not saying you should, but it happens. “And, Father, sometimes we raise our voices...” It happens. “And there are even times when plates fly”. It happens. But what can be done so that this does not damage the life of the marriage? Listen to me well: never finish the day end without making peace. “We fought. My God, I said bad words. I said awful things. But now, to finish the day, I must make peace”. You know why? Because the cold war the next day is very dangerous. Don't let war begin the next day. For this reason, make peace before going to bed. “But, Father, you know, I don't know how to express myself to make peace after such an awful situation that we experienced”. It's very easy. Do this (the Pope caresses his cheek) and peace is already made. Remember this always. Remember always: never finish the day without making peace. And this will help you in your married life. To them

and to all the married couples who are here. This movement from falling in love to mature love is a demanding choice, but we must choose that path.

This time too, let us conclude with a prayer to Saint Joseph.

*Saint Joseph,
you who loved Mary with freedom,
and chose to renounce your fantasies to give way
to reality,
help each of us to allow ourselves to be surprised
by God
and to accept life not as something unforeseen
from which to defend ourselves,
but as a mystery that hides the secret of true joy.
Obtain joy and radicality for all engaged
Christians,
while always being aware
that only mercy and forgiveness make love
possible. Amen.*

— CHAPTER IV —

Man of Silence

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 15 December 2021*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our journey of reflection on Saint Joseph. After illustrating the environment in which he lived, his role in salvation history and his being just and the spouse of Mary, today I would like to consider another important personal aspect: silence. Very often nowadays we need silence. Silence is important. I am struck by a verse from the Book of Wisdom that was read with Christmas in mind, which says: “While gentle silence enveloped all things, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven”. The moment of most silence God manifested himself. It is important to think about silence in this age in which it does not seem to have much value.

The Gospels do not contain a single word uttered by Joseph of Nazareth: nothing, he never spoke. This does not mean that he was taciturn, no: there is a deeper reason why the Gospels do not say a word. With his silence, Joseph confirms what Saint Augustine writes: “To the extent that the *Word* – that is, the Word made man - *grows in us, words diminish*”.¹ To the extent that Jesus, the

¹ *Discourse 288, 5: PL 38, 1307.*

spiritual life, grows, words diminish. What we can describe as “parroting”, speaking like parrots, continually, diminishes a little. John the Baptist himself, who is “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’ ” (*Mt* 3:3) says in relation to the Word, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (*Jn* 3:30). This means that he must speak and I must be silent, and through his silence, Joseph invites us to leave room for the Presence of the Word made flesh, for Jesus.

Joseph’s silence is not mutism, he is not taciturn; it is a silence full of *listening*, an *industrious* silence, a silence that brings out his great interiority. “The Father spoke a word, and it was his Son”, comments St John of the Cross, the Father said a word and it was his Son - “and it always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul”².

Jesus was raised in this “school”, in the house of Nazareth, with the daily example of Mary and Joseph. And it is not surprising that he himself sought spaces of silence in his days (cf. *Mt* 14:23) and invited his disciples to have such an experience by example: “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while” (*Mk* 6:31).

² *Dichos de luz y amor*, BAC, Madrid, 417, n. 99.

How good it would be if each one of us, following the example of Saint Joseph, were able to recover this *contemplative dimension of life, opened wide in silence*. But we all know from experience that it is not easy: silence frightens us a little, because it asks us to delve into ourselves and to confront the part of us that is true. And many people are afraid of silence, they have to speak, and speak, and speak, or listen to radio or television... but they cannot accept silence because they are afraid. The philosopher Pascal observed that “all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber”.³

Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn from Saint Joseph how to cultivate spaces for silence in which another Word can emerge, that is, Jesus, the Word: that of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, that Jesus brings. It is not easy to recognise that Voice, which is very often confused along with the thousand voices of worries, temptations, desires, and hopes that dwell within us; but without this training that comes precisely from the practice of silence, *our tongue can also ail*. Without practicing silence, our tongue can also ail. Instead of making the truth shine, it can become a dangerous weapon. Indeed, our words can become flattery, bragging, lies, backbiting and slander. It is an established fact that, as the Book of Sirach reminds us, “many have fallen by

³ *Pensées*, 139.

the edge of the sword, but not so many as have fallen because of the tongue” (28:18), the tongue kills more than the sword. Jesus said clearly: whoever speaks ill of his brother or sister, whoever slanders his neighbour, is a murderer (cf. *Mt* 5:21-22). Killing with the tongue. We do not believe this, but it is the truth. Let us think a little about the times we have killed with the tongue: we would be ashamed! But it will do us good, a great deal of good.

Biblical wisdom affirms that “death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (*Pr* 18:21). And the Apostle James, in his Letter, we read at the beginning, develops this ancient theme of the power, positive and negative, of the word with striking examples, and he says: “If any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also... So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing” (3:2-10).

This is why we must learn from Joseph to cultivate silence: that space of interiority in our days in which we give the Spirit the opportunity to regenerate us, to console us, to correct us. I am not saying to fall into muteness, no. Silence. But very often, each one of us look inside, when we are working on something and when we finish, immediately we look for our telephone to make another call... we are always like this. And this

does not help, this makes us slip into superficiality. Profoundness of the heart grows with silence, silence that is not mutism as I said, but which leaves space for wisdom, reflection and the Holy Spirit. We are afraid of moments of silence. Let us not be afraid! It will do us good. And the benefit to our hearts will also heal our tongue, our words and above all our choices. In fact, Joseph *combined silence with action*. He did not speak, but he acted, and thus demonstrated what Jesus once told his disciples: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (*Mt 7:21*). Silence. Fruitful words when we speak, and we remember that song: “Parole, parole, parole...”, words, words, words, and nothing of substance. Silence, speaking in the right way, and biting your tongue a little, which can be good at times instead of saying foolish things.

Let us conclude with a prayer:

*Saint Joseph, man of silence,
you who in the Gospel did not utter a single word,
teach us to fast from vain words,
to rediscover the value of words that edify,
encourage, console and support.
Be close to those who suffer from words that hurt,
like slander and backbiting,
and help us always to match words with deeds.
Amen.*

— CHAPTER V —

Persecuted and Courageous Migrant

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 29 December 2021*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I would like to present Saint Joseph to you as a *persecuted and courageous migrant*. This is how the Evangelist Matthew describes him. This particular event in the life of Jesus, which also involves Joseph and Mary, is traditionally known as “the flight into Egypt” (cf. *Mt* 2:13-23). The family of Nazareth suffered such humiliation and experienced first-hand the precariousness, fear and pain of having to leave their homeland. Today so many of our brothers and sisters are still forced to experience the same injustice and suffering. The cause is almost always the arrogance and violence of the powerful. This was also the case for Jesus.

King Herod learns from the Magi of the birth of the “King of the Jews”, and the news shocks him. He feels insecure, he feels that his power is threatened. So, he gathers together all the leaders of Jerusalem to find out the place of His birth, and begs the Magi to inform him of the precise details, so that - he says falsely - he too can go and worship him. But when he realised that the Magi had set out in another direction, he conceived a wicked plan: to kill all the children in Bethlehem

under the age of two years, which was the period of time, according to the calculations of the Magi, in which Jesus was born.

In the meantime, an angel orders Joseph: “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him” (*Mt* 2:13). Think today of the many people who feel this impulse within: “Let’s flee, let’s flee, because there is danger here”. Herod’s plan calls to mind that of Pharaoh to throw all the male children of the people of Israel into the Nile (cf. *Ex* 1:22). The flight into Egypt evokes the whole history of Israel beginning with Abraham, who also sojourned there (cf. *Gen* 12:10); to Joseph, son of Jacob, sold by his brothers (cf. *Gen* 37:36) before becoming “ruler of the land” (cf. *Gen* 41:37-57); and to Moses, who freed his people from the slavery of the Egyptians (cf. *Ex* 1:18).

The flight of the Holy Family into Egypt saves Jesus, but unfortunately it does not prevent Herod from carrying out his massacre. We are thus faced with two opposing personalities: on the one hand, Herod with his ferocity, and on the other hand, Joseph with his care and courage. Herod wants to defend his power, his own skin, with ruthless cruelty, as attested to by the execution of one of his wives, some of his children and hundreds of opponents. He was a cruel man: to solve problems, he had just one answer: to kill. He is the symbol of many tyrants of yesteryear and of today. And for them, for these tyrants, people do

not count; power is what counts, and if they need space for power, they do away with people. And this happens *today*: we do not need to look at ancient history, it happens *today*. He is the man who becomes a “wolf” for other men. History is full of figures who, living at the mercy of their fears, try to conquer them by exercising power despotically and carrying out inhuman acts of violence. But we must not think that we live according to Herod's outlook only if we become tyrants, no; in fact, it is an attitude to which we can all fall prey, every time we try to dispel our fears with arrogance, even if only verbal, or made up of small abuses intended to mortify those close to us. We too have in our heart the possibility of becoming little Herods.

Joseph is the opposite of Herod: first of all, he is “a just man” (*Mt* 1:19), and Herod is a dictator. Furthermore, he proves he is courageous in following the Angel’s command. One can imagine the vicissitudes he had to face during the long and dangerous journey and the difficulties involved in staying in a foreign country, with another language: many difficulties. His courage emerges also at the moment of his return, when, reassured by the Angel, he overcomes his understandable fears and settles with Mary and Jesus in Nazareth (cf. *Mt* 2:19-23). Herod and Joseph are two opposing characters, reflecting the two ever-present faces of humanity. It is a common misconception to consider courage as the exclusive virtue of the hero. In reality, the daily life of every person requires courage. Our

way of living – yours, mine, everyone’s: one cannot live without courage, the courage to face each days’ difficulties. In all times and cultures, we find courageous men and women who, in order to be consistent with their beliefs, have overcome all kinds of difficulties, and have endured injustice, condemnation and even death. Courage is synonymous with fortitude, which together with justice, prudence and temperance is part of the group of human virtues known as “cardinal virtues”.

The lesson Joseph leaves us with today is this: life always holds adversities in store for us, this is true, in the face of which we may also feel threatened and afraid. But it is not by bringing out the worst in ourselves, as Herod does, that we can overcome certain moments, but rather by acting like Joseph, who reacts to fear with the courage to trust in God’s Providence. Today I think we need a prayer for all migrants; migrants and all the persecuted, and all those who are victims of adverse circumstances: be they political, historical or personal circumstances. But, let us think of the many people who are victims of wars, who want to flee from their homeland but cannot; let us think of the migrants who set out on that road to be free, so many of whom end up on the street or in the sea; let us think of Jesus in the arms of Joseph and Mary, fleeing, and let us see in him each one of the migrants of today. Migration today is a reality to which we cannot close our eyes. It is a social scandal of humanity.

*Saint Joseph,
you who have experienced the suffering of those
who must flee
you who were forced to flee to save the lives of
those dearest to you,
protect all those who flee because of war, hatred,
hunger.
Support them in their difficulties,
Strengthen them in hope, and let them find
welcome and solidarity.
Guide their steps and open the hearts of those who
can help them. Amen.*

— CHAPTER VI —

Jesus' Foster Father

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 5 January 2021*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will reflect on Saint Joseph as the father of Jesus. The evangelists Matthew and Luke present him as the foster father of Jesus, and not as his biological father. Matthew specifies this, avoiding the formula “the father of”, used in the genealogy for all the ancestors of Jesus; instead, he defines Joseph as the “husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (1:16). Luke, on the other hand, affirms it by saying that he was Jesus’ “supposed” father (3:23), that is, he appeared as His father,

To understand the alleged or legal paternity of Joseph, it is necessary to bear in mind that in ancient times in the East the institution of adoption was very common, more so than today. One thinks of the common case in Israel of the “levirate”, as formulated in Deuteronomy: “If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband’s brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is

dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel” (25:5-6). In other words, the parent of this child is the brother-in-law, but the legal father remains the deceased, who gives the newborn child all hereditary rights. The purpose of this law was twofold: to ensure the descendants of the deceased and the preservation of the estate.

As the official father of Jesus, Joseph exercises the right to impose a name on his son, legally recognising him. Legally he is the father, but not generatively; he did not beget Him.

In ancient times, the name was the compendium of a person’s identity. Changing one’s name meant changing oneself, as in the case of Abraham, whose name God changed to “Abraham”, which means “father of many”, “for”, says the Book of Genesis, he will be “the father of a multitude of nations” (17:5). The same goes for Jacob, who would be called “Israel”, which means “he who struggles with God”, because he struggled with God to compel Him to give him the blessing (cf. *Gen* 32:29; 35:10).

But above all, naming someone or something meant asserting one’s authority over what was named, as Adam did when he conferred a name on all the animals (cf. *Gen* 2:19-20).

Joseph already knows that, for Mary’s son, a name had already been prepared by God – Jesus’ name is given to him by his *true* father, God – “Jesus”, which means “the Lord saves”; as the

Angel explains, “He will save his people from their sins” (*Mt* 1:21). This particular aspect of Joseph now enables us to reflect on fatherhood and motherhood. And this, I believe, is very important: thinking about fatherhood today. Because we live in an age of notorious orphanhood, don’t we? It is curious: our civilization is something of an orphan, and this orphanhood can be felt. May Saint Joseph, who took the place of the real father, God, help us to understand how to resolve this sense of orphanhood that is so harmful to us today.

It is not enough to bring a child into the world to also be the child’s father or mother. “Fathers are not born, but made. A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person” (Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*). I think in a particular way of all those who are open to welcome life by way of adoption, which is such a generous and beautiful, good attitude. Joseph shows us that this type of bond is not secondary; it is not an afterthought, no. This kind of choice is among the highest forms of love, and of fatherhood and motherhood. How many children in the world are waiting for someone to take care of them! And how many married couples want to be fathers and mothers but are unable to do so for biological reasons; or, although they already have children, they want to share their family’s affection with those who do

not have it. We should not be afraid to choose the path of adoption, to take the “risk” of welcoming children. And today, with orphanhood, there is a certain selfishness. The other day, I spoke about the demographic winter there is nowadays, in which we see that people do not want to have children, or just one and no more. And many, many couples do not have children because they do not want to, or they have just one – but they have two dogs, two cats... Yes, dogs and cats take the place of children. Yes, it’s funny, I understand, but it is the reality. And this denial of fatherhood or motherhood diminishes us, it takes away our humanity. And in this way civilization becomes aged and without humanity, because it loses the richness of fatherhood and motherhood. And our homeland suffers, as it does not have children, and, as it has been said somewhat humorously, “and now who will pay the taxes for my pension, if there are no children?”: with laughter, but it is the truth. Who will take care of me? I ask of Saint Joseph the grace to awaken consciences and to think about this: about having children. Fatherhood and motherhood are the fullness of the life of a person. Think about this. It is true, there is the spiritual fatherhood of those who consecrated themselves to God, and spiritual motherhood; but those who live in the world and get married, think about having children, of giving life, which they will take from you for the future. And also, if you cannot have children, think about adoption. It is a risk, yes: having a child is always a risk, either naturally or by adoption. But it is riskier not to have them. It is

riskier to deny fatherhood, or to deny motherhood, be it real or spiritual. But denial, a man or woman who do not develop the sense of fatherhood or motherhood, they are lacking something, something fundamental, something important. Think about this, please.

I hope that the institutions will always be ready to help regarding adoption, by seriously monitoring but also simplifying the necessary procedure so that the dream of so many children who need a family, and of so many couples who wish to give themselves in love, can come true. Some time ago I heard the testimony of a person, a doctor – an important profession – who did not have children, and he and his wife decided to adopt one. And when the time came, they were offered a child, and they were told, “But we do not know how this child’s health is. Perhaps he has an illness”. And he said – I saw him – he said, “If you had asked me about this before coming, perhaps I would have said no. But I have seen the child: I will take him with me”. This is the longing to be an adoptive father, to be an adoptive mother too. Do not be afraid of this.

I pray that no one feel deprived of the bond of paternal love. And those who are afflicted with orphanhood, may they go forward without this unpleasant feeling. May Saint Joseph protect, and give his help to orphans; and may he intercede for couples who wish to have a child. Let us pray for this together:

*Saint Joseph,
you who loved Jesus with fatherly love,
be close to the many children who have no family
and who long for a daddy and mommy.
Support the couples who are unable to have
children,
help them to discover, through this suffering, a
greater plan.
Make sure that no one lacks a home, a bond,
a person to take care of him or her;
and heal the selfishness of those who close
themselves off from life,
that they may open their hearts to love.*

— CHAPTER VII —

The Carpenter

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 12 January 2021*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The evangelists Matthew and Mark refer to Joseph as a “carpenter” or “joiner”. We heard earlier that the people of Nazareth, hearing Jesus speak, asked themselves: “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (13:55; cf. *Mk* 6:3). Jesus practised his father’s trade.

The Greek term *tekton*, used to specify Joseph’s work, has been translated in various ways. The Latin Fathers of the Church rendered it as “carpenter”. But let us bear in mind that in the Palestine of Jesus’ time, wood was used not only to make ploughs and various pieces of furniture, but also to build houses, which had wooden frames and terraced roofs made of beams connected with branches and earth.

Therefore, “carpenter” or “joiner” was a generic qualification, indicating both woodworkers and craftsmen engaged in activities related to construction. It was quite a hard job, having to work with heavy materials such as wood, stone, and iron. From an economic point of view, it did not ensure great earnings, as can be deduced from

the fact that when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple, they offered only a couple of turtledoves or pigeons (cf. *Lk* 2:24), as the Law prescribed for the poor (cf. *Lv* 12:8).

The young Jesus thus learned this trade from his father. Therefore, when he began to preach as an adult, his astonished neighbours asked: “But where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?” (*Mt* 13:54), and were scandalized by him (cf. v. 57), because he was the son of the carpenter, but he spoke like a doctor of the law, and they were scandalized by this.

This biographical fact about Joseph and Jesus makes me think of all the workers in the world, especially those who do gruelling work in mines and in some factories; those who are exploited through undocumented work; the victims of labour: we have seen a lot of this in Italy recently; children who are forced to work and those who rummage among the trash in search of something useful to trade....

Let me repeat what I said: the hidden workers, the workers who do hard labour in mines and in some factories: let’s think of them: about those who are exploited with undocumented work, those who are paid in contraband, on the sly, without a pension, without anything. And if you do not work, you have no security. And today there is a lot of undocumented work. Let us think of the victims of work, of work accidents, of the children

who are forced to work: this is terrible! A child at the age of play should be playing. Instead, they are forced to work like adults! Let us think about those poor children who rummage in the dumps to look for something useful to trade. All these are our brothers and sisters, who earn their living this way: with jobs that do not give them dignity! Let us think about this. And this is happening today, in the world. This is happening today.

But I think too of those who are out of work. How many people go knocking on the doors of factories, of businesses [asking]: “Is there anything to do?” — “No, there isn’t, there isn’t. Lack of work! [I think] of those who feel wounded in their dignity because they cannot find this work. They return home: “Have you found something?” — “No, nothing... I went to Caritas and I brought bread”. What gives dignity is not bringing bread home. You can get it from Caritas — no, this does not give you dignity. What gives you dignity is earning bread — and if we do not give our people, our men and women, the ability to earn bread, there is a social injustice in that place, in that nation, in that continent. Leaders must give everyone the possibility of earning bread, because this ability to earn gives them dignity. Work is an anointing of dignity. And this is important.

Many young people, many fathers and mothers experience the ordeal of not having a job that allows them to live serenely. They live day to day.

And how often the search for work becomes so desperate that it drives them to the point of losing all hope and the desire to live. In these times of pandemic, many people have lost their jobs — we know this — and some, crushed by an unbearable burden, reached the point of taking their own lives. I would like to remember each of them and their families today. Let us take a moment of silence, remembering these men, these women, who are desperate because they cannot find work.

Not enough consideration is given to the fact that work is an essential component of human life, and even a path of holiness. Work is not only a means of earning a living: it is also a place where we express ourselves, feel useful, and learn the great lesson of concreteness, which helps keep spiritual life from becoming spiritualism. Unfortunately, however, labour is often a hostage to social injustice and, rather than being a means of humanization, it becomes an existential periphery. I often ask myself: With what spirit do we do our daily work? How do we deal with fatigue? Do we see our activity as linked only to our own destiny or also to the destiny of others? In fact, work is a way of expressing our personality, which is relational by its nature. And, work is also a way to express our creativity: each one of us works in their own way, with their own style: the same work but with different styles.

It is good to think about the fact that Jesus himself worked and had learned this craft from Saint

Joseph. Today, we should ask ourselves what we can do to recover the value of work; and what contribution we can make, as Church, [to ensure] that work can be redeemed from the logic of mere profit and can be experienced as a fundamental right and duty of the person, which expresses and increases his or her dignity.

Dear brothers and sisters, for all these [reasons], I would like to recite with you today the prayer that Saint Paul VI lifted up to Saint Joseph on 1 May 1969:

*O Saint Joseph,
Patron of the Church!
you, who side by side with the Word made flesh,
worked each day to earn your bread,
drawing from Him the strength to live and to toil;
you who experienced the anxiety for the morrow,
the bitterness of poverty, the uncertainty of work:
you who today give the shining example,
humble in the eyes of men
but most exalted in the sight of God:
protect workers in their hard daily lives,
defending them from discouragement,
from negative revolt,
and from pleasure loving temptations;
and keep peace in the world,
that peace which alone can ensure the development of
peoples
Amen.*

— CHAPTER VIII —

Father in Tenderness

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 19 January 2021*

Today, I would like to explore the figure of Saint Joseph as a *father in tenderness*.

In my Apostolic Letter [*Patris corde*](#), (8 December 2020) I had the opportunity to reflect on this aspect of tenderness, an aspect of Saint Joseph's personality. In fact, although the Gospels do not give us any details about how he exercised his paternity, we can be sure that his being a "just" man also translated into the education he gave to Jesus. "Joseph saw Jesus grow day by day 'in wisdom and age and favour before God and man'" (*Lk 2:52*): so the Gospel says. As the Lord had done with Israel, so Joseph did with Jesus: "he taught him to walk, taking him by the hand; he was for him like a father who raises an infant to his cheeks, bending down to him and feeding him (cf. *Hos 11:3-4*)." ([*Patris corde*](#), 2). It is beautiful, this definition in the Bible, that shows God's relationship with the people of Israel. It is the same relationship, we think, that there was between Saint Joseph and Jesus.

The Gospels attest that Jesus always used the word "father" to speak of God and his love. Many parables have as their protagonist the figure of a

father. One of the most famous is certainly that of the merciful Father, recounted by Luke the Evangelist (cf. *Lk* 15:11-32). This parable emphasizes not only the experience of sin and forgiveness, but also the way in which forgiveness reaches the person who has done wrong. The text says: “While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him” (v. 20). The son was expecting a punishment, a justice that at most could have given him the place of one of the servants, but he finds himself wrapped in his father's embrace. Tenderness is something greater than the logic of the world. It is an unexpected way of doing justice. That is why we must never forget that God is not frightened by our sins: let us fix this clearly in our minds. God is not frightened by our sins, he is greater than our sins: he is the father, he is love, he is tender. He is not frightened by our sins, our mistakes, our slip-ups, but he is frightened by the closure of our hearts – this, yes, this makes him suffer – he is frightened by our lack of faith in his love. There is great tenderness in the experience of God's love. And it is beautiful to think that the first person to transmit this reality to Jesus was Joseph himself. For the things of God always come to us through the mediation of human experiences. Long ago – I don't know if I have already told this story – a group of young people who did theatrical drama, a pop theatre group, ahead of the curve, were struck by this parable of

the merciful father and decided to create a pop theatre production on this matter, with this story. And they did it well. And the story is that, at the end, a friend listens to a son who is estranged from his father, who wanted to return home but was afraid that his father would kick him out and punish him. And the friend, said, “Send a messenger to say that you want to return home, and if your father will receive you, to put a handkerchief in the window, the one you can see as soon as you take the last part of the path home”. And this was done. And the work, with singing and dancing, continues until the moment that the son turns onto the last stretch of the road and sees the house. And when he looks up, he sees the house full of white handkerchiefs: full of them. Not one, but three or four in every window. This is God’s mercy. He is not deterred by our past, by the bad things we have done; settling the accounts with God is a beautiful thing, because we begin to talk, and he embraces us. Tenderness!

So, we can ask ourselves if we ourselves have experienced this tenderness, and if we in turn have become its witnesses. For tenderness is not primarily an emotional or sentimental matter: it is the experience of feeling loved and welcomed precisely in our poverty and misery, and thus transformed by God's love.

God does not rely only on our talents, but also on our redeemed weakness. This, for example, makes Saint Paul say that there is also a plan for

one's fragility. In fact, he wrote to the community of Corinth: "And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me...Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" (2 *Cor* 12:7-9). The Lord does not take away all our weaknesses, but helps us to walk on with our weaknesses, taking us by the hand. He takes our weaknesses by the hand and places himself by our side. And this is tenderness.

The experience of tenderness consists in seeing God's power pass through precisely that which makes us most fragile; on condition, however, that we are converted from the gaze of the Evil One who "makes us see and condemn our frailty", while the Holy Spirit "brings it to light with tender love." ([*Patris corde*](#), 2). "Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us. [...] Look how nurses touch the wounds of the sick: with tenderness, so as not to hurt the further. And this is how the Lord touches our wounds, with the same tenderness. That is why it is so important to encounter God's mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in personal prayer with God, where we experience his truth and tenderness. Paradoxically, the evil one can also speak the truth to us: he is a liar, but he can arrange things so that he tells us the truth in order to tell us a lie, yet he does so only to condemn us.

Instead, the Lord tells us the truth and reaches out his hand to save us. We know that God's truth does not condemn, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains and forgives us." ([*Patris corde*](#), 2). God always forgives: keep this clearly in your head and your heart. God always forgives. We are the ones who tire of asking for forgiveness. But he always forgives, even the worst things.

It does us good, then, to mirror ourselves in Joseph's fatherhood, which is a mirror of God's fatherhood, and to ask ourselves whether we allow the Lord to love us with his tenderness, transforming each one of us into men and women capable of loving in this way. Without this "revolution of tenderness" – there is a need for a revolution of tenderness! - we risk remaining imprisoned in a justice that does not allow us to rise easily and that confuses redemption with punishment. For this reason, today I want to remember in a special way our brothers and sisters who are in prison. It is right that those who have done wrong should pay for their mistake, but it is equally right that those who have done wrong should be able to redeem themselves from their mistake. They cannot be sentenced without a window of hope. Any sentence must always have a window of hope. Let us think of our brothers and sisters in prison, and think of God's tenderness for them, and let us pray for them, so they might find in that window of hope a way out towards a better life.

And we conclude with this prayer:

*St Joseph, father in tenderness,
teach us to accept that we are loved precisely
in that which is weakest in us.*

*Grant that we may place no obstacle
between our poverty and the greatness of God's
love.*

*Stir in us the desire to approach the Sacrament of
Reconciliation,
that we may be forgiven and also made capable of
loving tenderly
our brothers and sisters in their poverty.*

*Be close to those who have done wrong and are
paying the price for it;*

*Help them to find not only justice but also
tenderness so that they can start again.*

*And teach them that the first way to begin again
is to sincerely ask for forgiveness, to feel the
Father's caress. Amen.*

— CHAPTER IX —

A Man Who “Dreams”

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 26 January 2021*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I would like to focus on the figure of St Joseph as a *man who dreams*. In the Bible, as in the cultures of ancient peoples, dreams were considered a means by which God revealed himself. The dream symbolises the spiritual life of each of us, that inner space that each of us is called to cultivate and guard, where God manifests himself and often speaks to us. But we must also say that within each of us there is not only the voice of God: there are many other voices. For example, the voices of our fears, the voices of past experiences, the voices of hopes; and there is also the voice of the evil one who wants to deceive and confuse us. It is therefore important to be able to recognise the voice of God in the midst of other voices. Joseph demonstrates that he knows how to cultivate the necessary silence and, above all, how to make the right decisions before the Word that the Lord addresses to him inwardly. Today, it will be good for us to take up the four dreams in the Gospel which have him as their protagonist, in order to understand how to place ourselves before God's revelation. The Gospel tells us of four dreams of Joseph.

In the first dream (cf. *Mt* 1:18-25), the angel helps Joseph to resolve the drama that assails him when he learns of Mary's pregnancy: "Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (vv. 20-21). And his response was immediate: "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (v. 24). Life often puts us in situations that we do not understand and that seem to have no solution. Praying in these moments — this means letting the Lord show us the right thing to do. In fact, very often it is prayer that gives us the intuition of the way out. Dear brothers and sisters, the Lord never allows a problem to arise without also giving us the help we need to deal with it. He does not cast us alone into the fire. He does not cast us among the beasts. No. When the Lord shows us a problem, or reveals a problem, he always gives us the intuition, the help, his presence, to get out of it, to resolve it.

And the second revealing dream of Joseph comes when the life of the child Jesus is in danger. The message is clear: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (*Mt* 2:13). Joseph obeyed without hesitation: "He rose and took the child and his mother by night," the Gospel says, "and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod" (vv. 14-15). In life we all experience

dangers that threaten our existence or the existence of those we love. In these situations, praying means listening to the voice that can give us the same courage as Joseph, to face difficulties without succumbing.

In Egypt, Joseph waited for a sign from God that he could return home, and this is the content of the third dream. The angel reveals to him that those who wanted to kill the Child are dead and orders him to leave with Mary and Jesus and return to his homeland (cf. Mt 2:19-20). Joseph “rose” the Gospel says, “and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel” (v. 21). But on the return journey, “when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there” (v. 22). Here then is the fourth revelation: “Being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth” (vv. 22-23). Fear is also part of life and it too needs our prayer. God does not promise us that we will never have fear, but that, with His help, it will not be the criterion for our decisions. Joseph experiences fear, but God also guides him through it. The power of prayer brings light into situations of darkness.

I am thinking at this moment of so many people who are crushed by the weight of life and can no longer hope or pray. May St Joseph help them to open themselves to dialogue with God in order to find light, strength, and peace.

And I am thinking, too, of parents in the face of their children's problems: Children with many illnesses, children who are sick, even with permanent maladies. — how much pain is there! — parents who see different sexual orientations in their children; how to deal with this and accompany their children and not hide in an attitude of condemnation. Parents who see their children leaving because of an illness, and also — even sadder, we read about it every day in the newspapers — children who get into mischief and end up in a car accident. Parents who see their children not progressing in school and don't know how... So many parental problems. Let's think about it: how to help them. And to these parents I say: don't be scared. Yes, there is pain. A lot. But think of the Lord, think about how Joseph solved the problems and ask Joseph to help you. Never condemn a child.

It fills me with compassion — it did in Buenos Aires — when I got on the bus and it passed in front of the prison. There was a queue of people who had to go in to visit the prisoners. And there were mothers there. And I was so touched by this mother who, faced with the problem of a son who has made a mistake and is in prison, doesn't leave him alone, puts her face forward and accompanies him. This courage; the courage of a father and mother who always, always accompany their children. Let us ask the Lord to give this courage to all fathers and mothers, as he gave it to Joseph.

And to pray, no? Pray that the Lord will help us in these moments.

Prayer, however, is never an abstract or purely internal gesture, like these spiritualist movements that are more gnostic than Christian. No, it's not that. Prayer is always inextricably linked to charity. It is only when we combine prayer with love, the love for children in the cases I just mentioned, or the love for our neighbour, that we are able to understand the Lord's messages. Joseph prayed, worked, and loved — three beautiful things for parents: to pray, to work, and to love — and because of this he always received what he needed to face life's trials. Let us entrust ourselves to him and to his intercession.

*St Joseph, you are the man who dreams,
teach us to recover the spiritual life
as the inner place where God manifests Himself
and saves us.
Remove from us the thought that praying is
useless;
help each one of us to correspond to what the
Lord shows us.
May our reasoning be illuminated by the light of
the Spirit,
our hearts encouraged by His strength
and our fears saved by His mercy. Amen.*

— CHAPTER X —

Saint Joseph and the Communion of Saints

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 2 February 2021

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In recent weeks we have been able to deepen our understanding of the figure of Saint Joseph, guided by the few but important pieces of information given in the Gospels, and also by the aspects of his personality that the Church over the centuries has been able to highlight through prayer and devotion. Starting precisely from this *sentire commune* (“common feeling”) of the Church that has accompanied the figure of St Joseph, today I would like to focus on an important article of faith that can enrich our Christian life and also shape our relationship with the saints and with our deceased loved ones in the best possible way: I am talking about the *communion of saints*. We often say, in the Creed, “I believe in the communion of saints.” But if you ask what the communion of saints is, I remember as a child I used to answer immediately, “Ah, the saints receive Communion.” It’s something that... we don’t understand what we are saying. What is the communion of saints? It’s not the saints receiving Communion, it’s not that. It’s something else.

Sometimes even Christianity can fall into forms of devotion that seem to reflect a mentality that is more pagan than Christian. The fundamental difference is that our prayer and our devotion of the faithful people is not based, in these cases on trust in a human being, or in an image or an object, even when we know that they are sacred. The prophet Jeremiah reminds us: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man, [...] blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord” (17:5,7). Even when we rely fully on the intercession of a saint, or even more so that of the Virgin Mary, our trust only has value in relation to Christ. As if the path toward this saint or toward Our Lady does not end there, no. Not there, but in relationship with Christ. He is the bond, Christ is the bond that unites us to him and to each other, and which has a specific name: this bond that unites us all, between ourselves and us with Christ, it is the “communion of saints”. It is not the saints who work miracles, no! This saint is so miraculous...” No, stop there. The saints don’t work miracles, but only the grace of God that acts through them. Miracles are done by God, by the grace of God acting through a holy person, a righteous person. This must be made clear. There are people who say, “I don’t believe in God, I don’t know, but I believe in this saint.” No, this is wrong. The saint is an intercessor, one who prays for us and we pray to him, and he prays for us and the Lord gives us grace: The Lord, through the saint.

What, then, is the “communion of saints”? The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms: “The communion of saints is the Church” (no. 946). See what a beautiful definition this is! “The communion of saints is the Church.” What does this mean? That the Church is reserved for the perfect? No. It means that it is the community of *saved sinners* [It: peccatori salvati]. The Church is the community of saved sinners. It’s beautiful, this definition. No one can exclude themselves from the Church, we are all saved sinners. Our holiness is the fruit of God’s love manifested in Christ, who sanctifies us by loving us in our misery and saving us from it. Thanks always to him we form one single body, says St Paul, in which Jesus is the head and we are the members (cf. 1 *Cor* 12:12). This image of the Body of Christ and the image of the body immediately makes us understand what it means to be bound to one another in *communion*: Let us listen to what Saint Paul says: “If one member suffers”, writes St Paul, “all the members suffer together; and if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with him. Now you are the body of Christ and, each according to his part, his members” (1 *Cor* 12:26-27). This is what Paul says: we are all one body, all united through faith, through baptism... All in communion: united in communion with Jesus Christ. And this is the communion of saints.

Dear brothers and dear sisters, the joy and sorrow that touch my life affect everyone, just as the joy and sorrow that touch the life of the brother and

sister next to us also affect me. I cannot be indifferent to others, because we are all in one body, in communion. In this sense, even the sin of an individual person always affects everyone, and the love of each individual person affects everyone. In virtue of the communion of saints, this union, every member of the Church is bound to me in a profound way. But I don't say "to me" because I am the Pope; [I say] to each one of us he is bound, we have been bound, and bound in a profound way and this bond is so strong that it cannot be broken even by death. Even by death. In fact, the communion of saints does not concern only those brothers and sisters who are beside me at this historic moment, or who live in this historic moment, but also those who have concluded their journey, the earthly pilgrimage and crossed the threshold of death. They too are in communion with us. Let us consider, dear brothers and sisters, that in Christ no one can ever truly separate us from those we love because the bond is an existential bond, a strong bond that is in our very nature; only the manner of being together with one another then changes, but nothing and no one can break this bond. "Father, let's think about those who have denied the faith, who are apostates, who are the persecutors of the Church, who have denied their baptism: Are these also at home?" Yes, these too. All of them. The blasphemers, all of them. We are brothers. This is the communion of saints. The communion of saints holds together the community of believers

on earth and in heaven, and on earth the saints, the sinners, all.

In this sense, the relationship of friendship that I can build with a brother or sister beside me, I can also establish with a brother or sister in heaven. The saints are friends with whom we very often establish friendly relations. What we call *devotion* to a saint — “I am very devoted to this or that saint” — what we call devotion is actually a way of expressing love from this very bond that unites us. Also, in everyday life one can say, “But this person has such devotion for his elderly parents”: no, it is a manner of love, an expression of love. And we all know that we can always turn to a friend, especially when we are in difficulty and need help. And we have friends in heaven. We all need friends; we all need meaningful relationships to help us get through life. Jesus, too, had his friends, and he turned to them at the most decisive moments of his human experience. In the history of the Church there are some constants that accompany the believing community: first of all, the great affection and the very strong bond that the Church has always felt towards Mary, Mother of God and our Mother. But also the special honour and affection she has bestowed on St Joseph. After all, God entrusts to him the most precious things he has: his Son Jesus and the Virgin Mary. It is always thanks to the communion of saints that we feel that the men and women saints who are our patrons — because of the name we bear, for example, because of the

Church to which we belong, because of the place where we live, and so on, as well as through personal devotion — are close to us. And this is the trust that must always animate us in turning to them at decisive moments in our lives. It's not some kind of magic, it's not superstition, it's devotion to the saints. It's simply talking to a brother, a sister, who is in the presence of God, who has led a righteous life, a model life, and is now in the presence of God. And I talk to this brother, this sister, and ask for their intercession for the needs that I have.

Precisely for this reason, I want to conclude this catechesis with a prayer to St Joseph to which I am particularly attached and which I have recited every day for more than 40 years. It is a prayer that I found in a prayer book of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, from the 1700s, the end of the eighteenth century. It is very beautiful, but more than a prayer it is a challenge, to this friend, to this father, to this our guardian, Saint Joseph. It would be wonderful if you could learn this prayer and repeat it. I will read it.

“Glorious Patriarch Saint Joseph, whose power makes the impossible possible, come to my aid in these times of anguish and difficulty. Take under your protection the serious and troubling situations that I commend to you, that they may have a happy outcome. My beloved father, all my trust is in you. All my trust is in you. Let it not be said that I invoked you in vain, and since you can

do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power. Amen.”

And it ends with a challenge, this is to challenge Saint Joseph: “You can do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power.” This is a prayer... I have been entrusting myself to St Joseph every day with this prayer for more than 40 years: it's an old prayer. Amen.

A few minutes ago, we heard a person shouting, shouting, who had some kind of problem, I don't know if it was physical, psychological, spiritual: but it's one of our brothers in trouble. I would like to end by praying for him, our brother who is suffering, poor thing: if he was shouting it is because he is suffering, he has some need. Let us not be deaf to this brother's need. Let us pray together to Our Lady for him: *Hail Mary*...

Let us go forward, have courage, in this communion of all the saints we have in heaven and on earth: the Lord does not abandon us. Thank you.

— CHAPTER XI —

Patron of the Good Death

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 9 February 2022*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In last week’s catechesis, again inspired by Saint Joseph, we reflected on the meaning of the communion of saints. And leading on from this, today I would like to explore the special devotion the Christian people have always had for Saint Joseph as the *patron saint of the good death*. A devotion born of the thought that Joseph died cared for by the Virgin Mary and Jesus, before leaving the house of Nazareth. There are no historical data, but since we no longer see Joseph in public life, it is thought that he died there in Nazareth, with his family. And Jesus and Mary accompanied him up to his death.

A century ago, Pope Benedict XV wrote “through Joseph we go directly to Mary, and through Mary to the origin of all holiness, who is Jesus”. Both Joseph and Mary help us to go to Jesus. And encouraging pious practices in honour of Saint Joseph, he recommended one in particular, saying: “Since he is deservedly considered to be the most effective protector of the dying, having expired in the presence of Jesus and Mary, it will be the concern of the sacred Pastors to inculcate and encourage [...] those pious associations that

have been established to implore Joseph on behalf of the dying, such as those ‘of the Good Death’, of the ‘Transit of Saint Joseph’ and ‘for the Dying’. (Motu proprio *Bonum sane*, 25 July 1920): they were the associations of the time.

Dear brothers and sisters, perhaps some people think that this language and this theme are only a legacy of the past, but in reality, our relationship with death is never about the past – it always present. Pope Benedict said, a few days ago, speaking of himself, that he “is before the dark door of death”. It is good to thank the Pope who has this clarity, at 95, to tell us this. “I am before the obscurity of death, at the dark door of death”. It is good advice that he has given us, isn’t it? The so-called “feel-good” culture tries to remove the reality of death, but the coronavirus pandemic has brought it back into focus in a dramatic way. It was terrible: death was everywhere, and so many brothers and sisters lost loved ones without being able to be near them, and this made death even harder to accept and process. A nurse told me that she was in front of a grandmother who was dying, and who said to her, “I would like to say goodbye to my family, before I leave”. And the nurse bravely took out her mobile phone and put her in touch with them. The tenderness of that farewell...

Nevertheless, we try in every way to banish the thought of our finite existence, deluding ourselves into believing we can remove the power of death and dispel fear. But the Christian faith is not a way

of exorcising the fear of death; rather, it helps us to face it. Sooner or later, we will all pass through that door.

The true light that illuminates the mystery of death comes from the resurrection of Christ. This is the light. And, Saint Paul writes: “Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (*1 Cor* 12: 12-14). There is one certainty: Christ is resurrected, Christ is risen, Christ is living among us. And this is the light that awaits us behind that dark door of death.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is only through faith in resurrection that we can face the abyss of death without being overwhelmed by fear. Not only that: we can restore a positive role to death. Indeed, thinking about death, enlightened by the mystery of Christ, helps us to look at all of life through fresh eyes. I have never seen a removals van following a hearse! Behind a hearse: I have never seen one. We will go alone, with nothing in the pockets of our shroud: nothing. Because the shroud has no pockets. This solitude of death: it is true, I have never seen a hearse followed by a removals van. It makes no sense to accumulate if one day we will die. What we must accumulate is love, and the ability to share, the ability not to remain indifferent when faced with the needs of others. Or, what is the point of arguing with a

brother, with a sister, with a friend, with a relative, or with a brother or sister in faith, if then one day we will die? What point is there in being angry, in getting angry with others? Before death, many issues are brought down to size. It is good to die reconciled, without grudges and without regrets! I would like to say one truth: we are all on our way towards that door, all of us.

The Gospel tells us that death comes like a thief. That is what Jesus tells us: it arrives like a thief, and however much we try to keep its arrival under control, perhaps even planning our own death, it remains an event that we must reckon with, and before which we must also make choices.

Two considerations stand for us Christians. The first: we cannot avoid death, and precisely for this reason, after having done everything that is humanly possible to cure the sick, it is immoral to engage in futile treatment (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2278). That phrase of the faithful people of God, of the simple people: “Let him die in peace”, “help him to die in peace”: such wisdom! The second consideration concerns the quality of death itself, the quality of pain, of suffering. Indeed, we must be grateful for all the help that medicine endeavours to give, so that through so-called “palliative care”, every person who is preparing to live the last stretch of their life can do so in the most human way possible. However, we must be careful not to confuse this help with unacceptable drifts towards killing. We must accompany people towards death, but not

provoke death or facilitate any form of suicide. I would point out that the right to care and treatment for all must always be prioritised, so that the weakest, particularly the elderly and the sick, are never discarded. Life is a right, not death, which must be welcomed, not administered. And this ethical principle applies to concerns everyone, not just Christians or believers.

I would like to underline a real social problem. That “planning” – I don’t know if it is the right word – but accelerating the death of the elderly. Very often we see in a certain social class that the elderly, since they do not have means, are given fewer medicines than they need, and this is inhuman; this is not helping them, it is driving them towards death earlier. This is neither human nor Christian. The elderly should be cared for as a treasure of humanity: they are our wisdom. And if they do not speak, or if they do not make sense, they are still the symbol of human wisdom. They are those who went before us and have left us so many good things, so many memories, so much wisdom. Please, do not isolate the elderly, do not accelerate the death of the elderly. To caress an elderly person has the same hope as caressing a child, because the beginning of life and the end are always a mystery, a mystery that should be respected, accompanied, cared for. Loved.

May Saint Joseph help us to live the mystery of death in the best possible way. For a Christian, the good death is an experience of the mercy of God, who comes close to us even in that last moment of

our life. Even in the Hail Mary, we pray asking Our Lady to be close to us “at the hour of our death”. Precisely for this reason, I would like to conclude this catechesis by praying together to Our Lady for the dying, for those who are experiencing this moment of passage through the dark door, and for the relatives who are experiencing bereavement. Let us pray together:

Hail Mary...

— CHAPTER XII —

Patron of the Church

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 16 February 2022*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we conclude the cycle of catecheses on the figure of St Joseph. These catecheses are complementary to the Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, written on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of St Joseph as Patron of the Catholic Church by Blessed Pius IX. But what does this title mean? What does it mean that St Joseph is “patron of the Church”? I would like to reflect on this today with you.

In this case, too, the Gospels provide us with the most correct key to interpretation. In fact, at the end of every story in which Joseph is the protagonist, the Gospel notes that he takes the Child and His mother with him and does what God has ordered him to do (cf. *Mt* 1:24; 2:14,21). Thus, the fact that Joseph’s task is to protect Jesus and Mary stands out. He is their principal guardian: “Indeed, Jesus and Mary His Mother are the most precious treasure of our

faith”⁴ (Apostolic letter *Patris corde*, 5). And this treasure is safeguarded by Saint Joseph

In the plan of salvation, the Son cannot be separated from the Mother, from the one who “advanced in the pilgrimage of faith and faithfully preserved her union with her Son even to the Cross” (*Lumen Gentium*, 58), as the Second Vatican Council reminds us.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph are in a sense the primordial nucleus of the Church. Jesus is Man and God; Maria, the first disciple and the Mother; and Joseph, the guardian. And we too “We should always consider whether we ourselves are protecting Jesus and Mary, for they are also mysteriously entrusted to our own responsibility, care and safekeeping.” (*Patris corde*, 5). And here there is a very beautiful trace of the Christian vocation: to safeguard. To safeguard life, to safeguard human development, to safeguard the human mind, to safeguard the human heart, to safeguard human work. The Christian — we could say — is like St Joseph: he must safeguard. To be a Christian is not only to receive the faith, to confess the faith, but to safeguard life, one’s own life, the life of others, the life of the Church. The Son of the Most High came into the world in a condition of great weakness: Jesus was born like this, weak, weak. He wanted to be defended,

⁴ S. Rituum Congreg., Decr. *Quemadmodum Deus* (8 December 1870): *ASS* 6 (1870-71), 193; cf. Pius IX, Lett. Ap. *Inclytum Patriarcham* (7 July 1871): *lo. cit.*, 324-327.

protected, cared for. God trusted Joseph, as did Mary, who found in him the bridegroom who loved and respected her and always took care of her and the Child. “In this sense, Saint Joseph could not be other than the Guardian of the Church, for the Church is the continuation of the Body of Christ in history, even as Mary’s motherhood is reflected in the motherhood of the Church. In his continued protection of the Church, Joseph continues to protect the child and his mother, and we too, by our love for the Church, continue to love *the Child and His mother*” (ibid.).

This Child is the One who will say: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me”. (*Mt 25:40*). Therefore, every person who is hungry and thirsty, every stranger, every migrant, every person without clothes, every sick person, every prisoner is the “Child” whom Joseph looks after. And we are invited to safeguard these people, these our brothers and sisters, as Joseph did. That is why he is invoked as protector of all the needy, the exiled, the afflicted, and even the dying – we spoke about this last Wednesday. And we too must learn from Joseph to “safeguard” these goods: to love the Child and His mother; to love the sacraments and the people of God; to love the poor and our parish. Each of these realities is always the Child and His mother (cf. *Patris corde*, 5). We must safeguard, because with this we safeguard Jesus, as Joseph did.

Nowadays it is common, it is an everyday occurrence, to criticise the Church, to point out its inconsistencies — there are many — to point out its sins, which in reality are our inconsistencies, our sins, because the Church has always been a people of sinners who encounter God's mercy. Let us ask ourselves if, in our hearts, we love the Church as she is, the People of God on the journey, with many limitations, but with a great desire to serve and to love God. In fact, only love makes us capable of speaking the truth fully, in a non-partisan way; of saying what is wrong, but also of recognising all the goodness and holiness that are present in the Church, starting precisely with Jesus and Mary. Loving the Church, safeguarding the Church and walking with the Church. But the Church is not that little group that is close to the priest and commands everyone, no. The Church is everyone, everyone. On the journey. Safeguarding one another, looking out for each other. This is a good question: when I have a problem with someone, do I try to look after them, or do I immediately condemn them, spit on them, destroy them? We must safeguard, always safeguard!

Dear brothers and sisters, I encourage you to ask for the intercession of Saint Joseph precisely at the most difficult times in the life of you and of your communities. Where our mistakes become a scandal, let us ask St Joseph to give us the courage to speak the truth, ask for forgiveness, and humbly begin again. Where persecution prevents the Gospel from being proclaimed, let us ask St

Joseph for the strength and patience to endure abuse and suffering for the sake of the Gospel. Where material and human resources are scarce and make us experience poverty, especially when we are called to serve the last, the defenceless, the orphans, the sick, the rejected of society, let us pray to St Joseph to be Providence for us. How many saints have turned to him! How many people in the history of the Church have found in him a patron, a guardian, a father!

Let us imitate their example, and for this reason, we pray today: Let us pray, all together, to Saint Joseph with the prayer that I have placed at the conclusion of the Letter *Patris corde*, entrusting to him our intentions and, in a special way, the Church that suffers and is in trial. And now, you have in your hands in various language — in four, I think — the prayer; and I think that it will also be on the screen. So together, each one in their own language, let us pray to Saint Joseph.

*Hail, guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted His only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.*

*Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself to be a father,
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.*

— Appendix I —

St Joseph and Priesthood

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE
FRANCIS
TO THE COMMUNITY OF THE BELGIAN
PONTIFICAL COLLEGE***

Thursday, 18 March 2021

Dear brothers,

I am pleased to welcome you, the 175th anniversary of your College, the Pontifical Belgian College, whose alumni include Saint John Paul II. I thank the rector, Archbishop Smet, for his words of introduction.

On the eve of the Solemnity of Saint Joseph, in this Year dedicated to him, and knowing that the Belgian College has the Guardian of the Redeemer as its heavenly Patron, we can look to him, as ministers of Christ, to bring out some ideas regarding the identity of the pastor and the way of exercising paternity towards those entrusted to us. As you know, fatherhood is the main theme of the Apostolic Letter [*Patris corde*](#), which I wrote to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church.

First of all, Saint Joseph is a *father who welcomes*. Indeed, after overcoming all rebellion and setting aside his legitimate personal plans, he loved and welcomed Mary and Jesus, a wife and son who were very different from the vision of family life that he could have wished for, but for this reason even more cherished and loved by him. In other words, Joseph did not seek explanations for the surprising and mysterious reality he found himself facing, but welcomed it with faith, loving it just as it was.

In this sense, Saint Joseph is master of the spiritual life and of discernment, and we can invoke him to free us from the bonds of excessive reflection in which we sometimes lose ourselves, even with the best of intentions. They manifest our tendency to "seize" and "possess" what happens to us, rather than welcoming it first of all as it presents itself to us.

Let's think - to make a concrete example that is close to us - of a priest who arrives in a new parish. That community existed before him, it has its own history, made up of joys and sorrows, riches and small miseries, which cannot be ignored in the name of personal pastoral ideas and plans that one cannot wait to apply. This is a risk we can prey to. The new parish priest must first love the community, freely, simply because he has been sent to it; and gradually by loving it he will get to know it in depth and be able to help it set out on new paths.

Saint Joseph, then, is a *father as protector*. Being a protector is an essential part of his vocation and mission. It is a task that Joseph lived “discreetly, humbly and silently, but with an unfailing presence and utter fidelity, even when he finds it hard to understand”; he lived it “by being constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God’s presence and receptive to God’s plans, and not simply to his own” ([Homily, 19 March 2013](#)). Therefore, he carried out this task with the inner freedom of the good and faithful servant who desires only the good of the people entrusted to him.

To protect - for Joseph, as for every priest who is inspired by his paternity - means to love tenderly those who are entrusted to us, to think first and foremost of their wellbeing and their happiness, with discretion and persevering generosity. To protect is an inner attitude, that leads us never to lose sight of others, judging from time to time when to step back and when to draw close, but always maintaining a vigilant, attentive and prayerful heart.

It is the *attitude of the shepherd*, who never abandons his flock, but places himself in a different position in relation to it according to the practical needs of the moment: ahead so as to open the way, in its midst to encourage, behind to gather the last. This is what a priest is called to do in his relationship with the community entrusted to him, that is, to be an attentive guardian, ready

to change according to what the situation requires; not to be 'monolithic', inflexible and, as it were, cemented in a way of exercising the ministry that may be good in itself, but not able to respond to the changes and needs of the community.

When instead a shepherd loves and know his flock, he knows how to make himself the servant of all (see *1 Cor 9: 19*), as Saint Paul wrote. He does not place himself and his own ideas at the centre, but rather the good of those whom he is called upon to protect, avoiding the contrary temptations of domination and carelessness.

Finally, Saint Joseph is *a father who dreams*. Not a “dreamer” in the sense of one with his head in the clouds, detached from reality, no, but a man who knows how to look beyond what he sees: with a prophetic outlook, capable of recognising God’s plan where others see nothing, and in this way to be clear about the way in in which to head. Indeed, Saint Joseph was able to see in Mary and Jesus not only a young spouse and a child; he always saw in them God’s work, the presence of God.

It this way, safeguarding the fragility of the Child and his Mother, Joseph looked beyond his duties as a father and, preferring to believe in God rather than in his own doubts, he offered himself to him as a tool for the realisation of a greater plan, in hidden, generous and tireless service, until the silent end of his life.

For priests, in the same way, it is necessary to know how to dream of the community they love, so as not to limit themselves to wanting to conserve what exists - conserve and protect are not synonyms! - to be ready instead to start out from the real history of people in order to promote conversion and renewal in a missionary sense, and to nurture a community on the move, made up of disciples guided by the Holy Spirit and “driven” by the love of God (see *2 Cor 5: 14*).

Dear priests, in this year dedicated to him, I invite you to rediscover in a special way in prayer the figure and mission of Saint Joseph, obedient to God’s will, humble author of great undertakings, obedient and creative servant. It will do you good to place yourselves and your vocations under his mantle and to learn from him the art of fatherhood, which you will soon be called to exercise in communities and in the areas and ministerial services that will be entrusted to you. I accompany you with my prayer and my blessing. And you too, please pray for me. Thank you.

— Appendix II —

Apostolic Letter: *Patris Corde*

ON THE 150th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE PROCLAMATION OF SAINT
JOSEPH
AS PATRON OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

WITH A FATHER’S HEART: that is how Joseph loved Jesus, whom all four Gospels refer to as “*the son of Joseph*”.⁵

Matthew and Luke, the two Evangelists who speak most of Joseph, tell us very little, yet enough for us to appreciate what sort of father he was, and the mission entrusted to him by God’s providence.

We know that Joseph was a lowly carpenter (cf. *Mt* 13:55), betrothed to Mary (cf. *Mt* 1:18; *Lk* 1:27). He was a “just man” (*Mt* 1:19), ever ready to carry out God’s will as revealed to him in the Law (cf. *Lk* 2:22.27.39) and through four dreams (cf. *Mt* 1:20; 2:13.19.22). After a long and tiring journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, he beheld the birth of the Messiah in a stable, since “there was no place for them” elsewhere (cf. *Lk* 2:7). He witnessed the adoration of the shepherds (cf. *Lk* 2:8-20) and the Magi

⁵ *Lk* 4:22; *Jn* 6:42; cf. *Mt* 13:55; *Mk* 6:3.

(cf. *Mt* 2:1-12), who represented respectively the people of Israel and the pagan peoples.

Joseph had the courage to become the legal father of Jesus, to whom he gave the name revealed by the angel: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (*Mt* 1:21). As we know, for ancient peoples, to give a name to a person or to a thing, as Adam did in the account in the Book of Genesis (cf. 2:19-20), was to establish a relationship.

In the Temple, forty days after Jesus’ birth, Joseph and Mary offered their child to the Lord and listened with amazement to Simeon’s prophecy concerning Jesus and his Mother (cf. *Lk* 2:22-35). To protect Jesus from Herod, Joseph dwelt as a foreigner in Egypt (cf. *Mt* 2:13-18). After returning to his own country, he led a hidden life in the tiny and obscure village of Nazareth in Galilee, far from Bethlehem, his ancestral town, and from Jerusalem and the Temple. Of Nazareth it was said, “No prophet is to rise” (cf. *Jn* 7:52) and indeed, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (cf. *Jn* 1:46). When, during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Joseph and Mary lost track of the twelve-year-old Jesus, they anxiously sought him out and they found him in the Temple, in discussion with the doctors of the Law (cf. *Lk* 2:41-50).

After Mary, the Mother of God, no saint is mentioned more frequently in the papal

magisterium than Joseph, her spouse. My Predecessors reflected on the message contained in the limited information handed down by the Gospels in order to appreciate more fully his central role in the history of salvation. Blessed Pius IX declared him “Patron of the Catholic Church”,⁶ Venerable Pius XII proposed him as “Patron of Workers”⁷ and Saint John Paul II as “Guardian of the Redeemer”.⁸ Saint Joseph is universally invoked as the “patron of a happy death”.⁹

Now, one hundred and fifty years after his proclamation as *Patron of the Catholic Church* by Blessed Pius IX (8 December 1870), I would like to share some personal reflections on this extraordinary figure, so close to our own human experience. For, as Jesus says, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (*Mt* 12:34). My desire to do so increased during these months of pandemic, when we experienced, amid the crisis, how “our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in

⁶ S. RITUUM CONGREGATIO, *Quemadmodum Deus* (8 December 1870): ASS 6 (1870-71), 194.

⁷ Cf. *Address to ACLI on the Solemnity of Saint Joseph the Worker* (1 May 1955): AAS 47 (1955), 406.

⁸ Cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* (15 August 1989): AAS 82 (1990), 5-34.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1014.

newspaper and magazine headlines, or on the latest television show, yet in these very days are surely shaping the decisive events of our history. Doctors, nurses, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests, men and women religious, and so very many others. They understood that no one is saved alone... How many people daily exercise patience and offer hope, taking care to spread not panic, but shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday ways, how to accept and deal with a crisis by adjusting their routines, looking ahead and encouraging the practice of prayer. How many are praying, making sacrifices and interceding for the good of all".¹⁰ Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble. Saint Joseph reminds us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation. A word of recognition and of gratitude is due to them all.

1. *A beloved father*

¹⁰ *Meditation in the Time of Pandemic* (27 March 2020): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29 March 2020, p. 10.

The greatness of Saint Joseph is that he was the spouse of Mary and the father of Jesus. In this way, he placed himself, in the words of Saint John Chrysostom, “at the service of the entire plan of salvation”.¹¹

Saint Paul VI pointed out that Joseph concretely expressed his fatherhood “by making his life a sacrificial service to the mystery of the incarnation and its redemptive purpose. He employed his legal authority over the Holy Family to devote himself completely to them in his life and work. He turned his human vocation to domestic love into a superhuman oblation of himself, his heart and all his abilities, a love placed at the service of the Messiah who was growing to maturity in his home”.¹²

Thanks to his role in salvation history, Saint Joseph has always been venerated as a father by the Christian people. This is shown by the countless churches dedicated to him worldwide, the numerous religious Institutes, Confraternities and ecclesial groups inspired by his spirituality and bearing his name, and the many traditional expressions of piety in his honour. Innumerable holy men and women were passionately devoted to him. Among them was Teresa of Avila, who

¹¹ *In Matthaicum Homiliae*, V, 3: PG 57, 58.

¹² *Homily* (19 March 1966): *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, IV (1966), 110.

chose him as her advocate and intercessor, had frequent recourse to him and received whatever graces she asked of him. Encouraged by her own experience, Teresa persuaded others to cultivate devotion to Joseph.¹³

Every prayer book contains prayers to Saint Joseph. Special prayers are offered to him each Wednesday and especially during the month of March, which is traditionally dedicated to him.¹⁴

Popular trust in Saint Joseph is seen in the expression “*Go to Joseph*”, which evokes the famine in Egypt, when the Egyptians begged Pharaoh for bread. He in turn replied: “Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do” (*Gen 41:55*). Pharaoh was referring to Joseph the son of Jacob, who was sold into slavery because of the jealousy

¹³ Cf. *Autobiography*, 6, 6-8.

¹⁴ Every day, for over forty years, following Lauds I have recited a prayer to Saint Joseph taken from a nineteenth-century French prayer book of the Congregation of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary. It expresses devotion and trust, and even poses a certain challenge to Saint Joseph: “Glorious Patriarch Saint Joseph, whose power makes the impossible possible, come to my aid in these times of anguish and difficulty. Take under your protection the serious and troubling situations that I commend to you, that they may have a happy outcome. My beloved father, all my trust is in you. Let it not be said that I invoked you in vain, and since you can do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power. Amen.”

of his brothers (cf. *Gen* 37:11-28) and who – according to the biblical account – subsequently became viceroy of Egypt (cf. *Gen* 41:41-44).

As a descendant of David (cf. *Mt* 1:16-20), from whose stock Jesus was to spring according to the promise made to David by the prophet Nathan (cf. *2 Sam* 7), and as the spouse of Mary of Nazareth, Saint Joseph stands at the crossroads between the Old and New Testaments.

2. A tender and loving father

Joseph saw Jesus grow daily “in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour” (*Lk* 2:52). As the Lord had done with Israel, so Joseph did with Jesus: “he taught him to walk, taking him by the hand; he was for him like a father who raises an infant to his cheeks, bending down to him and feeding him” (cf. *Hos* 11:3-4).

In Joseph, Jesus saw the tender love of God: “As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him” (*Ps* 103:13).

In the synagogue, during the praying of the Psalms, Joseph would surely have heard again and again that the God of Israel is a God of tender

love,¹⁵ who is good to all, whose “compassion is over all that he has made” (*Ps* 145:9).

The history of salvation is worked out “in hope against hope” (*Rom* 4:18), through our weaknesses. All too often, we think that God works only through our better parts, yet most of his plans are realized in and despite our frailty. Thus Saint Paul could say: “To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’” (*2 Cor* 12:7-9).

Since this is part of the entire economy of salvation, we must learn to look upon our weaknesses with tender mercy.¹⁶

The Evil one makes us see and condemn our frailty, whereas the Spirit brings it to light with tender love. Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us. Pointing fingers and judging others are frequently signs of an inability to accept

¹⁵ Cf. *Deut* 4:31; *Ps* 69:16; 78:38; 86:5; 111:4; 116:5; *Jer* 31:20.

¹⁶ Cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 88, 288: AAS 105 (2013), 1057, 1136-1137.

our own weaknesses, our own frailty. Only tender love will save us from the snares of the accuser (cf. *Rev* 12:10). That is why it is so important to encounter God's mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where we experience his truth and tenderness. Paradoxically, the Evil one can also speak the truth to us, yet he does so only to condemn us. We know that God's truth does not condemn, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains and forgives us. That truth always presents itself to us like the merciful father in Jesus' parable (cf. *Lk* 15:11-32). It comes out to meet us, restores our dignity, sets us back on our feet and rejoices for us, for, as the father says: "This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (v. 24).

Even through Joseph's fears, God's will, his history and his plan were at work. Joseph, then, teaches us that faith in God includes believing that he can work even through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses. He also teaches us that amid the tempests of life, we must never be afraid to let the Lord steer our course. At times, we want to be in complete control, yet God always sees the bigger picture.

3. An obedient father

As he had done with Mary, God revealed his saving plan to Joseph. He did so by using dreams, which in the Bible and among all ancient peoples,

were considered a way for him to make his will known.¹⁷

Joseph was deeply troubled by Mary's mysterious pregnancy. He did not want to "expose her to public disgrace",¹⁸ so he decided to "dismiss her quietly" (*Mt* 1:19).

In the first dream, an angel helps him resolve his grave dilemma: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (*Mt* 1:20-21). Joseph's response was immediate: "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (*Mt* 1:24). Obedience made it possible for him to surmount his difficulties and spare Mary.

In the second dream, the angel tells Joseph: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (*Mt* 2:13). Joseph did not hesitate to obey, regardless of the hardship involved: "He got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went

¹⁷ Cf. *Gen* 20:3; 28:12; 31:11,24; 40:8; 41:1-32; *Num* 12:6; *1 Sam* 3:3-10; *Dan* 2, 4; *Job* 33:15.

¹⁸ In such cases, provisions were made even for stoning (cf. *Deut* 22:20-21).

to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod” (*Mt 2:14-15*).

In Egypt, Joseph awaited with patient trust the angel’s notice that he could safely return home. In a third dream, the angel told him that those who sought to kill the child were dead and ordered him to rise, take the child and his mother, and return to the land of Israel (cf. *Mt 2:19-20*). Once again, Joseph promptly obeyed. “He got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel” (*Mt 2:21*).

During the return journey, “when Joseph heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. After being warned in a dream” – now for the fourth time – “he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth” (*Mt 2:22-23*).

The evangelist Luke, for his part, tells us that Joseph undertook the long and difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered in his family’s town of origin in the census of the Emperor Caesar Augustus. There Jesus was born (cf. *Lk 2: 7*) and his birth, like that of every other child, was recorded in the registry of the Empire. Saint Luke is especially concerned to tell us that Jesus’ parents observed all the prescriptions of the Law: the rites of the circumcision of Jesus, the

purification of Mary after childbirth, the offering of the firstborn to God (cf. 2:21-24).¹⁹

In every situation, Joseph declared his own “fiat”, like those of Mary at the Annunciation and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In his role as the head of a family, Joseph taught Jesus to be obedient to his parents (cf. *Lk* 2:51), in accordance with God’s command (cf. *Ex* 20:12).

During the hidden years in Nazareth, Jesus learned at the school of Joseph to do the will of the Father. That will was to be his daily food (cf. *Jn* 4:34). Even at the most difficult moment of his life, in Gethsemane, Jesus chose to do the Father’s will rather than his own,²⁰ becoming “obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (*Phil* 2:8). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews thus concludes that Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered” (5:8).

All this makes it clear that “Saint Joseph was called by God to serve the person and mission of Jesus directly through the exercise of his fatherhood” and that in this way, “he cooperated

¹⁹ Cf. *Lev* 12:1-8; *Ex* 13:2.

²⁰ Cf. *Mt* 26:39; *Mk* 14:36; *Lk* 22:42.

in the fullness of time in the great mystery of salvation and is truly a minister of salvation.”²¹

4. *An accepting father*

Joseph accepted Mary unconditionally. He trusted in the angel’s words. “The nobility of Joseph’s heart is such that what he learned from the law he made dependent on charity. Today, in our world where psychological, verbal and physical violence towards women is so evident, Joseph appears as the figure of a respectful and sensitive man. Even though he does not understand the bigger picture, he makes a decision to protect Mary’s good name, her dignity and her life. In his hesitation about how best to act, God helped him by enlightening his judgment”.²²

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

²¹ SAINT JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* (15 August 1989), 8: AAS 82 (1990), 14.

²² *Homily at Mass and Beatifications, Villavicencio, Colombia* (8 September 2017): AAS 109 (2017), 1061.

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*).

Joseph is certainly not passively resigned, but courageously and firmly proactive. In our own lives, acceptance and welcome can be an expression of the Holy Spirit’s gift of fortitude. Only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments.

Jesus’ appearance in our midst is a gift from the Father, which makes it possible for each of us to be reconciled to the flesh of our own history, even when we fail to understand it completely.

Just as God told Joseph: “Son of David, do not be afraid!” (*Mt 1:20*), so he seems to tell us: “Do not be afraid!” We need to set aside all anger and disappointment, and to embrace the way things are, even when they do not turn out as we wish. Not with mere resignation but with hope and

courage. In this way, we become open to a deeper meaning. Our lives can be miraculously reborn if we find the courage to live them in accordance with the Gospel. It does not matter if everything seems to have gone wrong or some things can no longer be fixed. God can make flowers spring up from stony ground. Even if our heart condemns us, “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (*1 Jn 3:20*).

Here, once again, we encounter that Christian realism which rejects nothing that exists. Reality, in its mysterious and irreducible complexity, is the bearer of existential meaning, with all its lights and shadows. Thus, the Apostle Paul can say: “We know that all things work together for good, for those who love God” (*Rom 8:28*). To which Saint Augustine adds, “even that which is called evil (*etiam illud quod malum dicitur*)”.²³ In this greater perspective, faith gives meaning to every event, however happy or sad.

Nor should we ever think that believing means finding facile and comforting solutions. The faith Christ taught us is what we see in Saint Joseph. He did not look for shortcuts, but confronted reality with open eyes and accepted personal responsibility for it.

²³ *Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate*, 3.11: PL 40, 236.

Joseph's attitude encourages us to accept and welcome others as they are, without exception, and to show special concern for the weak, for God chooses what is weak (cf. *1 Cor* 1:27). He is the "Father of orphans and protector of widows" (*Ps* 68:6), who commands us to love the stranger in our midst.²⁴ I like to think that it was from Saint Joseph that Jesus drew inspiration for the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father (cf. *Lk* 15:11-32).

5. *A creatively courageous father*

If the first stage of all true interior healing is to accept our personal history and embrace even the things in life that we did not choose, we must now add another important element: creative courage. This emerges especially in the way we deal with difficulties. In the face of difficulty, we can either give up and walk away, or somehow engage with it. At times, difficulties bring out resources we did not even think we had.

As we read the infancy narratives, we may often wonder why God did not act in a more direct and clear way. Yet God acts through events and people. Joseph was the man chosen by God to guide the beginnings of the history of redemption. He was the true "miracle" by which God saves the child and his mother. God acted by trusting in

²⁴ Cf. *Deut* 10:19; *Ex* 22:20-22; *Lk* 10:29-37.

Joseph's creative courage. Arriving in Bethlehem and finding no lodging where Mary could give birth, Joseph took a stable and, as best he could, turned it into a welcoming home for the Son of God come into the world (cf. *Lk* 2:6-7). Faced with imminent danger from Herod, who wanted to kill the child, Joseph was warned once again in a dream to protect the child, and rose in the middle of the night to prepare the flight into Egypt (cf. *Mt* 2:13-14).

A superficial reading of these stories can often give the impression that the world is at the mercy of the strong and mighty, but the "good news" of the Gospel consists in showing that, for all the arrogance and violence of worldly powers, God always finds a way to carry out his saving plan. So too, our lives may at times seem to be at the mercy of the powerful, but the Gospel shows us what counts. God always finds a way to save us, provided we show the same creative courage as the carpenter of Nazareth, who was able to turn a problem into a possibility by trusting always in divine providence.

If at times God seems not to help us, surely this does not mean that we have been abandoned, but instead are being trusted to plan, to be creative, and to find solutions ourselves.

That kind of creative courage was shown by the friends of the paralytic, who lowered him from the roof in order to bring him to Jesus (cf. *Lk* 5:17-

26). Difficulties did not stand in the way of those friends' boldness and persistence. They were convinced that Jesus could heal the man, and "finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you'" (vv. 19-20). Jesus recognized the creative faith with which they sought to bring their sick friend to him.

The Gospel does not tell us how long Mary, Joseph and the child remained in Egypt. Yet they certainly needed to eat, to find a home and employment. It does not take much imagination to fill in those details. The Holy Family had to face concrete problems like every other family, like so many of our migrant brothers and sisters who, today too, risk their lives to escape misfortune and hunger. In this regard, I consider Saint Joseph the special patron of all those forced to leave their native lands because of war, hatred, persecution and poverty.

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). Indeed,

Jesus and Mary his Mother are the most precious treasure of our faith.²⁵

In the divine plan of salvation, the Son is inseparable from his Mother, from Mary, who “advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son until she stood at the cross”.²⁶

We should always consider whether we ourselves are protecting Jesus and Mary, for they are also mysteriously entrusted to our own responsibility, care and safekeeping. 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. God trusted Joseph, as did Mary, who found in him someone who would not only save her life, but would always provide for her and her child. In this sense, Saint Joseph could not be other than the Guardian of the Church, for the Church is the continuation of the Body of Christ in history, even as Mary’s motherhood is reflected in the motherhood of the Church.²⁷ In his continued

²⁵ Cf. S. RITUUM CONGREGATIO, *Quemadmodum Deus* (8 December 1870): ASS 6 (1870-1871), 193; BLESSED PIUS IX, Apostolic Letter *Inclytum Patriarcham* (7 July 1871): l.c., 324-327.

²⁶ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 58.

²⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 963-970.

protection of the Church, Joseph continues to protect *the child and his mother*, and we too, by our love for the Church, continue to love *the child and his mother*.

That child would go on to say: “As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). Consequently, every poor, needy, suffering or dying person, every stranger, every prisoner, every infirm person is “the child” whom Joseph continues to protect. For this reason, Saint Joseph is invoked as protector of the unfortunate, the needy, exiles, the afflicted, the poor and the dying. Consequently, the Church cannot fail to show a special love for the least of our brothers and sisters, for Jesus showed a particular concern for them and personally identified with them. From Saint Joseph, we must learn that same care and responsibility. We must learn to love the child and his mother, to love the sacraments and charity, to love the Church and the poor. Each of these realities is always *the child and his mother*.

6. *A working father*

An aspect of Saint Joseph that has been emphasized from the time of the first social Encyclical, Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, is his relation to work. Saint Joseph was a carpenter who earned an honest living to provide for his family. From him, Jesus learned the value, the

dignity and the joy of what it means to eat bread that is the fruit of one's own labour.

In our own day, when employment has once more become a burning social issue, and unemployment at times reaches record levels even in nations that for decades have enjoyed a certain degree of prosperity, there is a renewed need to appreciate the importance of dignified work, of which Saint Joseph is an exemplary patron.

Work is a means of participating in the work of salvation, an opportunity to hasten the coming of the Kingdom, to develop our talents and abilities, and to put them at the service of society and fraternal communion. It becomes an opportunity for the fulfilment not only of oneself, but also of that primary cell of society which is the family. A family without work is particularly vulnerable to difficulties, tensions, estrangement and even break-up. How can we speak of human dignity without working to ensure that everyone is able to earn a decent living?

Working persons, whatever their job may be, are cooperating with God himself, and in some way become creators of the world around us. The crisis of our time, which is economic, social, cultural and spiritual, can serve as a summons for all of us to rediscover the value, the importance and necessity of work for bringing about a new "normal" from which no one is excluded. Saint Joseph's work reminds us that God himself, in

becoming man, did not disdain work. The loss of employment that affects so many of our brothers and sisters, and has increased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, should serve as a summons to review our priorities. Let us implore Saint Joseph the Worker to help us find ways to express our firm conviction that no young person, no person at all, no family should be without work!

7. *A father in the shadows*

The Polish writer Jan Dobraczyński, in his book *The Shadow of the Father*,²⁸ tells the story of Saint Joseph's life in the form of a novel. He uses the evocative image of a shadow to define Joseph. In his relationship to Jesus, Joseph was the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father: he watched over him and protected him, never leaving him to go his own way. We can think of Moses' words to Israel: "In the wilderness... you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you travelled" (*Deut* 1:31). In a similar way, Joseph acted as a father for his whole life.²⁹

Fathers are not born, but made. A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into

²⁸ Original edition: *Cień Ojca*, Warsaw, 1977.

²⁹ Cf. SAINT JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos*, 7-8: AAS 82 (1990), 12-16.

the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person.

Children today often seem orphans, lacking fathers. The Church too needs fathers. Saint Paul's words to the Corinthians remain timely: "Though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers" (*1 Cor* 4:15). Every priest or bishop should be able to add, with the Apostle: "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel" (*ibid.*). Paul likewise calls the Galatians: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!" (4:19).

Being a father entails introducing children to life and reality. Not holding them back, being overprotective or possessive, but rather making them capable of deciding for themselves, enjoying freedom and exploring new possibilities. Perhaps for this reason, Joseph is traditionally called a "most chaste" father. That title is not simply a sign of affection, but 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. A possessive love ultimately becomes dangerous: it imprisons, constricts and makes for misery. God himself loved humanity with a chaste love; he left us free even to go astray and set ourselves against him. The logic of love is

always the logic of freedom, and Joseph knew how to love with extraordinary freedom. He never made himself the centre of things. He did not think of himself, but focused instead on the lives of Mary and Jesus.

Joseph found happiness not in mere self-sacrifice but in self-gift. In him, we never see frustration but only trust. His patient silence was the prelude to concrete expressions of trust. Our world today needs fathers. It has no use for tyrants who would domineer others as a means of compensating for their own needs. It rejects those who confuse authority with authoritarianism, service with servility, discussion with oppression, charity with a welfare mentality, power with destruction. Every true vocation is born of the gift of oneself, which is the fruit of mature sacrifice. The priesthood and consecrated life likewise require this kind of maturity. Whatever our vocation, whether to marriage, celibacy or virginity, our gift of self will not come to fulfilment if it stops at sacrifice; were that the case, instead of becoming a sign of the beauty and joy of love, the gift of self would risk being an expression of unhappiness, sadness and frustration.

When fathers refuse to live the lives of their children for them, new and unexpected vistas open up. Every child is the bearer of a unique mystery that can only be brought to light with the help of a father who respects that child's freedom. A father who realizes that he is most a father and

educator at the point when he becomes “useless”, when he sees that his child has become independent and can walk the paths of life unaccompanied. When he becomes like Joseph, who always knew that his child was not his own but had merely been entrusted to his care. In the end, this is what Jesus would have us understand when he says: “Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven” (*Mt 23:9*).

In every exercise of our fatherhood, we should always keep in mind that it has nothing to do with possession, but is rather a “sign” pointing to a greater fatherhood. In a way, we are all like Joseph: a shadow of the heavenly Father, who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (*Mt 5:45*). And a shadow that follows his Son.

* * *

“Get up, take the child and his mother” (*Mt 2:13*), God told Saint Joseph.

The aim of this Apostolic Letter is to increase our love for this great saint, to encourage us to implore his intercession and to imitate his virtues and his zeal.

Indeed, the proper mission of the saints is not only to obtain miracles and graces, but to intercede for

us before God, like Abraham³⁰ and Moses³¹, and like Jesus, the “one mediator” (*1 Tim* 2:5), who is our “advocate” with the Father (*1 Jn* 2:1) and who “always lives to make intercession for [us]” (*Heb* 7:25; cf. *Rom* 8:34).

The saints help all the faithful “to strive for the holiness and the perfection of their particular state of life”.³² Their lives are concrete proof that it is possible to put the Gospel into practice.

Jesus told us: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (*Mt* 11:29). The lives of the saints too are examples to be imitated. Saint Paul explicitly says this: “Be imitators of me!” (*1 Cor* 4:16).³³ By his eloquent silence, Saint Joseph says the same.

Before the example of so many holy men and women, Saint Augustine asked himself: “What they could do, can you not also do?” And so he drew closer to his definitive conversion, when he

³⁰ Cf. *Gen* 18:23-32.

³¹ Cf. *Ex* 17:8-13; 32:30-35.

³² SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

³³ Cf. *1 Cor* 11:1; *Phil* 3:17; *1 Thess* 1:6.

could exclaim: “Late have I loved you, Beauty
ever ancient, ever new!”³⁴

We need only ask Saint Joseph for the grace of
graces: our conversion.

Let us now make our prayer to him:

*Hail, guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted His only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.*

*Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself to be a father,
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.*

Given in Rome, at Saint John Lateran, on 8
December, Solemnity of the Immaculate
Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the
year 2020, the eighth of my Pontificate.

Franciscus

³⁴ *Confessions*, VIII, 11, 27: PL 32, 761; X, 27, 38: PL 32,
795.