

Year of Saint Joseph, Spiritual Father: Some Meditations

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There are many objections raised against emphasizing the reality and importance of Saint Joseph. Let me introduce you to some of them to begin our reflection on the greatness of Joseph:

1. The apostles and even Saint John the Baptist communicate more to us in the New Testament. Joseph says nothing, suggesting he is more or less to be kept in the shadows of our redemption.
2. Jesus's public life, establishing the sacraments, ministers of the sacraments, and the whole Paschal mystery are at the heart of our faith. But Joseph is dead when all this happens, and so has little importance to us. He is never directly mentioned in any creed or solemn definitions of faith.
3. Joseph's role is exceedingly minor or almost nothing in contrast to Mary's importance by the general councils and Fathers of the Church for many centuries.
4. To think of giving Joseph a status of *proto-dulia*—one who deserves the highest honor of all the saints after the Virgin Mary—makes no sense. He lived a very minor role and not even a heroic role in the establishing of the Catholic faith. So, it seems inappropriate that he be given the highest honor, above all the other saints and angels.
5. Saint Joseph was simply an old man with children from a previous family, which explains why there is mentioned brothers and sisters of Jesus.

To answer these objections takes more time than we have for this conference, but I can share some ideas to allay the many quandaries that some Catholics have when thinking that the life of Joseph is not very important for our salvation.

To the first objection, while it is true that we have no words spoken by Joseph in the Sacred Scripture, we do find his inner actions with angels and his obedience. Mary and Joseph's marriage was probably matched by both of their parents. It is also the teaching of saints and theologians that Mary convinced him to make a vow of perpetual virginity (although we are privy to no conversations that led up to either the marriage or such a vow).

To the second objection, even though Joseph was absent from the public ministry and Paschal mystery of Christ, he played an exceedingly important role preparing him for our redemption. The Incarnation was for the redemption of the human race. They are not isolated realities. The Hypostatic Union is the summit of all divine benefits.¹ Therefore, no order is superior to it, the order whereby the highest degree of essential goodness can communicate itself to a creature. Saint Thomas says it best: "Christ is the fruit of this marriage; neither a child born in adultery nor an adopted son reared in a marriage is its good, since marriage is not directed to rear such; but the marriage of Joseph was specially ordained for this purpose that the child should be received and brought up within it." So it has no equal in the natural order. It establishes a fatherhood far above any we know, and hence Joseph has a dominion and ministry over the God-man. He is a father supernaturally.²

Concerning the third objection, while it is true that Joseph is rarely mentioned by general councils and Fathers of the Church, the early centuries of the Church had to face grave threats of heresy (Trinitarian, Christological, soteriological, sacramental, and Mariological, among many others disputes) as well as the martyrdom of its members. All of these kept the understanding of Joseph in the shadows of a robust speculative theology except that he keeps Mary virginal.

Fourth, it took a long time of reflection and devotion to realize how important Joseph was to the makeup of the Incarnation. His greatness surpasses all the saints due to his unique role as the spiritual father of Jesus, and the spouse of Mary requiring special graces greater than the apostles or martyrs. One is not given authority over God on earth and the Queen of Heaven and Earth without being given the requisite graces.

¹ Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] IV, ch. 27; see also Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, qq. 1–7.

² Aquinas, *In IV sent.*, d. 30, q. 2, 1.3, ad 4.

Jurisdiction and the sacred ministry over the sacraments is remote and pales when contrasted to a ministry over God incarnate and the Blessed Virgin. And Mary also increased in her fullness of grace due to the good deeds he did for her and she for him. Moreover, the dignity of Mary's motherhood is greater than grace itself, as she is adorned in her womb with divinity.³ So, Saint John Damascene writes about Joseph that he is "the spouse of Mary: nothing greater could be said of him." Leo XIII said Joseph arrived closer to that dignity of Mary than any other creature because there is a kind of communication of goods between husband and wife due to the union and surrender of each to each. If Mary's dignity is called quasi-infinite, it is not in the same order as habitual grace, but above all grace, even as the divine person himself is greater than grace itself.⁴

The final objection is answered accordingly. Today most who reflect on Saint Joseph know from Scripture studies that the phrase "brothers and sisters" is not to be taken literally in all instances, but could be used for friends and relatives. Further, to think of Joseph as an old man would make the journey to Egypt whereby he became the savior of the Savior more unlikely, given human nature's physical weakness to walk the 240 miles to Cairo. Then on arrival, it takes a certain creative spunk to find a home and a job and make new friends with a new environment in a foreign country.

Turning now to Pope Francis's apostolic letter *Patris Corde* (With a Father's Heart) concerning Saint Joseph, he begins in section one with the following introduction:

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."⁵

Those two major responsibilities of Joseph describe his identity and call forth an understanding of his personal grace of vocation. This letter of the present Pontiff is in tandem with the opening of a year in honor of Saint Joseph and in many ways continues the papal magisterium of previous popes, especially the last major document by Saint John Paul on Saint Joseph, *Redemptoris Custos* (Guardian of the Redeemer). Francis even

³ *In I sent.*, d. 45, q. 1, a. 3.

⁴ *ST III*, q. 7, a. 13, ad 3.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Patris Corde* [PC] (2020), §1 ("A Beloved Father").

continues with a citation from that document, which in turn cites Saint Paul VI's teaching as well:

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."⁶

When Saint John Paul wrote his apostolic exhortation, many previous papal teachings had been written to encourage devotion to Saint Joseph, but *Redemptoris Custos* gives its readers many theological underpinnings for the spiritual life to encourage prayer to Saint Joseph. The Christian faithful are reminded that when Joseph is given authority as a husband over the future Queen of Heaven and Earth, his spousal love is produced by special gifts of the Holy Spirit so that, while remaining virginal, he would have real chaste affection for his spouse whom he willingly chose to keep as his best friend, and preserve their virginity intact with a special gift from God. In addition, Saint Thomas Aquinas reminds his readers that, when God chooses someone for a special mission in the Church, he always prepares that person with many graces, and sometimes gifts of nature to fulfill that task.⁷ The reader is recalled to this spiritual insight by Saint John Paul:

Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife" in to his home (Matt 1:24); what was conceived in Mary was "of the Holy Spirit." From expressions such as these are we not to suppose that his love as a man was also given new birth by the Holy Spirit? Are we not to think that the love of God which has been poured forth into the human heart through the Holy Spirit (see Rom 5:5) molds every human love to perfection? This love of God also molds—in a completely unique way—the love of husband and wife, deepening within it everything of human worth and beauty, everything that bespeaks an exclusive gift of self, a covenant between persons, and an authentic communion according to the model of the Blessed Trinity.

⁶ PC, §1, citing the passage from Paul VI quoted in St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos* [RC] (1989), §8.

⁷ ST III, q. 98, a. 5, ad 3.

“Joseph . . . took his wife; but he knew her not, until she had borne a son” (Matt 1:24–25). These words indicate another kind of closeness in marriage. The deep spiritual closeness arising from marital union and the interpersonal contact between man and woman have their definitive origin in the Spirit, the Giver of Life (see John 6:63). Joseph, in obedience to the Spirit, found in the Spirit the source of love, the conjugal love which he experienced as a man. And this love proved to be greater than this “just man” could ever have expected within the limits of his human heart.⁸

Likewise, when it comes to Joseph’s fatherly and affectionate love of Jesus as a child in his household, Saint John Paul also points out:

Since it is inconceivable that such a sublime task would not be matched by the necessary qualities to adequately fulfill it, we must recognize that Joseph showed Jesus “by a special gift from heaven, all the natural love, all the affectionate solicitude that a father’s heart can know.”

Besides fatherly authority over Jesus, God also gave Joseph a share in the corresponding love, the love that has its origin in the Father “from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Eph 3:15).⁹

In the case of his virginal marriage, Joseph accepted this gift and challenge so that he could concentrate more exclusively on God and his purposes, while at the same time be a husband who knew how to both affirm his wife’s role and goodness in the home and educate his son on the human level. As Saint Thomas reminds us, marriage is the highest friendship because it includes the gift of one’s total self to will, in a practical way, benefits to one’s spouse in terms of conversations, happy surprises, family decisions, and sacrifices.¹⁰ And even though they did not engage in authentic and holy conjugal acts, this did not prevent them from sacrificing for and enjoying each other’s presence, even while discussing the daily family “ups and downs” of life. This would have included how to change family rules as the baby Jesus became a child, a teenager, and an adult. Moreover, since Joseph worked as a carpenter, he must have had many stories with which to regale his little family about some of the odd customers who came to his workshop. Further, his holiness would not have deprived him or

⁸ RC, §19.

⁹ RC, §8.

¹⁰ SCG III, ch. 123, a. 6.

the family of his sense of humor. As Saint Thomas reminds his followers: "Grace does not destroy nature, rather it purifies and elevates it."¹¹

While it may seem odd to believe that Thomists would praise Francisco Suarez, S.J., yet the latter seems to have been the first theologian to teach that the Incarnation of the Word of God implies a deep order.¹² What does this mean?

God chose to become man in a marriage, not to a single mother, and therefore in a daily family setting for parents to educate and take care of him. The Word of God did not become "flesh" in a vacuum, but very concretely with many purposes, some beyond a theologian's ability to understand. It took the consent of a betrothed woman to say "yes" to the will of God through an appearance of the angel Gabriel, and the consent of her husband to say "yes" to another angel for the Holy Family to continue the marriage after Joseph's discovery of Mary's pregnancy and his thoughts that he should withdraw from this mysterious relationship. The Word of God could have accomplished the redemption of the human race in a million other ways, but he chose this order or plan of entering the world with the consent of a woman and her husband.

Saint Thomas does not like to answer "what if" questions. We human beings do not know, if either of them would have said "no" to the angel's requests, what would have been the consequences for us. Notwithstanding, since both Mary and Joseph accepted their vocations, Suarez goes on to teach that Mary's role was intrinsically necessary for the Incarnation. Given today's understanding of biology, God wanted to become incarnate beginning in a woman's womb using in part her genetic makeup and the Holy Spirit creating the other portion, thereby creating a male fetus. God wanted to enter the world from the womb of a mother. While Joseph gave nothing of his physical being to the makeup of Jesus, yet he too was essential in other ways for the Incarnation, given God's will to enter the world through a marriage yet without a holy conjugal act. Suarez observes that Joseph's role was extrinsically necessary for the Incarnation, given the decision of God himself.

Many theologians would say that this order or plan of the Incarnation is a reality greater than sanctifying grace, because the latter gift elevates someone as an adopted son or daughter of God together with other divine gifts and dignities. But to be integral and necessary for the Incarnation to exist, given God's decision, and to possess authority over God incarnate—all of this suggests and even demands that grace be given in super-

¹¹ *ST*I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

¹² Francisco Suárez, *Summam S. Thomae* III, q. 29, disp. 8, sect. I.

abundance to Mary first and to Joseph second, both because of the infinite dignity of being the Mother of God, and in the case of Joseph, being the spouse of the Virgin Mary, thereby sharing in her dignity, as well as being the chosen and commanded father of God on earth. His fatherhood demanded that he raise the Lord Jesus in his masculine spirituality, and so prepare him for his public ministry and his death on the Cross for our salvation. Joseph is rightly called by Saint John Paul a special minister of the economy of salvation.¹³

Patris Corde develops many practical themes for the spiritual life of ordinary people, as well as religious and clerics, especially men, since Joseph led a hidden life of work, under the power of the grace of the Holy Spirit. As Pope Francis says in his introduction:

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.¹⁴

Since the principal perspective of Saint Joseph is his fatherhood, the document is a challenge or call for men to appropriate several key concepts for the spiritual life of present and future fathers. The Holy Father asserts throughout his work a theology of weakness, together with merciful love, and creative courage in dealing with seemingly impossible situations in life. For example, fathers in general, when correcting their sons and daughters, can become overly harsh rather than patient while being definitive. Worse still, fathers can ignore their sons' shortcoming and never lovingly correct them either. This overreaction or under-reaction may be due in part to either the self-hatred in themselves or a failure of courage, which is often projected onto their children and often to their wives. So, Francis reminds fathers of the following in section 2:

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

¹³ 13 RC, §32.

¹⁴ PC, introduction.

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.¹⁵

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 our own weaknesses, our own frailty. Only tender love will save us from the snares of the accuser (see 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 (see Luke 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).¹⁶

Another aspect of fatherhood, whether in married or even priestly life, consists in learning to accept responsibility for others notwithstanding their weaknesses. As Francis admonishes present and future fathers:

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 (see 1 Cor 1:27).¹⁷

However, to get to that point in the spiritual life, one has to first learn how to handle with creative courage the reality of failures and weaknesses of others as they exist in front of us. Francis emphasizes:

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

¹⁵ *PC*, §2.

¹⁶ *PC*, 2.

¹⁷ *PC*, 4.

that we have been abandoned, but instead are being trusted to plan, to be creative, and to find solutions ourselves.¹⁸

When being a father sometimes seems overly burdensome and there appears to be no solution in sight to conflicts, whether in home life or the life of work, the same abandonment to God's plans which Joseph possessed throughout his life can come to our aid. Pope Francis explains,

Just as God told Joseph: "Son of David, do not be afraid!" (Matt 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 John 3:20).¹⁹

These spiritual insights of Pope Francis should inspire fathers with hope when faced with seeming impossible problems, and going to Joseph in prayer can keep us steady on the way to heaven, because "only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments."²⁰

In conclusion, the child supernaturally generated in Mary belonged by right of marriage to Joseph. So Joseph came closer to Christ than all other men. By his labors and solicitude, he maintained and protected the God-man. Grace was therefore superabundant in his ministry as a result. He cooperated in the constitution of the hypostatic order in a true and singular manner, serving the Hypostatic Union in a direct, immediate, and necessary way by God's design. By a special divine ordination, Christ then is the fruit and effect of the marriage between the Blessed Virgin and Joseph. Jesus was received within their marriage. So, there is a true bond of dependence between the ministry of Joseph and the Incarnation that should lead the Christian to have a love for and devotion to Joseph. 

¹⁸ *PC*, 5.

²⁰ *PC*, 4.

²¹ *RC*, §4.