

Saint Joseph and the Indispensable Role of the Holy Family

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One of the greatest graces of the year of Saint Joseph¹ is the way it shifts our gaze to marriage and family. Catholic devotion and theology have focused extensively on the relationship of Jesus and Mary, and rightly so! Out of reverence for the great wonder of the virginity of Mary, we have traditionally overlooked her marriage to Saint Joseph. When we zoom out to include Saint Joseph, however, we now have in view a marriage and a family. This is especially important in the midst of our current social confusion and crisis over marriage. By focusing the Church's attention on Saint Joseph, it seems that the Holy Spirit is directing us to look more carefully at this holy marriage and this Holy Family.

Sometimes we get the impression from Catholic theology or popular devotion, because of the focus on Mary and Jesus, that Joseph was more like an appendix to this holy Mother and Son. It almost seems as if the angel Gabriel would have come to Mary anyway and Joseph just happened to get involved first. His involvement can even appear to create certain problems that require some divine intervention to fix up with an angelic appearance in an inspired dream. Joseph seems to complicate things in a way that appears not to be part of the original plan, and their marriage appears to be an inconvenience that interferes with the real theodrama of the Incarnation. The really important part of the narrative seems to focus on Mary's virginity and her sublime fiat to God's initiative. Her real spouse is the Holy Spirit

¹ Pope Francis, *Patris Corde* [PC], Apostolic Letter on the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church (December 8, 2020). All magisterial documents cited are available on the Vatican website.

and Joseph comes across as a kind of butler in the service of this noble household. Or worse: “In other ancient fictions, he appears as something of a buffoon. Again, the authors seem to think that Mary would be exalted if her husband were humiliated.”²

In contrast to this view, Scripture actually places the marriage in the primary position by mentioning it first. It draws attention to the fact that their marriage was already a reality before the Incarnation. Both evangelists Matthew and Luke indicate this clearly in their introduction of the Blessed Virgin.³ She was already a married woman when the angel came to her. This fact has also entered into the liturgical prayer of the Church. The commemoration of the Espousal has even been celebrated liturgically at different times in the Church in more recent centuries (on August 29 initially, or more commonly on January 23).⁴ Though we do not know the details of that betrothal outside of the mosaic fragments offered through the kaleidoscope of visionaries, we know that there was a betrothal and that it was something typically Jewish in accordance with the Mosaic law.

We do not want to diminish in the least detail the profound mystery which is made possible through Mary’s “yes” and that unfolds uniquely in history. The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled exactly once when the Virgin conceives and bears a Son. Without taking anything away from this, a very different, and indeed a more beautiful picture unfolds. In the longest papal teaching on Saint Joseph, Pope Saint John Paul II was emphatic: “And while it is important for the Church to profess the virginal conception of Jesus, it is no less important to uphold Mary’s marriage to Joseph.”⁵ Pope John Paul II refocuses our attention on their marriage as an *intentional* pre-cursor to the Incarnation. In fact, God willed to bring about our redemption not only through a virgin but indeed also through a marriage. Pope John Paul II emphasized this fact in quoting from Pope Saint Paul

² Mike Aquilina, “Getting to Know Joseph: The Church’s Appreciation for the Head of the Holy Family Has Developed over Millennia,” Knights of Columbus, March 1, 2021, kofc.org/en/news-room/columbia/2021/march/getting-to-know-joseph.html.

³ “When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together” (Matt 1:18); “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary” (Luke 1:26–27).

⁴ See Leonora Butau, “The Espousal of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph—a Feast for our Times,” ICN: Independent Catholic News, indcatholicnews.com/news/38776.

⁵ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos* [RC] (1989), §7.

VI: “The Savior began the work of salvation by this virginal and holy union, wherein is manifested his all-powerful will to purify and sanctify the family—that sanctuary of love and cradle of life.”⁶ Pope Leo XIII emphasized the same point in his letter *Neminem Fugit*:

When God in his mercy determined to accomplish the work of man’s renewal, which same had so many long ages awaited, he appointed and ordained this work on such wise that its very beginning might shew to the world the august spectacle of a Family which was known to be divinely constituted; that therein all men might behold a perfect model, as well of domestic life as of every virtue and pattern of holiness: for such indeed was the Holy Family of Nazareth.⁷

Finally, Pope Francis presented this idea in a dramatic way at the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia in 2015 when he departed from his prepared text and said: “When the man and his wife [Adam and Eve] went astray and walked away from God, God did not leave them alone. Such was his love. So great was his love that he began to walk with mankind, he began to walk alongside his people, until the right time came and then he gave the greatest demonstration of love: his Son. And where did he send his Son? To a palace, to a city, to an office building? He sent him to a family. God came into the world in a family.”⁸

This consistent papal magisterium highlights the intentionality rather than the coincidence of the marriage between Mary and Joseph. It is not the accidental landing place for the Incarnate Word. In fact, Catholic theology upholds something even more daring. Starting with Saint Augustine, we see that the Incarnate Word is actually *the offspring of this genuine marriage*: “In Christ’s parents all the goods of marriage were realized—offspring, fidelity, the sacrament: the offspring being the Lord Jesus himself; fidelity, since there was no adultery; the sacrament, since there was no divorce.”⁹ The understandable concern of earlier times was to prevent the misconception that Jesus was the *physical* offspring of the

⁶ RC, §7, quoting Pope Saint Paul VI, Discourse to the “Equipes Notre-Dame” Movement, May 4, 1970, §7.

⁷ Pope Leo XIII, *Breve Neminem Fugit* (1892; instituting the feast of the Holy Family), the-american-catholic.com/2015/12/27/breve-neminem-fugit/.

⁸ Pope Francis, Address at the Prayer Vigil for the World Meeting of Families, Sept 26, 2015.

⁹ Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.11.13 (*Patrologia Latina*, 44:421), quoted in RC, §7.

marriage. However, this tended to cloud over the important role that the marriage played in the drama of salvation. Saint Thomas Aquinas repeated this teaching of Saint Augustine,¹⁰ and it gives the foundation for the later papal statements we considered about the importance of the marriage. Although Jesus is not the offspring of a physical union between Joseph and Mary, he is indeed the offspring of their marriage. For this reason, Saint Augustine also emphasized that in Scripture Joseph is rightly called “father,” and Joseph and Mary together are called the “parents” of Jesus.¹¹

When we focus our attention on God’s design that made the marriage of Mary and Joseph a necessary part of his plan of salvation, we can discover several beautiful truths. First we reenvision Saint Joseph. Rather than being an inconvenient buffoon, his unique and preeminent holiness emerge clearly as a predestined minister in the order of the Hypostatic Union.¹² Indeed, he was specifically formed and chosen as the husband of the Blessed Virgin, the human father of Jesus, and the head of the Holy Family. Second we recognize how God mediates his plan of salvation through our humanity, entrusting the human formation of his divine Son to a man and a woman united in marriage. Third we come to appreciate that at the foundation of the redemption is not just an individual, nor even a couple, but actually a triple. God inaugurates a new creation with a communion of love, with a family. From this we can draw some lessons for

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 29, a. 2, sc.

¹¹ Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.12: “And because of this conjugal fidelity they are both deservedly called ‘parents’ of Christ (not only she as His mother, but he as His father, as being her husband), both having been such in mind and purpose, though not in the flesh. But while the one was His father in purpose only, and the other His mother in the flesh also, they were both of them, for all that, only the parents of His humility, not of His sublimity; of His weakness, not of His divinity. For the Gospel does not lie, in which one reads, ‘Both His father and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken about Him;’ and in another passage, ‘Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year;’ and again a little afterwards, ‘His mother said to Him, “Son, why have You thus dealt with us? Behold, Your father and I have sought You sorrowing”’” (trans. at newadvent.org/fathers/15071.htm).

¹² Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., explicates this at greater length in the final chapter of his mariological work: “Certain offices pertain to the order of sanctifying grace, and among them that of the Apostles holds the highest place; thus they have need of more gratuitous gifts than other souls, especially gratuitous gifts of wisdom. But there are other offices which touch upon or border on the order of the Hypostatic Union, . . . as can be seen clearly in the case of the divine maternity of the Blessed Virgin, and it is to that order that the ministry of St. Joseph pertains” (*Mother of the Saviour: And Our Interior Life*, trans. Bernard J. Kelly [Charlotte, NC: TAN, 1948]).

the family today and we can look to the Holy Family to help us overcome the current crisis in marriage and family.

Joseph's Dignity

When we consider that Joseph was chosen specifically to be the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary then we can also acknowledge the grace God would give him to carry out that vocation. We can apply what Saint Thomas taught about the Blessed Virgin also to her husband Joseph: "Those whom God chooses for an office, He prepares and disposes in such a way that they become suited to it, according to the saying of St. Paul, 'He has made us fit ministers of the New Covenant' (2 Cor 3:6). But the Blessed Virgin was divinely chosen to be the Mother of God, and therefore there can be no doubt that God fitted her for this position by means of His grace."¹³ This invites our reflection on the dignity of Saint Joseph as one who was made worthy to be a spouse of Mary. He needed a strength to protect her body but also a sensitivity to protect her heart. He needed the grace to perfect his chastity in a way that it could blossom in friendship (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], §2347). He needed the modesty that could keep hidden the precious treasures that were entrusted to his care (see CCC, §§2521–22).¹⁴

In the magisterial logic of Pope Leo XIII: "But as Joseph has been united to the Blessed Virgin by the ties of marriage, it may not be doubted that he approached nearer than any to the eminent dignity by which the Mother of God surpasses so nobly all created natures."¹⁵ Pope Leo XIII is unhesitating in presenting us with a marriage that soared above all others in its beauty, intimacy and perfection. He describes the marriage of two saints, indeed the greatest two saints, and sees how the marriage was itself even more sanctifying for them. Pope Leo XIII elaborates three reasons for the surpassing dignity of Saint Joseph: first because he is chosen and equipped as husband of the Blessed Virgin, then because of his unique vocation to foster the Incarnate Word: "And Joseph shines among all mankind by the most august dignity, since by divine will, he was the guardian of the Son of God and reputed as His father among men."¹⁶ Pope Leo XIII further argued: "Hence it came about that the Word of God was humbly subject to Joseph, that He obeyed him, and that He rendered to

¹³ ST III, q. 27, a. 4, corp.

¹⁴ Boniface Hicks, O.S.B., *Through the Heart of St. Joseph* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2021), 35–36.

¹⁵ Pope Leo XIII, *Quamquam Pluries* [QP] (1889), §3.

¹⁶ QP, §3.

him all those offices that children are bound to render to their parents.”¹⁷ Finally, Joseph was charged with responsibility as head of the Holy Family, completing the threefold reason for his eminent dignity.¹⁸

Though we have often quickly overlooked this holy marriage, with these powerful proclamations Pope Leo XIII is inviting us to fix our gaze on it. The marriage of Mary and Joseph was not superficial or merely functional. Contrary to the images of Saint Joseph being merely a guardian to Mary and Jesus, he is presented as much more. He is an equal in the marriage, and both receives from it and contributes to it: “For marriage is the most intimate of all unions which from its essence imparts a community of gifts between those that by it are joined together.”¹⁹ Pope Leo XIII speaks of a community of gifts that are received by and shared between the holy couple. What would these gifts be? Of course the greatest is Jesus, the fruit of their marriage, who is God himself. In him they receive everything. At the same time, there are many other gifts that they share, including the gift of their hearts communicated in times of silence, in times of sharing, in times of working together, in times of shared anxiety, and in times of shared joy. We are invited to see Joseph in all his dignity as the true spouse of Mary.

Pope Leo XIII described Saint Joseph as Mary’s “life’s companion” and a “participator in her sublime dignity.”²⁰ Not unlike the spouse who enjoys the benefits of a spouse’s fame or fortune, Saint Joseph is the happy beneficiary of Mary’s heavenly fame and divine vocation. He is not merely overshadowed by her radiance, but enlightened and illuminated by it. He shares in her holiness, in her virtues, in her merits. He has the privilege of enjoying the world through her Immaculate Heart and he has the grace of beholding the light of the nations through her eyes and in her arms.²¹

Far from being a functionary kept off to the side, or merely a pack animal to carry their baggage on long journeys, Saint Joseph is an intimate and integral participant in the hidden years of Christ’s life. It is staggering to imagine that he had the privilege of introducing the Son of God to the Jerusalem temple, walking with his toddler into that tabernacle that could not contain his presence. Presumably he taught him to read Hebrew and

¹⁷ *QP*, §3.

¹⁸ *QP*, §3.

¹⁹ *QP*, §3.

²⁰ *QP*, §3.

²¹ Drawing on Pope John Paul II’s description of the Rosary as the contemplation of the face of Jesus through the eyes of Mary (see *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* [2002], §§9–16), we can think of Saint Joseph as the first advocate of this holy devotional way of prayer.

then taught the Incarnate Word to pray the Psalms with his little human voice. We can imagine that he had the joy of presiding over the first wooden creation, as he guided the little hands of the very Creator of wood. The mystery hidden from ages past had become the mystery hidden in Mary's womb, placed under Joseph's care, and kept safe in Joseph's house.

After many centuries of an important and beautiful focus on Mary and Jesus, the Church in the last centuries is taking one step back to see that the image of the infant Jesus in Mary's arms always takes place in the context of Joseph's loving presence. Jesus is entrusted into the care of a marriage. Like every marriage, the marriage of Joseph and Mary finds its perfection in its offspring, and in the case of this marriage, it has a *divine* perfection in its *divine* offspring. The Incarnate Word is the infinite mystery at the center of their family. That mystery dwells first in the womb of Mary and then remains in the heart of Mary. The woman's heart that bears the mystery remains the center of the family. But as we make one more step outward, we find another concentric circle and see how that heart is situated in the protective care of a husband who always adores this mystery together with his holy bride.

Joseph as Husband and Father

Saint Thomas posits several reasons why it was fitting that the Virgin should be espoused before she conceived.²² Two of those reasons focus on the roles of Saint Joseph as husband and father. He says that Mary and Jesus are the beneficiaries of Saint Joseph's spousal love and fatherly love, respectively. Here again we see that Saint Joseph is not a mere attachment to the noble pair but an intimate and integral part of these divine mysteries.

Saint Thomas argues that it was fitting for Mary to be espoused to Joseph before she conceived because, "as Jerome says, Joseph might administer to her wants."²³ Along with the defensive and practical reasons of protecting her honor and preventing accusations of her being an adulteress, Saint Thomas also acknowledges the valuable role that Joseph plays in her life. The Blessed Virgin's life is better for having a husband. She herself is not merely a tool in a salvation operation, but a human woman with a tender heart who can receive love from a husband who delights in serving her. We are edified by their spousal love and invited to ponder it that we might also receive the overflow of their affections. We are, after all, baptized into Jesus and so we also benefit from the stability of a home

²² ST III, q. 29, a. 1.

²³ ST III, q. 29, a. 1, sc.

that is established and held firm by the union of these two hearts in their marriage. As Pope Saint John Paul II described it:

Analyzing the nature of marriage, both St. Augustine and St. Thomas always identify it with an “indivisible union of souls,” a “union of hearts,” with “consent.” These elements are found in an exemplary manner in the marriage of Mary and Joseph. At the culmination of the history of salvation, when God reveals his love for humanity through the gift of the Word, it is precisely the marriage of Mary and Joseph that brings to realization in full “freedom” the “spousal gift of self” in receiving and expressing such a love.²⁴

The exalted level of their union might seem especially surprising in the light of their abstinence from physical sexual intercourse. Saint Thomas Aquinas reflects on this in asking whether the marriage of Mary and Joseph was a true marriage. He explains that the perfection of a thing requires the perfection of its form and the perfection of its end. Then he explains the form and end of matrimony:

The form of matrimony consists in a certain inseparable union of souls, by which husband and wife are pledged by a bond of mutual affection that cannot be sundered. And the end of matrimony is the begetting and upbringing of children: the first of which [begetting children] is attained by conjugal intercourse; the second [upbringing of children] by the other duties of husband and wife, by which they help one another in rearing their offspring.

Mary and Joseph were able to form an inseparable bond, beget a child, and raise him without use of the means of conjugal intercourse. Saint Thomas focused his teaching on intercourse as a means, rather than an end, in marriage, especially in regard to its necessity for the begetting of children. Later magisterial teaching recognized the role that intercourse plays also in the unification of the married couple.²⁵ In reality, these two

²⁴ *RC*, §7.

²⁵ Pope Saint Paul VI taught: “The Church, nevertheless, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life. This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both

ends of intercourse are inseparable, because the begetting and raising of children is supported by and fosters the union of the couple. On the other hand, the union of the couple is defective if it is not open to the begetting and raising of children. For Mary and Joseph, this procreation and union were fostered supernaturally without intercourse and sustained by grace through their mutual perfection in love.

While Saint Thomas focused on sexual intercourse as a means towards procreation, a genuine development of doctrine sees sexual intercourse not only as a means but also as an expression of self-donation and union. Building on Pope Paul VI's teaching in *Humanae Vitae*, Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body focuses on the capacity for self-donation that occurs through sexual intercourse as part of the perfection of marriage and the nuptial meaning of the body. John Crosby explains his teaching:

Self-donation belongs to man as person; . . . it belongs to him no less than selfhood and self-possession. The supreme self-donation between human persons is spousal self-donation. . . . John Paul adds: this spousal self-donation can be fully expressed and enacted only when a man and a woman in marriage become one flesh (Genesis 2, 24). . . . This potential of the masculinity and the femininity of the human body to serve the supreme self-donation of persons is what the Holy Father calls the "nuptial meaning of the human body."²⁶

In the case of Mary and Joseph, there was a miraculous union and fruitfulness that normally come about through the means of marital intercourse. Furthermore, they were able to live out the intimacy of marriage and self-donation without its bodily expression in sexual intercourse. Like the singular miracle of the conception, it seems that there was an ongoing supernatural grace of self-donation without recourse to marital intercourse. This was necessary for them to fulfill their divine vocation to be the parents of Jesus, because the effectiveness of motherhood and fatherhood is dependent on the capacity of self-donation that is normally expressed between spouses and fostered in conjugal union. We can see

inherent to the marriage act. The reason is that the fundamental nature of the marriage act, while uniting husband and wife in the closest intimacy, also renders them capable of generating new life—and this as a result of laws written into the actual nature of man and of woman" (*Humanae Vitae* [1968], §§11–12).

²⁶ John Crosby, "The Personalism of John Paul II as the Basis of His Approach to the Teaching of *Humanae Vitae*," in *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 222.

how the same grace that made possible the virginal fruit of their marriage also provided miraculously for their virginal union as spouses and their capacity for self-donation.

Furthermore, the uniqueness of the fruit of their marriage made the begetting of any additional children unnecessary. In fact, the miraculous begetting of this one child not only fulfilled their particular calling in marriage, but actually inaugurated a new chapter in the meaning of marriage, raising it to the level of a sacrament:

Jesus was born and lived in a concrete family, accepting all its characteristic features and he conferred the highest dignity on the institution of marriage, making it a sacrament of the new covenant (cf. Mt 19:3–9). It is in this new perspective that the couple finds the fullness of its dignity and the family its solid foundation.²⁷

Additionally, Saint Thomas lists Joseph's care for Jesus as another reason that it was fitting for Mary to be espoused to Joseph before she conceived. After recognizing Joseph's importance in protecting Jesus's reputation against being born of adultery, in ensuring that his genealogy might be traced through the male line, and in protecting him from the devil, he then explained: "that He might be fostered by Joseph: who is therefore called His 'father,' as bread-winner."²⁸ Being fostered by Joseph is a positive value for Jesus in his humanity according to Saint Thomas.

This invites us to reflect on the designs of God, who did not send his Son into the world as a fully formed adult man. He sent his Son as a fertilized ovum, a zygote, into the womb of Mary, who was in the care of Saint Joseph. Just as Mary's proper care for her body during her pregnancy was important for the formation of Jesus's humanity and just as proper nutrition continued to be necessary for him as he grew through the stages of childhood, so also the proper affection from a mother and father was necessary for the ordinary formation of his sacred humanity. Although God can intervene miraculously to achieve certain ends, we do not get any indication that he intervened that way with Jesus. Rather, he gave him the ordinary supports in a mother and a father. Furthermore, he formed the mother and father to be of the highest dignity and holiness and perfection in love and grace so that they would most perfectly form the humanity of the miraculous offspring of their marriage.

²⁷ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), §210.

²⁸ *ST* III, q. 29, a. 1, sc.

In doing this, God honored his own design of our humanity, not subverting the normal processes of growth. As much as we grow from proper nutrition, even more we develop internally through the loving affirmation of a father's care. Saint Thomas acknowledges this natural human need when he says that there is a benefit for Mary's Son in having her husband to foster him.

Pope Francis reflects on the way that Joseph loved Jesus and Mary in his letter inaugurating the year of Saint Joseph: "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."²⁹ Like Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Pope Leo XIII, and Pope Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis helps us to see the positive value of Joseph's love. Joseph was not an accidental interloper on the stage of salvation history, but an essential and integral part of this beautiful drama. His love helps us see God's design even more clearly. When "God sent forth His Son, born of woman," he sent him into a marriage, forming a family, and entrusted his upbringing to a mother and a father (Gal 4:4). Joseph was an integral and intimate part of this moment that marks the fullness of time, and not merely as a "guardian" or "trustee," but rather as a father (Gal 4:2). Indeed, the Son, in whom it has become possible for us to say "Abba!" to God, first said "Abba!" to Joseph in his humanity (see Gal 4:4–6).

In reflecting on the fatherhood of Joseph, Pope Francis reflects further on the important role that fathers play in the lives of their children: "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."³⁰ In this case, the fatherhood of Joseph follows the pattern described by Pope Francis, and in fact we could say that it fulfills this pattern *par excellence*. There is no greater and no more unique mystery than the One that grew up in the house of Joseph and under the care of his loving fatherhood. We can even see the way that that mystery was "brought to light" by Joseph in the very bestowal of Jesus's Name. Although Jesus always knew He had a Father in heaven, and at least in divine and infused knowledge knew his sacred mission, we can envision how he experienced that knowledge in his humanity as he discovered the story of his conception and his name from Saint Joseph's own narrative.

While God can always act in sovereign ways to reveal his power, He ordinarily honors his creative design of our humanity. He shows us that in

²⁹ *PC*, §7.

³⁰ *PC*, §7.

a particular way in the Holy Family and he summons our natural participation in his plan of salvation, after the pattern of Saint Joseph. He calls us to offer our own human, tender, loving care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Pope Francis offers a teaching about the Josephite fatherhood that comes about not only through childbirth, but through a loving, committed choice:

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. Children today often seem orphans, lacking fathers.³¹

Returning to the observation of Saint Thomas about the value that Joseph brings to both Mary, by being her husband, and to Jesus, by being a father to him, we can see how God wants us to reverence his own design of marriage and family. God neither violates nor sidesteps marriage and family in carrying out the work of salvation. Rather, he honors it and works through it:

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 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. Luke 2:6–7).³²

A Holy Family for the Sake of All Families

As noted earlier, the words of Pope Saint Paul VI guide us in seeing the fundamental role of the family in the plan of salvation as we continue our reflection on the Holy Family of Nazareth: “The Savior began the work of salvation by this virginal and holy union, wherein is manifested his all-powerful will to purify and sanctify the family—that sanctuary of love

³¹ *PC*, §7.

³² *PC*, §5.

and cradle of life.”³³ This is a truth that is important for all times, of course, but it is especially important in our time as Pope Francis has observed: “Marriage and the family are in crisis today.”³⁴ In light of the fact that “the future of humanity passes by way of the family,”³⁵ this is a crisis for the whole human race.

When Pope Francis invited the Church to focus her attention on Saint Joseph during the year that commemorates the 150th anniversary of Blessed Pius IX’s declaration that Saint Joseph is Protector of the Church, he invited us implicitly to focus our attention on the Holy Family and the essential role of the family in God’s plan of salvation. For one thing, we find in that family a school of discipleship that is important for every individual Christian: “Nazareth is a kind of school where we may begin to discover what Christ’s life was like and even to understand his Gospel. Here we can observe and ponder the simple appeal of the way God’s Son came to be known, profound yet full of hidden meaning. And gradually we may even learn to imitate him.”³⁶ Just as importantly, we find there the model of family life that needs to be promoted and fostered today.

This was a special task that Pope Saint John Paul II entrusted to the Church with his apostolic exhortation on the family in 1981, *Familiaris Consortio*. He taught about the dangers and evils that menace it. He acknowledged the temptations to discouragement and distress at the growth of difficulties. He saw how the family is being led away from its original position and true orientation and stated firmly: “They must follow Christ.” For this reason he exhorted the children of the Church to take concrete action to show special love to the family and explained: “Loving the family means being able to appreciate its values and capabilities, fostering them always.”³⁷

Like Pope Francis has done for us in declaring a year of Saint Joseph, Pope John Paul II also directed the attention of the Church to the Holy Family in order to carry out this solemn task of protecting and promoting

³³ RC, §7, quoting Pope Saint Paul VI, Discourse to the “Equipes Notre-Dame” Movement, §7.

³⁴ Pope Francis, Address at the International Colloquium on the Complementarity between Man and Woman sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, November 17, 2014, §2.

³⁵ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* [FC], Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (1981), §86.

³⁶ Pope Saint Paul VI, Homily in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth during Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, January 5, 1964, papalencyclicals.net/paul06/p6reflect.htm.

³⁷ FC, §86.

the family. He sees it as a key for helping Christian families to fulfill his call to “become what [they] are.”³⁸ The Holy Family provides the template for human families, because Christ always lived at its center: “Through God’s mysterious design, it was in that family that the Son of God spent long years of a hidden life. It is therefore the prototype and example for all Christian families.” It is also the hope for human families because of its greatness. This was a greatness that appeared in a very ordinary way, worked out in the daily details of family life. For this reason, Pope John Paul II, who was a great lover of humanity, saw in the Holy Family an unfailing source of support for human families in all their daily trials: “It glorified God in an incomparably exalted and pure way. And it will not fail to help Christian families—indeed, all the families in the world—to be faithful to their day-to-day duties, to bear the cares and tribulations of life, to be open and generous to the needs of others, and to fulfill with joy the plan of God in their regard.”

When we consider again the fact that God entrusted his Son not only to an immaculate Mother but also to a father, it also shows us the importance of sexual complementarity for reflecting God’s beauty and for raising God’s Son. As Pope Francis stated in a colloquium on the topic of the complementarity of man and woman: “This complementarity lies at the foundation of marriage and the family, which is the first school. . . . Thus, complementarity becomes a great treasure. It is not only an asset but is also a thing of beauty.”³⁹

Not only a thing of beauty, revealing the image and likeness in the communion of this complementarity, Pope Francis asserted the very points we were considering earlier in the importance of both mother *and* father for raising a child to the fullness of human maturity. This is the normative pattern, re-established in the Holy Family at the beginning of the new creation. It is a pattern of complementarity, with both father and mother caring for a child, such that a child has a right to this most perfect care:

Children have a right to grow up in a family with a father and a mother capable of creating a suitable environment for the child’s growth and emotional development. This is why, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I stressed the “indispensable” contribution of marriage to society, a contribution which “transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple” (n. 66).

³⁸ FC, §17.

³⁹ Pope Francis, Address at the International Colloquium on the Complementarity between Man and Woman, §1.

And this is why I am grateful to you for the emphasis that your colloquium has placed on the benefits that marriage can provide children, the spouses themselves, and society.⁴⁰

To lose sight of the essential role of the family in God's plan of salvation is fatal for the human race. It is for this reason that Pope Francis encouraged intellectuals, in particular, not to leave this theme of sexual complementarity aside or to make it secondary, but to focus on it for the sake of "a more free and just society." He raised concerns about the new threats to children, the family and consequently to the human race. He centered his concerns around the current efforts to relativize or eliminate the importance of the sexual difference between men and women:

I ask myself, if the so-called gender theory is not, at the same time, an expression of frustration and resignation, which seeks to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it. Yes, we risk taking a step backwards. The removal of difference in fact creates a problem, not a solution.⁴¹

This helps us to see again how important it is for us to expand our view from the beautiful and important relationship of Jesus and Mary to the fuller perspective of the Holy Family. How beautifully Joseph and Mary, in their preeminent holiness along with the fragility of their humanity, can exemplify precisely what Pope Francis says here and also intercede for those who are struggling:

In order to resolve the problems in their relationships, men and women need to speak to one another more, listen to each other more, get to know one another better, love one another more. They must treat each other with respect and cooperate in friendship. On this human basis, sustained by the grace of God, it is possible to plan a lifelong marital and familial union. The marital and familial bond is a serious matter, and it is so for everyone not just for believers. I would urge intellectuals not to leave this theme aside, as if it had to become secondary in order to foster a more free and just society.⁴²

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, Address at the International Colloquium on the Complementarity Between Man and Woman, §3.

⁴¹ Pope Francis, Address at the International Colloquium on the Complementarity Between Man and Woman §3.

⁴² Pope Francis, General Audience, "The Family no. 10: Male and Female (I)," April 15, 2015.

Like Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis sees that the protection of the family, particularly in regard to the complementarity of male and female as the necessary composition of marriage, is a critical part of the Church's mission today: "The social devaluation for the stable and generative alliance between man and woman is certainly a loss for everyone. We must return marriage and the family to the place of honour!"⁴³ What better way to behold the great place of honor that marriage holds than to see that God entrusted his Son to a marriage. In his eternal plan of salvation, marriage was not an after-thought. On the contrary, it was at the beginning of creation and at the beginning of redemption, and it continues to be a sign that always points to the eternal marriage of the Bride and the Lamb (see Rev 21:9–10; 22:17).

It is not easy to live out holy marriages and to fight for the place of honor that marriage should hold and to resist the many strong voices that push for various alternatives. All the same, the Holy Father exhorts us: "The responsibility of guarding this covenant between man and woman is ours, although we are sinners and are wounded, confused and humiliated, discouraged and uncertain; it is nevertheless for us believers a demanding and gripping vocation in today's situation."⁴⁴ And to help us he gave us a year of Saint Joseph to bring the Holy Family back into focus. In responding to these summons and taking up our own particular role, we find clarity, insight, strength, and support in the Holy Family. With Pope Saint John Paul II and Pope Francis, with Blessed Pius IX, Pope Leo XIII, and with all the popes in between, we can entrust the Church's mission and in a particular way the health and integrity of the family to the loving prayer and care of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. N-V

⁴³ Pope Francis, General Audience, "The Family no. 11: Male and Female (II)," April 22, 2015.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, "The Family, no. 11: Male and Female (II)."