

“WITH A FATHER’S HEART”

STUDY OF ST. JOSEPH USING POPE FRANCIS’ APOSTOLIC LETTER: PATRIS CORDE



St. Joseph with the Infant Jesus, Guido Reni, c. 1620

Year of St. Joseph - December 8, 2020 - December 8, 2021

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From St. Joseph Guild, Flourtown, PA prayer card

A Note from the study's author

When I was studying at l'Université de Grenoble in the 1970's, I became familiar with songs of Georges Moustaki. He cleverly composed lyrics, sang with a unique cadence, although racy at times. One song is titled "Mon Vieux Joseph" (My Old Man Joseph).

Moustaki laments with St. Joseph that "all he wanted was to live happily with Mary." Joseph was unaware of what was in store for listening to the angel in his dreams!

Before hearing the song, I had not focused much on St. Joseph's life, since his actions are mentioned only in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. It seemed to me at the time that Joseph was almost in the background. The tune remained one of my favorites, however, and I would listen to it on one of my cassette tapes. With moving to the States, and the fading out of cassette players, I practically forgot about the song.

When Pope Francis proclaimed the Year of St. Joseph on December 8th, 2020, over 40 years since the first time I heard "Mon Vieux Joseph," it was that song that came to mind immediately. "St. Joseph is finally getting the attention he deserves," I thought.

Popes through the centuries have talked about St. Joseph, and at least 3 modern day popes, including our beloved Pope Francis, have written encyclicals or letters about him. We will use Patris Corde, Pope Francis' apostolic letter, for this study.

I invite you to take a journey with St. Joseph, following his life as an example of obedience, willingness to change plans with courageous creativity, while listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, be it through current times, people around us, or dreams.

St. Joseph, pray for us!

- Christina Delaney, April 27, 2021

APOSTOLIC LETTER

PATRIS CORDE

**OF THE HOLY FATHER
FRANCIS**

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*".[1]

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 (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”,^[2] Venerable Pius XII proposed him as “Patron of Workers”^[3] and Saint John Paul II as “Guardian of the Redeemer”.^[4] Saint Joseph is universally invoked as the “patron of a happy death”.^[5]

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 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”.^[6] 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*

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”.^[7]

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”.^[8]

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 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.[9]

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.[10]

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 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,[11] 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.^[12]

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 (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.^[13]

Joseph was deeply troubled by Mary's mysterious pregnancy. He did not want to "expose her to public disgrace",^[14] 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 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).^[15]

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,^[16] 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 in the fullness of time in the great mystery of salvation and is truly a minister of salvation.”^[17]

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”.^[18]

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 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*)".^[19] 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.

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" (*Psalms* 68:6), who

commands us to love the stranger in our midst.^[20] 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 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.^[21]

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”.^[22]

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.^[23] 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*.

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*,^[24] 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.^[25]

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. 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 Abraham^[26] and Moses^[27], 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”.^[28] 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).^[29] 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 could exclaim: “Late have I loved you, Beauty ever ancient, ever new!”^[30]

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 Blessed 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 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

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

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

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

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

[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1014.

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

[7] *In Matthaeum Homiliae*, V, 3: PG 57, 58.

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

[9] Cf. *Autobiography*, 6, 6-8.

[10] 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."

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

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

[13] 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.*

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

[15] Cf. *Lev 12:1-8; Ex 13:2.*

[16] Cf. *Mt 26:39; Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42.*

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

[18] Homily at Mass and Beatifications, Villavicencio, Colombia (8 September 2017): AAS 109 (2017), 1061.

[19] Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate, 3.11: PL 40, 236.

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

[21] 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.

[22] SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium, 58.

[23] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 963-970.

[24] Original edition: *Cień Ojca*, Warsaw, 1977.

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

[26] Cf. *Gen* 18:23-32.

[27] Cf. *Ex* 17:8-13; 32:30-35.

[28] SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium, 42.

[29] Cf. *1 Cor* 11:1; *Phil* 3:17; *1 Thess* 1:6.

[30] *Confessions*, VIII, 11, 27: PL 32, 761; X, 27, 38: PL 32, 795.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	page 18
2. A Beloved Father.....	page 20
3. A Tender and Loving Father.....	page 22
4. An Obedient Father.....	page 24
5. An Accepting Father.....	page 27
6. A Creatively Courageous Father.....	page 29
7. A Working Father.....	page 32
8. A Father in the Shadows.....	page 34

Not much is known about Joseph, Mary’s husband. Many speculate about his age, his status, or if he had children before Jesus, and was widowed. Countless stories and movies include him in accounts of Jesus’s life. Based on the few words about him in Scripture, writers and artists have depicted him according to their imaginations. Through this study and discussion about him, may we grow closer to a better understanding of his heart and what kind of a human father he was to our Beloved Jesus.

St. Joseph, pray for us!



St. John Neumann Church, Annapolis, MD

Before each study session, ask the Holy Spirit to enrich you with appreciation for St. Joseph, the Blessed Mother's husband. Then, "Go to Joseph" with the prayer below, or see pages 13 and 14 for Pope Francis' suggestions. During the study, you may be inspired to write one of your own!



St. Joseph Church, Cockeysville, MD

Prayer to St. Joseph

With a Father's Heart, St. Joseph, you loved and nurtured Jesus.
Surely you taught Him with patience and wisdom, so that He learned to do the same,
growing into the man you helped Him to become.
Thank you, St. Joseph, for protecting our Lord, for listening to God in your dreams, for
remaining steadfast among trials, and true to the spirit of God's Law, taking Mary as
your wife into your home.
May we turn to you often, to be our model of obedience, perseverance, and fidelity to
the life of Jesus.
May you intercede for us, as we ask for the wisdom to follow Jesus, and for your loving
fatherly protection on us, the Body of Christ. Amen.

- 19

3. Why is it significant that Joseph was a descendant of David? (Matt 1: 16-20)

4. How is St. Joseph “at the crossroads between the Old and New Testaments?



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II. A TENDER AND LOVING FATHER

1. Joseph would have been familiar with Scripture (“a righteous man,” a devout observer of the Mosaic Law). He would have understood God’s faithful and compassionate love for Israel. How would Joseph’s familiarity with Scripture affect what kind of father and guardian he was to Jesus? Husband to Mary? (Think of covenantal language in Scripture; see citations at [11].)

2. Pope Francis points out that “The history of salvation is worked out ‘in hope against hope’ (Romans 4:18), through our weaknesses... yet most of [God’s] plans are realized in and despite our frailty... Since this is part of the entire economy of salvation, we must learn to look upon our weaknesses with tender mercy.” How can we be gentle and tender to ourselves and others? (“The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.” - see EG 88)
3. How can we experience wanting to be in control of a situation, but see instead the bigger picture that God has in mind, as Joseph experienced? How does that show faith, trust, and love?



The Dream of St. Joseph, Anton Raphael Mengs, c. 1773

III. AN OBEDIENT FATHER

1. What are the 4 dreams in which an angel reveals God's saving plan to Joseph, and how does Joseph's response in each situation show how he is an obedient father?

2. What are other examples of dreams used in Scripture as God's way to send a message?

A) How do we discern what is from God or from elsewhere?

B) What is a helpful dream experience you have had, and are willing to share?

3. How does Luke's infancy narrative differ from Matthew's? How do both show obedience?
4. In Luke 2:21-24, Jesus' parents observed all the prescriptions of the Law. How did Joseph's actions of obedience teach Jesus? (John 4:34; Luke 2:51; Luke 22:42)
5. How can we understand Matthew 1:19? "Joseph, her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly." (NAB) Other translations include: "Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare [Mary] publicity, decided to divorce her informally." (JB) "Joseph, being an upright man and wanting to spare [Mary] disgrace, decided to divorce her informally." (NJB) "Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly." (RSV) "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." (NRSV)
- How does this demonstrate Joseph's understanding of obedience?



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IV. AN ACCEPTING FATHER

1. "Joseph set aside his own ideas."
 - A) Can you think of a time when you have experienced disappointment when your ideas, plans or expectations fell short? Describe.
 - B) How can we embrace or reconcile these plans, following Joseph's example?

2. Reality (“warts and all”) has meaning and is part of God’s plan of salvation history. In light of Romans 8:28, how does faith help give meaning to every event?
3. Pope Francis states that “it was from St. Joseph that Jesus drew inspiration for the parable of the prodigal son and merciful father.” (Luke 15:11-32) What kind of father do you think Joseph was, in light of this?
4. Our relationship with God the Father is often influenced by our relationship with our own fathers. For some, it is a blessing, while for others it may be difficult. How has your relationship with your father shaped your understanding of God as Father? Of Joseph with Jesus?

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V. A CREATIVELY COURAGEOUS FATHER

1. When faced with seemingly impossible difficulties, we are called to use creative courage. St. Joseph's example can encourage us to lean into our faith when making difficult decisions. Joseph used resources he may not have thought he had. "God acted by trusting in Joseph's creative courage." What are some examples? And what are deeper meanings of these actions? (Luke 2:6-7; Matt 2:13-14)

2. “God always finds a way to save us,” even when we are in situations that seem impossible.

A) What are some examples from Scripture to demonstrate this?
(Luke 5:17-26; Mark 6:30-44; Matt 9:20-22; John 2:1-10)

B) What are some personal examples to share?

3. How does Joseph’s trip to a foreign land with Jesus and Mary help us to have compassion for today’s migrant brothers and sisters seeking escape from misfortune, war, persecution, hunger, danger, and poverty?
[See end notes, Catholic Social Teachings and Mission statement from the USCCB committee on Migration].

4. How does Pope Francis express the reason that St. Joseph is guardian of the Church?

5. We might even say that St. Joseph is guardian of each of us. How? (Mt 25:40)



St. Andrew by the Bay, Annapolis, MD

VI. A WORKING FATHER

1. How is work a “means of participating in the work of salvation”?
2. Joseph had to work and teach Jesus his craft. The Greek word *tekton* is usually interpreted as “carpenter,” but it included other craft skills. What are some ways you see yourself using your skills to create a better world?

3. How do you envision Jesus as a child, working alongside St. Joseph?

4. We often ponder or discuss life issues, while working a craft. What do you imagine Jesus and Joseph might have talked about, while they worked together?



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VII. A FATHER IN THE SHADOWS

“Joseph was the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father” in his relationship with Jesus.

1. In Deuteronomy 1:31, Moses says to Israel: “God carried you as one carries a child.” What are some ways that Joseph’s life can be compared to Moses’ life (as a father)?
2. Pope Francis writes, “Chastity is freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of one’s life.” How did Joseph demonstrate chastity in his life?

3. Although Pope St. John XXIII mandated that St. Joseph be added to the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I) on December 8, 1962, his name was left out in the newly composed Eucharistic Prayer reforms after Vatican II. Pope Benedict XVI resolved this because St. Joseph is fundamental to salvation history.

In *Redemptoris Custos*, Pope St. John Paul II wrote:

16. *The growth of Jesus "in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Lk 2:52) took place within the Holy Family under the eyes of Joseph, who had the important task of "raising" Jesus, that is, feeding, clothing and educating him in the Law and in a trade, in keeping with the duties of a father.*

In the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the Church venerates the memory of Mary the ever-Virgin Mother of God and the memory of St. Joseph, (28) because "he fed him whom the faithful must eat as the bread of eternal life." (30) For his part, Jesus "was obedient to them" (Lk 2:51), respectfully returning the affection of his "parents." In this way he wished to sanctify the obligations of the family and of work, which he performed at the side of Joseph.

Why is it significant that St. Joseph was added to the Eucharistic Prayer?

4. "True vocation is born of the gift of oneself." How do we need the vocation of a father in today's world?

7. We ask St. Joseph for the gift of conversion. What do you need conversion from and toward? How can St. Joseph's life be an example for us?

8. If you could ask St. Joseph one question, what would it be?

9. After this study time, how have you come to appreciate or to understand St. Joseph differently? Take this to prayer, and write your own prayer to St. Joseph!



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REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Patris Corde - Apostolic Letter of the Holy Father Francis (December 8, 2020)

NAB - New American Bible

JB - Jerusalem Bible

NJB - New Jerusalem Bible

RSV - Revised Standard Version

EG - Evangelii Gaudium (Pope Francis, November 24, 2013)

RC - Redemptoris Custos (Pope St. John Paul II, August 15, 1989)

QP - Quamquam Pluries (Pope Leo XIII, August 15, 1889)

USCCB on Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching: <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching>)

Mission statement from the USCCB committee on Migration: *“Grounded by our belief in Jesus Christ and Catholic teaching, Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) fulfills the commitment of the U.S. Catholic bishops to protect the life and dignity of the human person. We serve and advocate for refugees, asylees, migrants, unaccompanied children, and victims of human trafficking.”*



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