

REFLECTION ON ST. JOSEPH, THE HUSBAND OF MARY



Monday, March 19, is the feast of St. Joseph, the Husband of Mary. It is a feast of great importance in the Church. Without Joseph's loving trust as husband of Mary our faith story would be very different. Let us take a few moments with St. Joseph today in prayer. As we say our daily prayer with St. Joseph for Vocations perhaps we might do so in a more intense way today, reflecting on what these words might mean for us for surely it is a prayer that has come to be particularly loved by all of us as we have recited it alone or together over many a year.¹

St. Joseph, Foster Father of Christ

- ✚ Foster father: yes, Joseph was the legal guardian of the Son of God. He received this role because he was the husband of Mary, the mother God had chosen to bear His Son. Just as foster fathers today have a temporary role of fostering and being parent to a child, so St. Joseph assumed the temporary role of father to the Son of God until Jesus would return to his heavenly Father. What an awesome responsibility.

Intercede for us with your Son

- ✚ Who best to intercede for us but the earthly father of Jesus to whom we have given our lives through our Religious Vows. He who had the opportunity for intimate conversation with his beloved wife, Mary, and their Blessed Son.

To help us become more like him.

- ✚ Oh, how we wish we were more like Jesus!

¹ The beautiful carving of St. Joseph seen here is from Zambia and is currently in our Archives room in Chigwell.

1. Jesus who loves all of creation, each one of us totally with all his being.
 - So, we pray to love more like Jesus.
2. Jesus whose compassion and forgiveness is without judgement.
 - We pray to be more compassionate, forgiving, slow to judge others!
3. Jesus who sees beauty in the flowers of the fields, who heals with a touch of his hand, who allows himself to be touched by the suffering of others, who raises us up from all that is dead within us.
 - So, we give thanks for God's beauty and we make our gardens, chapels and convents beautiful places for one another to enjoy. We heal one another by opening ourselves with empathy to each other's hurts and when we fail we seek to become more sensitive. Love of each even has the power to bring us to life, to rekindle in us the spark that burns away all that is dead within us.

And to renew our dedication to the Religious Life.

- ✚ Our tradition tells us Joseph was faithful to his humble role as provider for Mary and Jesus, working as carpenter of Nazareth. Whatever our role now we pray we will assume it with gratitude and humble perseverance even when life throws us the unexpected. Joseph certainly had to deal with the unexpected. This is a good point in our prayer to pause and look at six sorrows experienced by St. Joseph.

1. Pregnancy of Mary

Every day, three times a day, we recall the story of the Annunciation when we recite the Angelus prayer. What must it have been like for Joseph to learn Mary was pregnant knowing he was not the father of her baby? What a shock it was for him! In the Jewish culture of that time punishment for infidelity was as drastic as stoning the betrothed woman to death. Joseph had that power over Mary, but he trusted Mary, his wife, and trusted God's dream message to him. Joseph accepted all in faith. Yet he trusted God's message not to fear and took Mary into his home as his wife.

How hard it is for us, also, when we do not have all the information we would wish for and yet need to go forward in faith with a project, work assigned to us, or even just accepting the unexpected in life?

Joseph sets us the example of Trust in God.

2. The poverty of the birth of Jesus.

Jesus has been told by Mary that the child she bears is not only born of God but that he is to be the Savior of the world. How do you think Joseph felt when he had to bring his beloved to a stable, the only shelter he could find for her to give birth? Was this not a humiliation for a man who would have wished to provide the best of care and surroundings for the needs of his beloved wife and her baby?

Joseph sets us an example of Humility.

3. The Prophecy of Simeon

Joseph hears the words of Simeon who in glorious prophecy confirms for Joseph all Mary has told him. He, like Mary, must have pondered the words in his heart and worried when he hears Mary is to have a sword of sorrow pierce her heart and that his son is to be a sign of contradiction. How protective and concerned Joseph would have felt!

Joseph sets us an example of Faith.

3. The Flight into Egypt

Joseph took on the hardship of the journey from Bethlehem to Egypt for the safety of Jesus. For the sake of Jesus Joseph and Mary experienced separation from their family of origin and from all that was familiar to them. For the sake of Jesus Joseph chose to live the experience of a refugee where, as the husband and father of the holy family, he had to establish himself in a foreign land and find work to provide for them all.

Joseph sets us an example of courageous vision

4. The Return to Nazareth

Yes, this was an experience, no doubt, of great joy when Joseph returned to his homeland. Yet, he had the long journey to Nazareth with Mary and Jesus and the responsibility for their safety on the road. On return to Nazareth he had to find work and settle into life after years away in a foreign land. What questions did Joseph face about where he had been? How difficult was it to reestablish himself and once again provide for his family?

Joseph sets us an example of perseverance.

5. The Loss of the Child Jesus:

This must have given him a great fright when he realized he saw the distress of his beloved wife, Mary, and realized they had lost their son amid the milling crowds of pilgrims in and around Jerusalem. And when he found Jesus, his son who had been so obedient until then, did not seem to understand why he, Joseph, was distressed. Did he not realize his son needed to be in his Father's house? How did Joseph, as the earthly father of Jesus, feel when he heard these words from his beloved son whom he had been raising for twelve years? How must it have been for him be the silent one of the Holy Family, a role he so humbly assumed as God's will for him? Like Mary, he must have pondered all in his heart.

Joseph sets us an example of Silent acceptance.

May he teach us respect and love for all the members of our community

✚ To love and respect each other is core to our living Religious life for we make our Vows to God, not in isolation but in and through our religious community. Wherever we live or work, whether we are alone or in a large community, we are members of the community. Our respect sends a ripple among us all until it reaches the center. From the youngest to the most senior among us we affect one another by our love and respect. Sometimes we get it wrong, and do not treat one another as we should. But when we ask

forgiveness the loving ripple effect touches everyone for good. Let us not hold grudges but willingly forgive one another. Our center cannot hold if we are divisive.

And those whom we serve.

✚ Joseph answered wholeheartedly God's call to serve His Son. Imagine Jesus speaking the Our Father. Joseph would have heard him say, Abba in Heaven, Blessed is your name, your Kingdom come, your will be done. Joseph gave us an example of loving service as guardian, worker, silent observer and intimate participant in all affecting the life of the Son of God, the son of Mary, his wife.

May he, through your intercession, enable us to strengthen the vocations now in our Religious family

✚ It is really fitting we have the tradition of reciting this prayer daily with Joseph. That he answered God's call in such a unique way is surely in tune with us, with our cry to God from our hearts in which we, through St. Joseph, ask God to send us more women to join us in serving God in the Church in every place where our sisters continue to live, work, and pray. Joseph had a unique vocation in his role as husband of Mary and Foster Father of Jesus. His faith and love are what kept him faithful on a journey that was not to last very many years, but which were fraught with up-rootedness, dangers, hard work and concern. Yet through it all he held true to his calling as husband and father and when we think of Joseph we have a sense of stability of serenity, of joy and kindness rather than struggle.

And to encourage others to follow the evangelical counsels as his devoted servants, Amen.

✚ Yes, let us encourage others through the loving and joyful living of our lives. Let us encourage one another to live the evangelical

counsels even as we encourage new life in Uganda and the UK, in El Salvador and the USA, in the Philippines, Ireland and Zambia. Let us believe always in the possible. We have experienced how after fallow years God sent us good women, who are true to their calling, faithful and persevering. Surely our cry to St. Joseph has been heard for we have welcomed new members from around the world. Do we really trust St. Joseph to pass on our request for Sisters for our community which is devoted to the loving Hearts of his wife, Mary, and of Jesus, his Son? Yes, we are asking his help that our charism of serving Jesus and the poor might continue.

A final note: We know Joseph protected his beloved wife, Mary, and helped raise her son Jesus. His was a silent witness, humble and faithful. Joseph is not even mentioned in most of the New Testament. We meet him in the nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke, he is not even mentioned in Mark's Gospel and in the Gospel of John we see his name only once when Jesus is called the son of Joseph.

Well may we wonder why Joseph is mentioned so rarely in Holy Scripture! Over the centuries many stories have been made up to try and make sense of this. Why was such an important person, so central to our faith story, so rarely mentioned? This has brought about a traditional belief that Joseph died while Jesus was still young. We know he was not present at the time of the crucifixion and surely such a faithful father would have been at the foot of the cross supporting his beloved Mary were he still living. No, our tradition tells us Joseph had already died and that Mary and Jesus were at his side to comfort him.

It is for this reason we have the beautiful tradition of praying to St. Joseph for a happy death. What is a happy death? It is one of serenity, of absolute trust in our tender, loving God who longs for us to present ourselves to him and to hear Him say: Welcome, make yourself at home. Come and enjoy the life I have prepared for you from all eternity.