

## Joseph's vocation

### A WORD FOR EVERYONE

*St. Joseph is the key figure in understanding some of the essential dimensions of the Christian vocation. There are four of them: protecting life, living fairly, letting God be the protagonist in our life, cultivating the mystical dimension (Matthew 1, 18-25; 2, 1-23).*

In the heart of Lent, on 19 March, the church celebrates the feast of St. Joseph. Like Mary's, in the period of Advent (8 December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception). Frequently represented as a venerable old man with a beard and white hair, looking sad and distant, with a worried countenance, bent over with the weight of his destiny... you could say he mirrors the mood of a certain "Lent spirit" of other times!

The values that characterize him – silence, obedience and service, are also not fashionable. It is not therefore surprising that devotion to this saint has been declining for quite some time. And this is in spite of the apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, the *Redemptoris Custos*, in 1989, considered the "magna carta" of St. Joseph's theology.

In any case, St. Joseph is a key figure in understanding some of the essential dimensions of the Christian vocation. Let us consider four of them: protecting life, living fairly, letting God be the protagonist in our life, cultivating the mystical dimension. They highlight why the Church holds up Saint Joseph as a model for all Christians.

#### **Servant of life**

**Model of PATERNITY** – In Hebrew, the name Joseph means "God adds," "God increases you." A vocation for fruitfulness, overabundance of life, by consequence!

Descendant of David ("son of David"), originally from Nazareth, a "carpenter" (*tékton*), a profession linked to building. In the Gospels he is presented, at times, as "Mary's husband," which is unusual, because generally it was the wife who belonged to the husband. But it is also said that Mary was "Joseph's wife" (Matthew 1, 18) and that Jesus was the "son of the carpenter" (Matthew 13, 55).

Joseph foresees and lives the word of Jesus: "you have only one Father" (Matthew 23, 9). He incarnates in a singular manner this unique divine paternity (cf. Ephesians 3, 15). He is the father without exercising carnal paternity. But for all intents and purposes he is the father, because "To be a father means above all to be at the service of life and growth" (Pope Benedict XVI).

Like the old patriarchs, he also, three times, receives God's communications through dreams,. The sign of a singular vocation and of a particular relationship with God.

Joseph is the last of the ancient patriarchs, but the first of a new generation, of those who "were born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God himself." (John 1, 13).

This "paternity" is one dimension of the Christian vocation. We are called, like Joseph, to adopt and protect life. To be fecund, to live to serve life, without taking possession of it, detached. Joseph teaches us how we can love without "possessing" people.

Fatherhood/motherhood is a value that we need to discover today, in a society of "vagrant experiences," rich in "prodigal sons," but poor in "fathers" and "mothers" capable of patiently waiting at home to embrace their children when they return, disappointed with life and famished of love. So often they find the house empty, with nobody waiting for them!...

## Knowing how “to adjust”

A model of JUSTICE – The Gospel defines Joseph as a “upright man” (Matthew 1, 19). He is upright because being “faithful,” he “adjusts” his life in accordance with the Word of his Lord. But also because, being “wise,” he is able to “adjust” to reality. In fact, when he realizes Mary is pregnant, his first reaction is to comply with the Law (disowning Mary), but he decides to do it in secret. In this way he introduces a new element, of prudence and wisdom. He continues to trust Mary. He is not carried away by “suspicions.” Why? Because he has “for a long time been hearing other words that touch and penetrate him” (Frédérique Oltra, *Carmelite*).

Being “upright,” he is the “wise and trustworthy steward whom the master will place over his household” (Luke, 12, 42). Joseph knows he is the “servant” and that he must serve well. Goodwill is not enough. Therefore the Biblical text speaks of a man who is “wise and trustworthy” (Matthew 24, 45). “Intelligence without faithfulness and faithfulness without intelligence are insufficient” to take on the responsibility that God entrusts to us (Benedict XVI).

Being upright is part of our vocation. Being “upright” like Joseph. An uprightness that leads us to adopt “upright” behaviour and occupy an “upright” place in life, that of serving. An uprightness illuminated by love, “the fulfilment of the Law” (Romans 13, 10). A quality that is also lacking today. There is a lot of talk of uprightness, but a lack of “upright men.”

## Staying out of the picture

Model of DISCRETION – Joseph is a discreet man, a reserved person. He is always “out of the picture,” as one author quite cleverly comments: “Two sisters were flicking through the new book about religion, when they see a picture of the Virgin Mary with the Baby Jesus. “Look,” says the older one, “this is Jesus, and this is his mother”. “And where is his father?” asks the younger child. The sister thought for a moment and then exclaimed: “Ah, he’s taking the photograph.”

A man of silence, the facts speak for themselves. A man of obedience, the Gospel highlights his perfect compliance with the arrangements he receives in his sleep from the angel (Matthew 1, 24). As it says in Song of Songs: whilst he is sleeping, his heart is awake (5, 2).

Forgetting himself, he lives for “the child and his mother” (Matthew 2, 13. 19). Like John the Baptist, he considers it good that he diminishes and that they grow. His life belongs to them totally. And so, to a certain point he “disappears”...so as not to overshadow his son!

Each one of us is called to follow this testimony. Discreet like Joseph, making our life serve Christ’s mission. Knowing how to step aside, to retreat to the backstage. It is neither easy nor obvious. We live in a society that favours “personal fulfilment” and prominence. Since small, we design our own life project, what we want to be “when we’re big.” Vocation implies abandoning this human dream (like Joseph with Mary) to embrace the divine. Knowing how to eclipse ourselves to let God’s project be carried out in us!

## Inhabiting the mystery

Model of CONTEMPLATION – Joseph is the saint of silence. He never speaks. But his, it is a rich profound silence, which challenges us. Why this silence? Because Joseph lives in mystery! It is not a question of words, but of his attitude to life, of his whole person.

Faced with the unexpected fact – for him incomprehensible and a “mystery” – of Mary being pregnant, Joseph thinks of retreating, in silence. It is the word of the angel: “do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1, 20), which introduces Joseph to the mystery, as Gabriel had done with Mary.

These words do not eliminate the mystery, do not explain what really happened, or how. They introduce Joseph in the mystery that had already absorbed Mary. Joseph is not “facing” the mystery anymore but “inside” it. It is not like Israel in the desert in front of the cloud, but entering the cloud, like Moses or like the three apostles on Mount Tabor. Before he was “outside” of the mystery, facing it and therefore doubtful and fearful. Then, he allows himself to be led by it, like Mary after her “fiat.” Once inside the mystery, even without understanding it, he trusts totally in it.

“Entering” into the spirit of God is the essential dimension of any vocation. This requires availability to let yourself be “introduced” into it. Without this, the disciple remains “outside” and will not find the motivations to live his vocation to the full. He will be, in the best hypothesis, a “good worker” or “self-interested,” and in the worst scenario a “parasite” or an “unfaithful servant” (Luke 12, 46).

To conclude, Joseph is certainly not the man portrayed in a certain iconography. Surrounded in mystery, in the midst of a family he loved and who loved him, identified with his vocation as protector of the Author of Life, competently exercising his profession.... he was and is a happy man!

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