

St. Joseph, a Father of Fathers

In his love for Mary and Jesus, St. Joseph's faithfulness and purity are an example for all Christian fathers

by Father Frederick J. Miller

In his 1989 apostolic letter, *Guardian of the Redeemer*, Blessed John Paul II held up St. Joseph as a model of the Christian life for all believers. He wrote, "St. Joseph's example transcends all individual states of life and serves as a model for the entire Christian community, whatever the condition and duties of each of its members may be" (30). Precisely because of his closeness to Jesus and Mary, St. Joseph has a personal relationship with all Christians. But in a particular way, Catholic husbands and fathers turn to St. Joseph as a heavenly model and friend.

God desired to become man in a true human family. Although they never consummated their marriage out of reverence for the act of God in the virginal conception and birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph loved each other with a tender marital love. Joseph also loved Jesus as his son. The spousal and paternal love of Joseph was a gift of the Holy Spirit to help him live on earth as if he were already in heaven — a gift given, in large measure, to help Christian men be chaste and tender spouses and fathers. Stated simply, St. Joseph is the model of all husbands and the exemplar of all fathers.

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SON OF DAVID

St. Matthew, explaining why Joseph initially decided to divorce Mary quietly after learning about her pregnancy, tells us that he was a "just man" (Mt 1:19). In other words, Joseph was faithful to the covenant that God had established with his Chosen People. He participated in and manifested God's covenant love in every aspect of his life, and all of his relationships were characterized by the observance of the Ten Commandments.

A number of the early Church Fathers explained that Joseph did not decide to divorce Mary quietly because he suspected her of adultery or because he was perplexed by her sudden and humanly inexplicable pregnancy. Rather, knowing that Mary was pregnant "by the power of the Holy Spirit," Joseph was convinced that he was unworthy to be so close to the work of God and decided in his humility to step aside.

The angel did not say to Joseph, "Do not be angry" or "Do not be perplexed." Rather, coming to him in a dream, the angel said, "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:20-21).



In this passage, Joseph manifests the fear of the Lord, a fear that was grounded in his reverence for God. Pope John Paul II explains, "Even though he decided to draw back so as not to interfere in the plan of God which was coming to pass in Mary, Joseph obeyed the explicit command of the angel and took Mary into his house, while respecting the fact that she belonged exclusively to God" (Guardian of the Redeemer, 20).

This understanding of Mt 1:20-21 proposes that the angel did not come to Joseph in his sleep to explain the divine origin of Mary's pregnancy. Mary, in her love for Joseph, had likely informed him of this fact before the arrival of the angel. Knowing Mary's goodness and holiness, Joseph believed what Mary had told him and made an act of faith. The angel instead came to assure Joseph that God wanted him to accept Mary into his house as his wife. In doing so, Joseph would legally adopt the child Mary was carrying in her womb and become the foster father of God's Son.

By virtue of their marriage, St. Joseph integrated the child into the family of King David. The Jewish people understood that the Messiah would be the last and greatest king of Israel, a king who would reign forever. In the Davidic dynasty, it was the king's mother who was queen. The queen-mother would share in the Messiah's royal majesty and eternal reign. Amazingly, the king and queen of Israel — indeed, the king and queen of the world — lived in the home of a humble carpenter in Nazareth. In certain cultures, St. Joseph is thus presented in Christian art wearing a crown — the crown of King David that he, through his act of faith, conferred on his adopted son.

This conferral of royalty took place in very ordinary circumstances and with little notice. How wonderful and strange are the ways of God! St. Joseph's greatness is rooted in his reverence for Mary and her child. Together, Mary and Joseph brought the faith of Abraham to perfection and in receiving Christ as their son merited the gift of faith for all of us.

MODEL OF CHASTE LOVE

The example of St. Joseph teaches married men the importance of being righteous in all of their relationships, especially with their wives and children. As the years pass and the graces he received on his wedding day mature, the Christian husband becomes increasingly aware that God created him and his wife for each other and that their path to holiness is to grow in union with Christ together. How blessed the Church and the world would be to see St. Joseph's deep respect and tender love for Mary in every Catholic husband!

Similarly, as Joseph revered and loved Christ as if Jesus were his natural son, so the Christian father reveres each of his children as a unique gift from God who has an unrepeatable role to play in God's plan of salvation. The emotional, psychological and spiritual health of our children depends, to a large extent, on the strong and gentle love of fathers who recognize that each of their children belongs to



God. Just as Joseph received the grace to mediate God the Father's love to Christ, so too does God give Christian fathers the grace to form their sons and daughters in virtue, in the image of Christ.

The Christian husband and wife, in consummating their marriage and sharing in this beautiful intimacy throughout their lives, are also united with Christ and grow in his grace. In the act of marital love, the Christian husband and wife open their relationship to new life and receive children lovingly from God. The holiness of the marital act should motivate Christian husbands to be chaste in all of their relationships, thoughts, words and deeds. Think of the stunning chastity of St. Joseph, who loved Mary as his wife and guarded her virginity as the sacred sign of Christ's divine son-ship. St. Joseph, from his place in heaven, helps married men to be chaste.

I recently heard a group of young married men discuss how they deal with sexual temptations, which might include such things as impure thoughts, pornography or flirting with women other than their wives. The men explained that whenever they are tempted, they offer the mortification involved in overcoming their desires as an act of love for their wives and as a prayer for their children's chastity. And as these men grow in chastity, they grow in respect and love for those God has placed first and foremost in their lives: their wives and children.

St. Joseph lived at the heart of the Gospel of Life and wants to help us convince people today of the goodness of chastity and the importance of honoring the marital act through the rejection of sexual sins. I am certain that every pro-life effort by the Knights of Columbus in favor of chastity and, in particular, the movement to promote natural family planning will be richly blessed by St. Joseph.

Much more could be said about the benefits of prayerful devotion to St. Joseph — the sanctification of daily labor, contemplating Christ in times of prayer and amid our ordinary activities, and living and dying in the holy presence of Jesus and Mary. But one thing is certain: The Church in her ongoing struggle with the ancient serpent needs St. Joseph's help more than ever before. We need him, the spouse of the Virgin Mary and the foster father of God's only son, to help our Catholic fathers be the best of fathers, fathers like St. Joseph.

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