

Catechesis on SAINT JOSEPH



Pope Francis

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CATECHESIS ON SAINT JOSEPH

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1. St. Joseph and the environment in which he lived (17 November 2021)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

On 8 December 1870, Blessed Pius IX proclaimed Saint Joseph Patron of the Universal Church. One hundred and fifty years on from that event, we are living a special year dedicated to Saint Joseph, and in the Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, I gathered together some reflections on him. Never like before, today, in this time marked by a global crisis made up of several components, can he offer us support, consolation and guidance. Therefore, I have decided to dedicate a cycle of catecheses to him, which I hope may further help us to let ourselves be enlightened by his example and by his witness. For a few weeks we will talk about Joseph.

There are more than ten people in the Bible who bear the name Joseph. The most important among them is the son of Jacob and Rachel who, through various vicissitudes, went from being a slave to becoming the second most important person in Egypt after the Pharaoh (cf. *Gen 37-50*). The name Joseph is Hebrew for “may God increase, may God give growth”. It is a wish, a blessing based on trust in providence and referring especially to fertility and to raising children. Indeed, this very name reveals to us an essential aspect of Joseph of Nazareth’s personality. He is a man full of faith, in providence: he believes in God’s providence, he has faith in God’s providence. His every action, as recounted in the Gospel, is dictated by the certainty that God “gives growth”, that God “increases”, that God “adds”: that is, that God provides for the continuation of his plan of salvation. And in this, Joseph of Nazareth is very similar to Joseph of Egypt.

The first geographical reference to Joseph, Bethlehem and Nazareth, also assume an important role in our understanding of him.

In the Old Testament, the city of Bethlehem is called *Beth Lechem*, that is, “House of bread”, or also Ephrathah, after the tribe that settled there. In Arabic, however, the name means “House of meat”, probably because of the large number of flocks of sheep and goats in the area. Indeed, it is not by chance that when Jesus was born, the shepherds were the first to witness the event (cf. *Lk 2:8-20*). In the light of the story of Jesus, these allusions to bread and meat refer to the mystery of the Eucharist: Jesus is the living bread descended from heaven (cf. *Jn 6:51*). He will say of himself: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (*Jn 6:54*).

Bethlehem is mentioned several times in the Bible, as far back as the Book of Genesis. Bethlehem is also linked to the story of Ruth and Naomi, told in the short but wonderful Book of Ruth. Ruth bears a son named Obed, to whom in turn Jesse is born, the father of King David. And it was from the line of David that Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, descended. Then the prophet Micah foretold great things about Bethlehem: “You, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are so little to be among the

clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel” (*Mi* 5:1). The evangelist Matthew would take up this prophecy and connect it to the story of Jesus as its evident fulfilment.

In fact, the Son of God did not choose Jerusalem as the place of his incarnation, but Bethlehem and Nazareth, two outlying villages, far from the clamour of the news and the powers of the time. Yet Jerusalem was the city loved by the Lord (cf. *Is* 62:1-12), the “holy city” (*Dn* 3:28), chosen by God as his dwelling (cf. *Zech* 3:2; *Ps* 132:13). Here, in fact, dwelt the teachers of the Law, the scribes and Pharisees, the chief priests and the elders of the people (cf. *Lk* 2:46; *Mt* 15:1; *Mk* 3:22; *Jn* 1:19; *Mt* 26:3).

This is why the choice of Bethlehem and Nazareth tells us that the periphery and marginality are preferred by God. Jesus was not born in Jerusalem, with all the court... no, he was born in a periphery and spent his life, until the age of thirty, in that periphery, working as a carpenter like Joseph. For Jesus, the peripheries and marginality were favoured. To fail to take this fact seriously is equivalent to not take seriously the Gospel and the work of God, who continues to manifest himself in the geographical and existential peripheries. The Lord always acts in secret in the peripheries, even in our souls, in the peripheries of the soul, of feelings, perhaps feelings of which we are ashamed; but the Lord is there to help us move forward. The Lord continues to manifest himself in the peripheries, both geographical and existential. In particular, Jesus goes in search of sinners; he goes into their homes, speaks with them, calls them to conversion. And he is also rebuked for this: “But look, this Master”, say the doctors of the law, “Look at this Master: he eats with sinners, he gets dirty”. He goes in search also of those who have done no evil but have suffered it: the sick, the hungry, the poor, the least. Jesus always goes out to the peripheries of our heart, the peripheries of our soul, this is, that slightly obscure part that we do not show, perhaps out of shame.

In this respect, the society of that time is not very different from ours. Today, too, there is a centre and a periphery. And the Church knows that she is called to proclaim the good news from the periphery. Joseph, who is a carpenter from Nazareth and who trusts in God’s plan for his young fiancée and for himself, reminds the Church to keep her eyes on what the world deliberately ignores. Today Joseph teaches us this: “Do not look so much at the things that the world praises, look into the corners, look in the shadows, look at the peripheries, at what the world does not want”. He reminds each of us to accord consider important what others discard. In this sense he is truly a master of the essential: he reminds us that what truly matters does not attract our attention, but requires patient discernment to be discovered and appreciated. To discover what matters. Let us ask him to intercede so that the whole Church may recover this insight, this ability to discern, this capacity to evaluate what is essential. Let us start again from Bethlehem, let us start again from Nazareth.

Today I would like to send a message to all the men and women who live in the most forgotten geographical peripheries of the world, or who experience situations of existential marginalisation. May you find in Saint Joseph the witness and protector to look to. We can turn to him with this prayer, a “home-made” prayer, but one that comes from the heart:

Saint Joseph,

you who have always trusted God,

and have made your choices

guided by his providence

teach us not to count so much on our own plans

but on his plan of love.

You who come from the peripheries

help us to convert our gaze

and to prefer what the world discards and marginalises.

Comfort those who feel alone

and support those who work silently

to defend life and human dignity. Amen.

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2. St. Joseph in salvation history (24 November 2021)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last Wednesday we began a cycle of catecheses on Saint Joseph – the year dedicated to him is coming to an end. Today we will continue this journey, focusing on his role in salvation history.

Jesus in the Gospels is indicated as the “son of Joseph” (*Lk* 3:23; 4: 22; *Jn* 1:45; 6:42) and the “carpenter’s son” (*Mt* 13:55; *Mk* 6:3). Narrating Jesus’ childhood, the Evangelists Matthew and Luke dedicate space to the role of Joseph. Both of them compile a “genealogy” to highlight the historicity of Jesus. Addressing himself above all to the Judeo-Christians, Matthew starts from Abraham and ends up at Joseph, defined as “the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (1:16). Luke, on the other hand, goes all the way back to Adam, beginning directly with Jesus, who “was the son of Joseph”, but specifies: “as was supposed” (3:23). Therefore, both Evangelists present Joseph not as the biological father, but in any case, as fully the father of Jesus. Through him, Jesus fulfils the history of the covenant and salvation between God and humanity. For Matthew this history begins with Abraham; for Luke, with the very origin of humanity, that is, with Adam.

The evangelist Matthew helps us to understand that the person of Joseph, although apparently marginal, discreet, and in the background, is in fact a central element in the history of salvation. Joseph lives his role without ever seeking to take over the scene. If we think about it, “Our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines. ... How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small ways, and in 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” (Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, 1). Thus, everyone can find in Saint Joseph, the man who goes unnoticed, the man of daily presence, of discreet and hidden presence, an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of difficulty. He reminds us that all those who are seemingly hidden or in the “second row” are unparalleled protagonists in the history of salvation. The world needs these men and women: men and women in the second row, but who support the development of our life, of every one of us, and who with prayer, and by their example, with their teaching, sustain us on the path of life.

In the Gospel of Luke, Joseph appears as the *guardian of Jesus and of Mary*. And for this reason, he is also “the Guardian of the Church”: but, if he was the guardian of Jesus and Mary, he works, now that he is in heaven, and continues to be a guardian, in this case 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. In his continued protection of the Church – please do not forget this:

today, Joseph protects the Church – and by continuing to protect the Church, he continues to protect *the child and his mother*” (*ibid.*, 5). This aspect of Joseph’s guardianship is the great answer to the story of Genesis. When God asks Cain to account for Abel’s life, he replies: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (4: 9). With his life, Joseph seems to want to tell us that we are always called to feel that we are our brothers and sisters’ keepers, the guardians of those who are close to us, of those whom the Lord entrusts to us through many circumstances of life.

A society such as ours, which has been defined as “liquid”, as it seems not to have consistency... I will correct the philosopher who coined this definition and say: more than liquid, gaseous, a properly gaseous society. This liquid, gaseous society finds in the story of Joseph a very clear indication of the importance of human bonds. Indeed, the Gospel tells us the genealogy of Jesus, not only for a theological reason, but also to remind each one of us that our lives are made up of bonds that precede and accompany us. The Son of God chose to come into the world by way of such bonds, the way of history: he did not come down into the world by magic, no. He took the historic route we all take.

Dear brothers and sisters, I think of the many people who find it difficult to find meaningful bonds in their lives, and because of this they struggle, they feel alone, they lack the strength and courage to go on. I would like to conclude with a prayer to help them, and all of us, to find in Saint Joseph an ally, a friend and a support.

Saint Joseph,

you who guarded the bond with Mary and Jesus,

help us to care for the relationships in our lives.

May no one experience that sense of abandonment

that comes from loneliness.

Let each of us be reconciled with our own history,

with those who have gone before,

and recognise even in the mistakes made

a way through which Providence has made its way,

and evil did not have the last word.

Show yourself to be a friend to those who struggle the most,

and as you supported Mary and Jesus in difficult times,

support us too on our journey. Amen.

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3. St. Joseph: a just man and the husband of Mary (1 December 2021)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our journey of reflection on the person of Saint Joseph. Today, I would like to deepen his being “just” and “Mary’s betrothed spouse”, and thus provide a message to all engaged couples, and newlyweds as well. Many events connected with Joseph fill the stories of the apocryphal, that is, non-canonical gospels, that have even influenced art and various places of worship. These writings that are not in the Bible are stories that Christian piety provided at that time and are a response to the desire to fill in the empty spaces in the canonical Gospel texts, the ones that are in the Bible, which provide you with everything that is essential for faith and the Christian life.

The evangelist Matthew – this is important. What does the Gospel say about Joseph? Not what these apocryphal gospels say which are not something ugly or bad, no! They are beautiful, but they are not the Word of God. Instead, the Gospels that are in the Bible are the Word of God. Among these is the evangelist Matthew who defines Joseph as a “*just*” man. Let us listen to his account: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly” (1:18-19). Because those who were engaged, when the fiancée was unfaithful, or became pregnant, they could accuse her! They had to. And the women were stoned back then. But Joseph was just. He says: “No, I am not going to do this. I will go away quietly”.

To understand Joseph’s behaviour toward Mary, it is helpful to remember the marriage customs of ancient Israel. Marriage included two well-defined phases. The first was like an official engagement that already implied a new situation. In particular, while continuing to live in her paternal home for another year, the woman was in fact considered the “wife” of her betrothed spouse. They still did not live together, but it was like she was already someone’s wife. The second phase was the transfer of the bride from her paternal home to that of her spouse. This took place with a festive procession which concluded the marriage. And the friends of the bride accompanied her there. On the basis of these customs, the fact that “before they came to live together, Mary was found to be with child” exposed the Virgin to the accusation of adultery. And, according to the ancient Law, her guilt was punishable with stoning (cf. *Dt 22:20-21*). Nevertheless, a more moderate interpretation had taken hold after this in later Jewish practice that imposed only an act of repudiation along with civil and criminal consequences for the woman, but not stoning.

The Gospel says that Joseph was “just” precisely because he was subject to the law as any pious Israelite. But within him, his love for Mary and his trust in her

suggested a way he could remain in observance of the law and save the honour of his bride. He decided to repudiate her in secret, without making noise, without subjecting her to public humiliation. He chose the path of confidentiality, without a trial or retaliation. How holy Joseph was! We, as soon as we have a bit of gossip, something scandalous about someone else, we go around talking about it right away! Silent, Joseph. Silent.

But the evangelist Matthew adds immediately: “But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins’ ” (1:20.21). God’s voice intervenes in Joseph’s discernment. In a dream, He reveals a greater meaning than his own justice. How important it is for each one of us to cultivate a just life and, at the same time, to always feel the need for God’s help to broaden our horizons and to consider the circumstances of life from an always different, larger perspective. Many times, we feel imprisoned by what has happened to us: “But look what happened to me!” – and we remain imprisoned in that bad thing that happened to us. But particularly in front of some circumstances in life that initially appear dramatic, a Providence is hidden that takes shape over time and illuminates the meaning even of the pain that has touched us. The temptation is to close in on that pain, in that thought that good things never happen to us. And this is not good for us. This leads you to sadness and bitterness. A bitter heart is so ugly.

I would like us to pause to reflect on a detail of this story recounted in the Gospel that is often overlooked. Mary and Joseph were engaged to each other. They had probably cultivated dreams and expectations regarding their life and their future. Out of the blue, God seems to have inserted himself into their lives and, even if at first it was difficult for them, both of them opened their hearts wide to the reality that was placed before them.

Dear brothers and dear sisters, our lives are very often not what we imagine them to be. Especially in loving and affectionate relationships, it is difficult to move from the logic of falling in love to the logic of a mature love. We need to move from infatuation to mature love. You newlyweds, think about this. The first phase is always marked by a certain enchantment that makes us live immersed in the imaginary that is often not based on reality and facts – the falling in love phase. But precisely when falling in love with its expectations seems to come to an end, that is where true love begins or true love enters in there. In fact, to love is not the pretension that the other person, or life, should correspond to our imagination. Rather, it means to choose in full freedom to take responsibility for one’s life as it comes. This is why Joseph gives us an important lesson. He chooses Mary with “his eyes open”. We can say “with all the risks”. Think about this: in the Gospel of John, a reproof the doctors of the law make to Jesus is: “we are not children from that”, referring to prostitution. They knew how Mary had remained pregnant and they wanted to throw dirt on Jesus’ mamma. For me, this is the worst, the most demonic passage, in the Gospel. And Joseph’s risk gives us this lesson: to take life as it comes. Has God intervened there? I accept it. And Joseph does what the angel of the Lord had ordered: “He took his wife, but knew her not” – without living together she is expecting a son – “until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus” (*Mt* 1:24-25). Christian engaged couples are called to witness to a love like

this that has the courage to move from the logic of falling in love to that of mature love. This is a demanding choice that instead of imprisoning life, can fortify love so that it endures when faced with the trials of time. A couple's love progresses in life and matures each day. The love during engagement is a bit – allow me to use the word – a bit romantic. You have all experienced this, but then mature love begins, love lived every day, from work, from the children that come... And sometimes that romanticism disappears a bit, right? But is that not love? Yes, but mature love. “But you know, Father, sometimes we fight...” This has been happening since the time of Adam and Eve until today, eh! That spouses fight is our daily bread, eh! “But we shouldn't fight?” Yes, yes, you must. It happens. I am not saying you should, but it happens. “And, Father, sometimes we raise our voices...” It happens. “And there are even times when plates fly”. It happens. But what can be done so that this does not damage the life of the marriage? Listen to me well: never finish the day end without making peace. “We fought. My God, I said bad words. I said awful things. But now, to finish the day, I must make peace”. You know why? Because the cold war the next day is very dangerous. Don't let war begin the next day. For this reason, make peace before going to bed. “But, Father, you know, I don't know how to express myself to make peace after such an awful situation that we experienced”. It's very easy. Do this (the Pope caresses his cheek) and peace is already made. Remember this always. Remember always: never finish the day without making peace. And this will help you in your married life. To them and to all the married couples who are here. This movement from falling in love to mature love is a demanding choice, but we must choose that path.

This time too, let us conclude with a prayer to Saint Joseph.

Saint Joseph,

you who loved Mary with freedom,

and chose to renounce your fantasies to give way to reality,

help each of us to allow ourselves to be surprised by God

and to accept life not as something unforeseen from which to defend ourselves,

but as a mystery that hides the secret of true joy.

Obtain joy and radicality for all engaged Christians,

while always being aware

that only mercy and forgiveness make love possible. Amen.

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4. St. Joseph, man of silence (15 December 2021)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our journey of reflection on Saint Joseph. After illustrating the environment in which he lived, his role in salvation history and his being just and the spouse of Mary, today I would like to consider another important personal aspect: silence. Very often nowadays we need silence. Silence is important. I am struck by a verse from the Book of Wisdom that was read with Christmas in mind, which says: “While gentle silence enveloped all things, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven”. The moment of most silence God manifested himself. It is important to think about silence in this age in which it does not seem to have much value.

The Gospels do not contain a single word uttered by Joseph of Nazareth: nothing, he never spoke. This does not mean that he was taciturn, no: there is a deeper reason why the Gospels do not say a word. With his silence, Joseph confirms what Saint Augustine writes: “To the extent that the *Word* – that is, the Word made man - *grows in us, words diminish*”. [1] To the extent that Jesus, the spiritual life, grows, words diminish. What we can describe as “parroting”, speaking like parrots, continually, diminishes a little. John the Baptist himself, who is “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’ ” (*Mt* 3:3) says in relation to the Word, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (*Jn* 3:30). This means that he must speak and I must be silent, and through his silence, Joseph invites us to leave room for the Presence of the Word made flesh, for Jesus.

Joseph’s silence is not mutism, he is not taciturn; it is a silence full of *listening*, an *industrious* silence, a silence that brings out his great interiority. “The Father spoke a word, and it was his Son”, comments St John of the Cross, the Father said a word and it was his Son - “and it always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul” [2].

Jesus was raised in this “school”, in the house of Nazareth, with the daily example of Mary and Joseph. And it is not surprising that he himself sought spaces of silence in his days (cf. *Mt* 14:23) and invited his disciples to have such an experience by example: “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while” (*Mk* 6:31).

How good it would be if each one of us, following the example of Saint Joseph, were able to recover this *contemplative dimension of life, opened wide in silence*. But we all know from experience that it is not easy: silence frightens us a little, because it asks us to delve into ourselves and to confront the part of us that is true. And many people are afraid of silence, they have to speak, and speak, and speak, or listen to radio or television... but they cannot accept silence because they are afraid. The philosopher Pascal observed that “all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber”. [3]

Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn from Saint Joseph how to cultivate spaces for silence in which another Word can emerge, that is, Jesus, the Word: that of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, that Jesus brings. It is not easy to recognise that Voice, which is very often confused along with the thousand voices of worries, temptations, desires, and hopes that dwell within us; but without this training that comes precisely from the practice of silence, *our tongue can also ail*. Without practicing silence, our tongue can also ail. Instead of making the truth shine, it can become a dangerous weapon. Indeed, our words can become flattery, bragging, lies, backbiting and slander. It is an established fact that, as the Book of Sirach reminds us, “many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not so many as have fallen because of the tongue” (28:18), the tongue kills more than the sword. Jesus said clearly: whoever speaks ill of his brother or sister, whoever slanders his neighbour, is a murderer (cf. *Mt* 5:21-22). Killing with the tongue. We do not believe this, but it is the truth. Let us think a little about the times we have killed with the tongue: we would be ashamed! But it will do us good, a great deal of good.

Biblical wisdom affirms that “death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (*Pr* 18:21). And the Apostle James, in his Letter, we read at the beginning, develops this ancient theme of the power, positive and negative, of the word with striking examples, and he says: “If any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also... So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing” (3:2-10).

This is why we must learn from Joseph to cultivate silence: that space of interiority in our days in which we give the Spirit the opportunity to regenerate us, to console us, to correct us. I am not saying to fall into muteness, no. Silence. But very often, each one of us look inside, when we are working on something and when we finish, immediately we look for our telephone to make another call... we are always like this. And this does not help, this makes us slip into superficiality. Profoundness of the heart grows with silence, silence that is not mutism as I said, but which leaves space for wisdom, reflection and the Holy Spirit. We are afraid of moments of silence. Let us not be afraid! It will do us good. And the benefit to our hearts will also heal our tongue, our words and above all our choices. In fact, Joseph *combined silence with action*. He did not speak, but he acted, and thus demonstrated what Jesus once told his disciples: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (*Mt* 7:21). Silence. Fruitful words when we speak, and we remember that song: “Parole, parole, parole...”, words, words, words, and nothing of substance. Silence, speaking in the right way, and biting your tongue a little, which can be good at times instead of saying foolish things.

Let us conclude with a prayer:

Saint Joseph, man of silence,

you who in the Gospel did not utter a single word,

teach us to fast from vain words,

to rediscover the value of words that edify, encourage, console and support.

Be close to those who suffer from words that hurt,
like slander and backbiting,
and help us always to match words with deeds. Amen.

[1] *Discourse* 288, 5: *PL* 38, 1307.

[2] *Dichos de luz y amor*, BAC, Madrid, 417, n. 99.

[3] *Pensées*, 139.

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5. St. Joseph, persecuted and courageous migrant (29 December 2021)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I would like to present Saint Joseph to you as a *persecuted and courageous migrant*. This is how the Evangelist Matthew describes him. This particular event in the life of Jesus, which also involves Joseph and Mary, is traditionally known as “the flight into Egypt” (cf. *Mt 2:13-23*). The family of Nazareth suffered such humiliation and experienced first-hand the precariousness, fear and pain of having to leave their homeland. Today so many of our brothers and sisters are still forced to experience the same injustice and suffering. The cause is almost always the arrogance and violence of the powerful. This was also the case for Jesus.

King Herod learns from the Magi of the birth of the “King of the Jews,” and the news shocks him. He feels insecure, he feels that his power is threatened. So, he gathers together all the leaders of Jerusalem to find out the place of His birth, and begs the Magi to inform him of the precise details, so that - he says falsely - he too can go and worship him. But when he realised that the Magi had set out in another direction, he conceived a wicked plan: to kill all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two years, which was the period of time, according to the calculations of the Magi, in which Jesus was born.

In the meantime, an angel orders Joseph: “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him” (*Mt 2:13*). Think today of the many people who feel this impulse within: “Let’s flee, let’s flee, because there is danger here.” Herod’s plan calls to mind that of Pharaoh to throw all the male children of the people of Israel into the Nile (cf. *Ex 1:22*). The flight into Egypt evokes the whole history of Israel beginning with Abraham, who also sojourned there (cf. *Gen 12:10*); to Joseph, son of Jacob, sold by his brothers (cf. *Gen 37:36*) before becoming “ruler of the land” (cf. *Gen 41:37-57*); and to Moses, who freed his people from the slavery of the Egyptians (cf. *Ex 1:18*).

The flight of the Holy Family into Egypt saves Jesus, but unfortunately it does not prevent Herod from carrying out his massacre. We are thus faced with two opposing personalities: on the one hand, Herod with his ferocity, and on the other hand, Joseph with his care and courage. Herod wants to defend his power, his own skin, with ruthless cruelty, as attested to by the execution of one of his wives, some of his children and hundreds of opponents. He was a cruel man: to solve problems, he had just one answer: to kill. He is the symbol of many tyrants of yesteryear and of today. And for them, for these tyrants, people do not count; power is what counts, and if they need space for power, they do away with people. And this happens *today*: we do not need to look at ancient history, it happens *today*. He is the man who becomes a “wolf” for other men. History is full of figures who, living at the mercy of their fears, try to conquer them by exercising power despotically

and carrying out inhuman acts of violence. But we must not think that we live according to Herod's outlook only if we become tyrants, no; in fact, it is an attitude to which we can all fall prey, every time we try to dispel our fears with arrogance, even if only verbal, or made up of small abuses intended to mortify those close to us. We too have in our heart the possibility of becoming little Herods.

Joseph is the opposite of Herod: first of all, he is “a just man” (*Mt 1:19*), and Herod is a dictator. Furthermore, he proves he is courageous in following the Angel's command. One can imagine the vicissitudes he had to face during the long and dangerous journey and the difficulties involved in staying in a foreign country, with another language: many difficulties. His courage emerges also at the moment of his return, when, reassured by the Angel, he overcomes his understandable fears and settles with Mary and Jesus in Nazareth (cf. *Mt 2:19-23*). Herod and Joseph are two opposing characters, reflecting the two ever-present faces of humanity. It is a common misconception to consider courage as the exclusive virtue of the hero. In reality, the daily life of every person requires courage. Our way of living – yours, mine, everyone's: one cannot live without courage, the courage to face each day's difficulties. In all times and cultures, we find courageous men and women who, in order to be consistent with their beliefs, have overcome all kinds of difficulties, and have endured injustice, condemnation and even death. Courage is synonymous with fortitude, which together with justice, prudence and temperance is part of the group of human virtues known as “cardinal virtues.”

The lesson Joseph leaves us with today is this: life always holds adversities in store for us, this is true, in the face of which we may also feel threatened and afraid. But it is not by bringing out the worst in ourselves, as Herod does, that we can overcome certain moments, but rather by acting like Joseph, who reacts to fear with the courage to trust in God's Providence. Today I think we need a prayer for all migrants; migrants and all the persecuted, and all those who are victims of adverse circumstances: be they political, historical or personal circumstances. But, let us think of the many people who are victims of wars, who want to flee from their homeland but cannot; let us think of the migrants who set out on that road to be free, so many of whom end up on the street or in the sea; let us think of Jesus in the arms of Joseph and Mary, fleeing, and let us see in him each one of the migrants of today. Migration today is a reality to which we cannot close our eyes. It is a social scandal of humanity.

Saint Joseph,

you who have experienced the suffering of those who must flee

you who were forced to flee

to save the lives of those dearest to you,

protect all those who flee because of war,

hatred, hunger.

Support them in their difficulties,

Strengthen them in hope, and let them find welcome and solidarity.

Guide their steps and open the hearts of those who can help them. Amen.

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6. St. Joseph, Jesus' foster father (5 January 2022)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will reflect on Saint Joseph as the father of Jesus. The evangelists Matthew and Luke present him as the foster father of Jesus, and not as his biological father. Matthew specifies this, avoiding the formula “the father of”, used in the genealogy for all the ancestors of Jesus; instead, he defines Joseph as the “husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (1:16). Luke, on the other hand, affirms it by saying that he was Jesus’ “supposed” father (3:23), that is, he appeared as His father.

To understand the alleged or legal paternity of Joseph, it is necessary to bear in mind that in ancient times in the East the institution of adoption was very common, more so than today. One thinks of the common case in Israel of the “levirate”, as formulated in Deuteronomy: “If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband’s brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel” (25:5-6). In other words, the parent of this child is the brother-in-law, but the legal father remains the deceased, who gives the newborn child all hereditary rights. The purpose of this law was twofold: to ensure the descendants of the deceased and the preservation of the estate.

As the official father of Jesus, Joseph exercises the right to impose a name on his son, legally recognising him. Legally he is the father, but not generatively; he did not beget Him.

In ancient times, the name was the compendium of a person’s identity. Changing one’s name meant changing oneself, as in the case of Abraham, whose name God changed to “Abraham”, which means “father of many”, “for”, says the Book of Genesis, he will be “the father of a multitude of nations” (17:5). The same goes for Jacob, who would be called “Israel”, which means “he who struggles with God”, because he struggled with God to compel Him to give him the blessing (cf. *Gen* 32:29; 35:10).

But above all, naming someone or something meant asserting one’s authority over what was named, as Adam did when he conferred a name on all the animals (cf. *Gen* 2:19-20).

Joseph already knows that, for Mary’s son, a name had already been prepared by God – Jesus’ name is given to him by his *true* father, God – “Jesus”, which means “the Lord saves”; as the Angel explains, “He will save his people from their sins” (*Mt* 1:21). This particular aspect of Joseph now enables us to reflect on fatherhood and motherhood. And this, I believe, is very important: thinking about fatherhood

today. Because we live in an age of notorious orphanhood, don't we? It is curious: our civilization is something of an orphan, and this orphanhood can be felt. May Saint Joseph, who took the place of the real father, God, help us to understand how to resolve this sense of orphanhood that is so harmful to us today.

It is not enough to bring a child into the world to also be the child's father or mother. "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" (Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*). I think in a particular way of all those who are open to welcome life by way of adoption, which is such a generous and beautiful, good attitude. Joseph shows us that this type of bond is not secondary; it is not an afterthought, no. This kind of choice is among the highest forms of love, and of fatherhood and motherhood. How many children in the world are waiting for someone to take care of them! And how many married couples want to be fathers and mothers but are unable to do so for biological reasons; or, although they already have children, they want to share their family's affection with those who do not have it. We should not be afraid to choose the path of adoption, to take the "risk" of welcoming children. And today, with orphanhood, there is a certain selfishness. The other day, I spoke about the demographic winter there is nowadays, in which we see that people do not want to have children, or just one and no more. And many, many couples do not have children because they do not want to, or they have just one – but they have two dogs, two cats... Yes, dogs and cats take the place of children. Yes, it's funny, I understand, but it is the reality. And this denial of fatherhood or motherhood diminishes us, it takes away our humanity. And in this way civilization becomes aged and without humanity, because it loses the richness of fatherhood and motherhood. And our homeland suffers, as it does not have children, and, as it has been said somewhat humorously, "and now who will pay the taxes for my pension, if there are no children?": with laughter, but it is the truth. Who will take care of me? I ask of Saint Joseph the grace to awaken consciences and to think about this: about having children. Fatherhood and motherhood are the fullness of the life of a person. Think about this. It is true, there is the spiritual fatherhood of those who consecrated themselves to God, and spiritual motherhood; but those who live in the world and get married, think about having children, of giving life, which they will take from you for the future. And also, if you cannot have children, think about adoption. It is a risk, yes: having a child is always a risk, either naturally or by adoption. But it is riskier not to have them. It is riskier to deny fatherhood, or to deny motherhood, be it real or spiritual. But denial, a man or woman who do not develop the sense of fatherhood or motherhood, they are lacking something, something fundamental, something important. Think about this, please.

I hope that the institutions will always be ready to help regarding adoption, by seriously monitoring but also simplifying the necessary procedure so that the dream of so many children who need a family, and of so many couples who wish to give themselves in love, can come true. Some time ago I heard the testimony of a person, a doctor – an important profession – who did not have children, and he and his wife decided to adopt one. And when the time came, they were offered a child, and they were told, "But we do not know how this child's health is. Perhaps he has an illness". And he said – I saw him – he said, "If you had asked me about

this before coming, perhaps I would have said no. But I have seen the child: I will take him with me". This is the longing to be an adoptive father, to be an adoptive mother too. Do not be afraid of this.

I pray that no one feel deprived of the bond of paternal love. And those who are afflicted with orphanhood, may they go forward without this unpleasant feeling. May Saint Joseph protect, and give his help to orphans; and may he intercede for couples who wish to have a child. Let us pray for this together:

Saint Joseph,

you who loved Jesus with fatherly love,

be close to the many children who have no family

and who long for a daddy and mommy.

Support the couples who are unable to have children,

help them to discover, through this suffering, a greater plan.

Make sure that no one lacks a home, a bond,

a person to take care of him or her;

and heal the selfishness of those who close themselves off from life,

that they may open their hearts to love.

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7. St. Joseph the carpenter (12 January 2022)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The evangelists Matthew and Mark refer to Joseph as a “carpenter” or “joiner.” We heard earlier that the people of Nazareth, hearing Jesus speak, asked themselves: “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (13:55; cf. *Mk* 6:3). Jesus practised his father’s trade.

The Greek term *tehton*, used to specify Joseph’s work, has been translated in various ways. The Latin Fathers of the Church rendered it as “carpenter.” But let us bear in mind that in the Palestine of Jesus’ time, wood was used not only to make ploughs and various pieces of furniture, but also to build houses, which had wooden frames and terraced roofs made of beams connected with branches and earth.

Therefore, “carpenter” or “joiner” was a generic qualification, indicating both woodworkers and craftsmen engaged in activities related to construction. It was quite a hard job, having to work with heavy materials such as wood, stone, and iron. From an economic point of view, it did not ensure great earnings, as can be deduced from the fact that Mary and Joseph, when they presented Jesus in the Temple, offered only a couple of turtledoves or pigeons (cf. *Lk* 2:24), as the Law prescribed for the poor (cf. *Lv* 12:8).

Thus, the young Jesus learnt this trade from his father. Therefore, when as an adult he began to preach, his astonished neighbours asked: “But where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?” (*Mt* 13:54), and were scandalized by him (cf. v. 57), because he was the son of the carpenter, but he spoke like a doctor of the law, and they were scandalized by this.

This biographical fact about Joseph and Jesus makes me think of all the workers in the world, especially those who do gruelling work in mines and certain factories; those who are exploited through undocumented work; the victims of labour: we have seen a lot of this in Italy recently; the children who are forced to work and those who rummage among the trash in search of something useful to trade...

Let me repeat what I said: the hidden workers, the workers who do hard labour in mines and in certain factories: let's think of them. Let's think about them. Let's think about those who are exploited with undeclared work, who are paid in contraband, on the sly, without a pension, without anything. And if you don't work, you have no security. Undocumented work. And today there is a lot of undocumented work.

[Let us think] of the victims of work, who suffer from work accidents. Of the children who are forced to work: this is terrible! A child at the age of play, who should be playing, forced to work like an adult! Children forced to work. And of those — poor people! — who rummage in the dumps to look for something useful

to trade: they go to the dumps... All these are our brothers and sisters, who earn their living this way: they don't give them dignity! Let us think about this. And this is happening today, in the world, this is happening today.

But I think too of those who are out of work. How many people go knocking on the doors of factories, of businesses [asking] "Is there anything to do?" — "No, there's nothing, there's nothing. [I think] of those who feel their dignity wounded because they cannot find this work. They return home: "And? Have you found something?" — "No, nothing... I went to Caritas and I brought bread. What gives dignity is not bringing bread home. You can get it from Caritas — no, this doesn't give you dignity. What gives you dignity is earning bread — and if we don't give our people, our men and women, the ability to earn bread, that is a social injustice in that place, in that nation, in that continent. The leaders must give everyone the possibility of earning bread, because this ability to earn gives them dignity. It is an unction of dignity, work. And this is important.

Many young people, many fathers and mothers experience the ordeal of not having a job that allows them to live tranquilly. They live day to day. And how often the search for work becomes so desperate that it drives them to the point of losing all hope and the desire to live. In these times of pandemic, many people have lost their jobs — we know this — and some, crushed by an unbearable burden, reached the point of taking their own lives. I would like to remember each of them and their families today. Let us take a moment of silence, remembering these men, these women, who are desperate because they cannot find work.

Not enough consideration is given to the fact that work is an essential component of human life, and even of the path of sanctification. Work is not only a means of earning a living: it is also a place where we express ourselves, feel useful, and learn the great lesson of concreteness, which helps keep the spiritual life from becoming spiritualism. Unfortunately, however, labour is often a hostage to social injustice and, rather than being a means of humanization, it becomes an existential periphery. I often ask myself: With what spirit do we do our daily work? How do we deal with fatigue? Do we see our activity as linked only to our own destiny or also to the destiny of others? In fact, work is a way of expressing our personality, which is relational by its nature. And, too, work is a way to express our creativity: each one of us works in their own way, with their own style: the same work but with different styles.

It is good to think about the fact that Jesus himself worked and had learned this craft from St Joseph. Today, we should ask ourselves what we can do to recover the value of work; and what contribution we can make, as the Church, so that work can be redeemed from the logic of mere profit and can be experienced as a fundamental right and duty of the person, which expresses and increases his or her dignity.

Dear brothers and sisters, for all of this I would like to recite with you today the prayer that Saint Paul VI lifted up to Saint Joseph on 1 May 1969:

O Saint Joseph,

Patron of the Church!

you, who side by side with the Word made flesh,
worked each day to earn your bread,
drawing from Him the strength to live and to toil;
you who experienced the anxiety for the morrow,
the bitterness of poverty, the uncertainty of work:
you who today give the shining example,
humble in the eyes of men
but most exalted in the sight of God:
protect workers in their hard daily lives,
defending them from discouragement,
from negative revolt,
and from pleasure loving temptations;
and keep peace in the world,
that peace which alone can ensure the development of peoples
Amen.

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8. St. Joseph, father in tenderness (19 January 2022)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, I would like to explore the figure of Saint Joseph as *a father in tenderness*.

In my Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, (8 December 2020) I had the opportunity to reflect on this aspect of tenderness, an aspect of Saint Joseph's personality. In fact, although the Gospels do not give us any details about how he exercised his paternity, we can be sure that his being a "just" man also translated into the education he gave to Jesus. "Joseph saw Jesus grow day by day 'in wisdom and age and favour before God and man'" (*Lk 2:52*): so the Gospel says. 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*)." (*Patris corde*, 2). It is beautiful, this definition in the Bible, that shows God's relationship with the people of Israel. It is the same relationship, we think, that there was between Saint Joseph and Jesus.

The Gospels attest that Jesus always used the word "father" to speak of God and his love. Many parables have as their protagonist the figure of a father. One of the most famous is certainly that of the merciful Father, recounted by Luke the Evangelist (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*). This parable emphasizes not only the experience of sin and forgiveness, but also the way in which forgiveness reaches the person who has done wrong. The text says: "While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him" (v. 20). The son was expecting a punishment, a justice that at most could have given him the place of one of the servants, but he finds himself wrapped in his father's embrace. Tenderness is something greater than the logic of the world. It is an unexpected way of doing justice. That is why we must never forget that God is not frightened by our sins: let us fix this clearly in our minds. God is not frightened by our sins, he is greater than our sins: he is the father, he is love, he is tender. He is not frightened by our sins, our mistakes, our slip-ups, but he is frightened by the closure of our hearts – this, yes, this makes him suffer – he is frightened by our lack of faith in his love. There is great tenderness in the experience of God's love. And it is beautiful to think that the first person to transmit this reality to Jesus was Joseph himself. For the things of God always come to us through the mediation of human experiences. Long ago – I don't know if I have already told this story – a group of young people who did theatrical drama, a pop theatre group, ahead of the curve, were struck by this parable of the merciful father and decided to create a pop theatre production on this matter, with this story. And they did it well. And the story is that, at the end, a friend listens to a son who is estranged from his father, who wanted to return home but was afraid that his father would kick him out and punish him. And the friend, said, "Send a messenger to say that you want to return home, and if your father will receive you, to put a handkerchief in the window, the one you can see as soon as you take the last part of the path home". And this was done. And the work, with

singing and dancing, continues until the moment that the son turns onto the last stretch of the road and sees the house. And when he looks up, he sees the house full of white handkerchiefs: full of them. Not one, but three or four in every window. This is God's mercy. He is not deterred by our past, by the bad things we have done; settling the accounts with God is a beautiful thing, because we begin to talk, and he embraces us. Tenderness!

So, we can ask ourselves if we ourselves have experienced this tenderness, and if we in turn have become its witnesses. For tenderness is not primarily an emotional or sentimental matter: it is the experience of feeling loved and welcomed precisely in our poverty and misery, and thus transformed by God's love.

God does not rely only on our talents, but also on our redeemed weakness. This, for example, makes Saint Paul say that there is also a plan for one's fragility. In fact, he wrote to the community of Corinth: "And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me...Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" (2 Cor 12:7-9). The Lord does not take away all our weaknesses, but helps us to walk on with our weaknesses, taking us by the hand. He takes our weaknesses by the hand and places himself by our side. And this is tenderness.

The experience of tenderness consists in seeing God's power pass through precisely that which makes us most fragile; on condition, however, that we are converted from the gaze of the Evil One who "makes us see and condemn our frailty", while the Holy Spirit "brings it to light with tender love." (*Patris corde*, 2). "Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us. [...] Look how nurses touch the wounds of the sick: with tenderness, so as not to hurt the further. And this is how the Lord touches our wounds, with the same tenderness. That is why it is so important to encounter God's mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in personal prayer with God, where we experience his truth and tenderness. Paradoxically, the evil one can also speak the truth to us: he is a liar, but he can arrange things so that he tells us the truth in order to tell us a lie, yet he does so only to condemn us. Instead, the Lord tells us the truth and reaches out his hand to save us. We know that God's truth does not condemn, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains and forgives us." (*Patris corde*, 2). God always forgives: keep this clearly in your head and your heart. God always forgives. We are the ones who tire of asking for forgiveness. But he always forgives, even the worst things.

It does us good, then, to mirror ourselves in Joseph's fatherhood, which is a mirror of God's fatherhood, and to ask ourselves whether we allow the Lord to love us with his tenderness, transforming each one of us into men and women capable of loving in this way. Without this "revolution of tenderness" – there is a need for a revolution of tenderness! - we risk remaining imprisoned in a justice that does not allow us to rise easily and that confuses redemption with punishment. For this reason, today I want to remember in a special way our brothers and sisters who are in prison. It is right that those who have done wrong should pay for their mistake, but it is equally right that those who have done wrong should be able to

redeem themselves from their mistake. They cannot be sentenced without a window of hope. Any sentence must always have a window of hope. Let us think of our brothers and sisters in prison, and think of God's tenderness for them, and let us pray for them, so they might find in that window of hope a way out towards a better life.

And we conclude with this prayer:

St Joseph, father in tenderness,

teach us to accept that we are loved precisely in that which is weakest in us.

Grant that we may place no obstacle

between our poverty and the greatness of God's love.

Stir in us the desire to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation,

that we may be forgiven and also made capable of loving tenderly

our brothers and sisters in their poverty.

Be close to those who have done wrong and are paying the price for it;

Help them to find not only justice but also tenderness so that they can start again.

And teach them that the first way to begin again

is to sincerely ask for forgiveness, to feel the Father's caress.

Amen.

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9. St. Joseph, a man who dreams (26 January 2022)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I would like to focus on the figure of St Joseph as *a man who dreams*. In the Bible, as in the cultures of ancient peoples, dreams were considered a means by which God revealed himself. The dream symbolises the spiritual life of each of us, that inner space that each of us is called to cultivate and guard, where God manifests himself and often speaks to us. But we must also say that within each of us there is not only the voice of God: there are many other voices. For example, the voices of our fears, the voices of past experiences, the voices of hopes; and there is also the voice of the evil one who wants to deceive and confuse us. It is therefore important to be able to recognise the voice of God in the midst of other voices. Joseph demonstrates that he knows how to cultivate the necessary silence and, above all, how to make the right decisions before the Word that the Lord addresses to him inwardly. Today, it will be good for us to take up the four dreams in the Gospel which have him as their protagonist, in order to understand how to place ourselves before God's revelation. The Gospel tells us of four dreams of Joseph.

In the first dream (cf. *Mt 1:18-25*), the angel helps Joseph to resolve the drama that assails him when he learns of Mary's pregnancy: "Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (vv. 20-21). And his response was immediate: "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (v. 24). Life often puts us in situations that we do not understand and that seem to have no solution. Praying in these moments — this means letting the Lord show us the right thing to do. In fact, very often it is prayer that gives us the intuition of the way out. Dear brothers and sisters, the Lord never allows a problem to arise without also giving us the help we need to deal with it. He does not cast us alone into the fire. He does not cast us among the beasts. No. When the Lord shows us a problem, or reveals a problem, he always gives us the intuition, the help, his presence, to get out of it, to resolve it.

And the second revealing dream of Joseph comes when the life of the child Jesus is in danger. The message is clear: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (*Mt 2:13*). Joseph obeyed without hesitation: "He rose and took the child and his mother by night," the Gospel says, "and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod" (vv. 14-15). In life we all experience dangers that threaten our existence or the existence of those we love. In these situations, praying means listening to the voice that can give us the same courage as Joseph, to face difficulties without succumbing.

In Egypt, Joseph waited for a sign from God that he could return home, and this is the content of the third dream. The angel reveals to him that those who wanted to

kill the Child are dead and orders him to leave with Mary and Jesus and return to his homeland (cf. Mt 2:19-20). Joseph “rose” the Gospel says, “and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel” (v. 21). But on the return journey, “when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there” (v. 22). Here then is the fourth revelation: “Being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth” (vv. 22-23). Fear is also part of life and it too needs our prayer. God does not promise us that we will never have fear, but that, with His help, it will not be the criterion for our decisions. Joseph experiences fear, but God also guides him through it. The power of prayer brings light into situations of darkness.

I am thinking at this moment of so many people who are crushed by the weight of life and can no longer hope or pray. May St Joseph help them to open themselves to dialogue with God in order to find light, strength, and peace.

And I am thinking, too, of parents in the face of their children’s problems: Children with many illnesses, children who are sick, even with permanent maladies. — how much pain is there! — parents who see different sexual orientations in their children; how to deal with this and accompany their children and not hide in an attitude of condemnation. Parents who see their children leaving because of an illness, and also — even sadder, we read about it every day in the newspapers — children who get into mischief and end up in a car accident. Parents who see their children not progressing in school and don't know how... So many parental problems. Let's think about it: how to help them. And to these parents I say: don't be scared. Yes, there is pain. A lot. But think of the Lord, think about how Joseph solved the problems and ask Joseph to help you. Never condemn a child.

It fills me with compassion — it did in Buenos Aires — when I got on the bus and it passed in front of the prison. There was a queue of people who had to go in to visit the prisoners. And there were mothers there. And I was so touched by this mother who, faced with the problem of a son who has made a mistake and is in prison, doesn’t leave him alone, puts her face forward and accompanies him. This courage; the courage of a father and mother who always, always accompany their children. Let us ask the Lord to give this courage to all fathers and mothers, as he gave it to Joseph. And to pray, no? Pray that the Lord will help us in these moments.

Prayer, however, is never an abstract or purely internal gesture, like these spiritualist movements that are more gnostic than Christian. No, it’s not that. Prayer is always inextricably linked to charity. It is only when we combine prayer with love, the love for children in the cases I just mentioned, or the love for our neighbour, that we are able to understand the Lord's messages. Joseph prayed, worked, and loved — three beautiful things for parents: to pray, to work, and to love — and because of this he always received what he needed to face life's trials. Let us entrust ourselves to him and to his intercession.

St Joseph, you are the man who dreams,

teach us to recover the spiritual life

as the inner place where God manifests Himself and saves us.

Remove from us the thought that praying is useless;
help each one of us to correspond to what the Lord shows us.
May our reasoning be illuminated by the light of the Spirit,
our hearts encouraged by His strength
and our fears saved by His mercy. Amen.

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10. St. Joseph and the communion of saints (2 February 2022)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In recent weeks we have been able to deepen our understanding of the figure of Saint Joseph, guided by the few but important pieces of information given in the Gospels, and also by the aspects of his personality that the Church has been able to highlight over the centuries through prayer and devotion. Starting precisely from this *sentire commune* (“common feeling”) that has characterized the figure of Saint Joseph throughout the Church’s history, today I would like to focus on an important article of faith that can enrich our Christian life and also shape our relationship with the saints and with our deceased loved ones in the best possible way: I am talking about the *communion of saints*. We often say, in the Creed, “I believe in the communion of saints”. But if you ask what the communion of saints is, I remember as a child I used to answer immediately, “Ah, the saints receive Communion”. It is something that... we do not understand what we are saying. What is the communion of saints? It is not the saints receiving Communion, it is not that. It is something else.

Sometimes even Christianity can fall into forms of devotion that seem to reflect a mentality that is more pagan than Christian. The fundamental difference is the fact that our prayer and our devotion as faithful people is not based, in these cases, on trust in a human being, or in an image or an object, even when we know that they are sacred. The prophet Jeremiah reminds us: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man, [...] blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord” (17:5, 7). Even when we fully rely on the intercession of a saint, or even more so that of the Virgin Mary, our trust only has value in relation to Christ. As if the path toward this saint or toward Our Lady does not end there, no. It goes there, but in relationship with Christ. Christ is the bond that unites us to him and to each other, and which has a specific name: this bond that unites us all, between ourselves and us with Christ, is the “communion of saints”. It is not the saints who work miracles, no! “This saint is so miraculous...” No, stop there. The saints do not work miracles, but only the grace of God that acts through them. Miracles are done by God, by the grace of God acting through a holy person, a righteous person. This must be made clear. There are people who say, “I do not believe in God, but I believe in this saint”. No, this is wrong. The saint is an intercessor, one who prays for us and we pray to him, and he prays for us and the Lord gives us grace: The Lord acts through the saint.

What, then, is the “communion of saints”? The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms: “The communion of saints is the Church” (no. 946). What a beautiful definition this is! “The communion of saints is the Church”. What does this mean? That the Church is reserved for the perfect? No. It means that it is the community of *saved sinners*. The Church is the community of saved sinners. This is a beautiful definition. No one can exclude themselves from the Church. We are all saved sinners. Our holiness is the fruit of God’s love manifested in Christ, who sanctifies us by loving us in our misery and saving us from it. Thanks always to him we form

one single body, says Saint Paul, in which Jesus is the head and we are the members (cf. 1 Cor 12:12). This image of the Body of Christ and the image of the body immediately makes us understand what it means to be bound to one another in *communion*: “If one member suffers”, writes Saint Paul, “all suffer together; and if one member is honoured, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and, individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:26-27). This is what Paul says: we are all one body, all united through faith, through baptism, all in communion: united in communion with Jesus Christ. And this is the communion of saints.

Dear brothers and dear sisters, the joy and sorrow that touch my life affect everyone, just as the joy and sorrow that touch the life of the brother and sister next to us also affect me. I cannot be indifferent to others, because we are all parts of one body, in communion. In this sense, even the sin of an individual person always affects everyone, and the love of each individual person affects everyone. By virtue of the communion of saints, of this union, every member of the Church is bound to me in a profound way. But I don't say “to me” because I am the Pope — we are bound reciprocally and in a profound way and this bond is so strong that it cannot be broken even by death. Indeed, the communion of saints does not concern only the brothers and sisters who are beside me in this historical moment, but also those who have concluded their earthly pilgrimage and crossed the threshold of death. They too are in communion with us. Let us consider, dear brothers and sisters, that in Christ no one can ever truly separate us from those we love because the bond is an existential bond, a strong bond that is in our very nature; only the manner of being together with each of them changes, but nothing and no one can break this bond. “Father, let us think about those who have denied the faith, who are apostates, who are the persecutors of the Church, who have denied their baptism: Are these also at home?”. Yes, these too, even the blasphemers, everyone. We are brothers. This is the communion of saints. The communion of saints holds together the community of believers on earth and in heaven.

In this sense, the relationship of friendship that I can build with a brother or sister beside me, I can also establish with a brother or sister who is in heaven. The saints are friends with whom we very often establish friendly relations. What we call *devotion* to a saint — “I am very devoted to this or that saint” — what we call devotion is actually a way of expressing love from this very bond that unites us. Also, in everyday life one can say, “But this person has such devotion for his elderly parents”: no, it is a manner of love, an expression of love. And we all know that we can always turn to a friend, especially when we are in difficulty and need help. And we have some friends in heaven. We all need friends; we all need meaningful relationships to help us get through life. Jesus, too, had his friends, and he turned to them at the most decisive moments of his human experience. In the history of the Church there are some constants that accompany the community of believers: first of all, the great affection and the very strong bond that the Church has always felt towards Mary, Mother of God and our Mother. But also the special honour and affection she has bestowed on Saint Joseph. After all, God entrusts to him the most precious things he has: his Son Jesus and the Virgin Mary. It is always thanks to the communion of saints that we feel that the men and women saints who are our patrons — because of the name we bear, for example, because of the Church to which we belong, because of the place where we live, and so on, as well as through personal devotion — are close to us. And this is the trust that

must always animate us in turning to them at decisive moments in our lives. It is not some kind of magic, it is not superstition, it is devotion to the saints. It is simply talking to a brother, a sister, who is in the presence of God, who has led a righteous life, a holy life, an exemplary life, and is now in the presence of God. And I talk to this brother, to this sister, and ask for their intercession for the needs that I have.

Precisely for this reason, I would like to conclude this catechesis with a prayer to Saint Joseph to which I am particularly attached and which I have recited every day for more than 40 years. It is a prayer that I found in a prayer book of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, from the 1700's, the end of the 18th century. It is very beautiful, but more than a prayer it is a challenge, to this friend, to this father, to this our guardian, who is Saint Joseph. It would be wonderful if you could learn this prayer and repeat it. I will read it.

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.

And it ends with a challenge, this is to challenge Saint Joseph: “since you can do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power”. I have entrusted myself to Saint Joseph with this prayer every day for more than 40 years: it's an old prayer.

Let us go forward, have courage, in this communion of all the saints we have in heaven and on earth: the Lord does not abandon us.

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11. St. Joseph, patron of a good death (9 February 2022)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In last week's catechesis, again inspired by Saint Joseph, we reflected on the meaning of the communion of saints. And leading on from this, today I would like to explore the special devotion the Christian people have always had for Saint Joseph as the *patron saint of the good death*. A devotion born of the thought that Joseph died cared for by the Virgin Mary and Jesus, before leaving the house of Nazareth. There are no historical data, but since we no longer see Joseph in public life, it is thought that he died there in Nazareth, with his family. And Jesus and Mary accompanied him up to his death.

A century ago, Pope Benedict XV wrote "through Joseph we go directly to Mary, and through Mary to the origin of all holiness, who is Jesus". Both Joseph and Mary help us to go to Jesus. And encouraging pious practices in honour of Saint Joseph, he recommended one in particular, saying: "Since he is deservedly considered to be the most effective protector of the dying, having expired in the presence of Jesus and Mary, it will be the concern of the sacred Pastors to inculcate and encourage [...] those pious associations that have been established to implore Joseph on behalf of the dying, such as those 'of the Good Death', of the 'Transit of Saint Joseph' and 'for the Dying'. (Motu proprio *Bonum sane*, 25 July 1920): they were the associations of the time.

Dear brothers and sisters, perhaps some people think that this language and this theme are only a legacy of the past, but in reality, our relationship with death is never about the past – it always present. Pope Benedict said, a few days ago, speaking of himself, that he "is before the dark door of death". It is good to thank the Pope who has this clarity, at 95, to tell us this. "I am before the obscurity of death, at the dark door of death". It is good advice that he has given us, isn't it? The so-called "feel-good" culture tries to remove the reality of death, but the coronavirus pandemic has brought it back into focus in a dramatic way. It was terrible: death was everywhere, and so many brothers and sisters lost loved ones without being able to be near them, and this made death even harder to accept and process. A nurse told me that she was in front of a grandmother who was dying, and who said to her, "I would like to say goodbye to my family, before I leave". And the nurse bravely took out her mobile phone and put her in touch with them. The tenderness of that farewell...

Nevertheless, we try in every way to banish the thought of our finite existence, deluding ourselves into believing we can remove the power of death and dispel fear. But the Christian faith is not a way of exorcising the fear of death; rather, it helps us to face it. Sooner or later, we will all pass through that door.

The true light that illuminates the mystery of death comes from the resurrection of Christ. This is the light. And, Saint Paul writes: "Now if Christ is preached as raised

from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 12: 12-14). There is one certainty: Christ is resurrected, Christ is risen, Christ is living among us. And this is the light that awaits us behind that dark door of death.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is only through faith in resurrection that we can face the abyss of death without being overwhelmed by fear. Not only that: we can restore a positive role to death. Indeed, thinking about death, enlightened by the mystery of Christ, helps us to look at all of life through fresh eyes. I have never seen a removals van following a hearse! Behind a hearse: I have never seen one. We will go alone, with nothing in the pockets of our shroud: nothing. Because the shroud has no pockets. This solitude of death: it is true, I have never seen a hearse followed by a removals van. It makes no sense to accumulate if one day we will die. What we must accumulate is love, and the ability to share, the ability not to remain indifferent when faced with the needs of others. Or, what is the point of arguing with a brother, with a sister, with a friend, with a relative, or with a brother or sister in faith, if then one day we will die? What point is there in being angry, in getting angry with others? Before death, many issues are brought down to size. It is good to die reconciled, without grudges and without regrets! I would like to say one truth: we are all on our way towards that door, all of us.

The Gospel tells us that death comes like a thief. That is what Jesus tells us: it arrives like a thief, and however much we try to keep its arrival under control, perhaps even planning our own death, it remains an event that we must reckon with, and before which we must also make choices.

Two considerations stand for us Christians. The first: we cannot avoid death, and precisely for this reason, after having done everything that is humanly possible to cure the sick, it is immoral to engage in futile treatment (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2278). That phrase of the faithful people of God, of the simple people: “Let him die in peace”, “help him to die in peace”: such wisdom! The second consideration concerns the quality of death itself, the quality of pain, of suffering. Indeed, we must be grateful for all the help that medicine endeavours to give, so that through so-called “palliative care”, every person who is preparing to live the last stretch of their life can do so in the most human way possible. However, we must be careful not to confuse this help with unacceptable drifts towards killing. We must accompany people towards death, but not provoke death or facilitate any form of suicide. I would point out that the right to care and treatment for all must always be prioritised, so that the weakest, particularly the elderly and the sick, are never discarded. Life is a right, not death, which must be welcomed, not administered. And this ethical principle applies to concerns everyone, not just Christians or believers.

I would like to underline a real social problem. That “planning” – I don’t know if it is the right word – but accelerating the death of the elderly. Very often we see in a certain social class that the elderly, since they do not have means, are given fewer medicines than they need, and this is inhuman; this is not helping them, it is driving them towards death earlier. This is neither human nor Christian. The elderly should be cared for as a treasure of humanity: they are our wisdom. And if they do not speak, or if they do not make sense, they are still the symbol of human

wisdom. They are those who went before us and have left us so many good things, so many memories, so much wisdom. Please, do not isolate the elderly, do not accelerate the death of the elderly. To caress an elderly person has the same hope as caressing a child, because the beginning of life and the end are always a mystery, a mystery that should be respected, accompanied, cared for. Loved.

May Saint Joseph help us to live the mystery of death in the best possible way. For a Christian, the good death is an experience of the mercy of God, who comes close to us even in that last moment of our life. Even in the Hail Mary, we pray asking our Lady to be close to us “at the hour of our death”. Precisely for this reason, I would like to conclude this catechesis by praying together to our Lady for the dying, for those who are experiencing this moment of passage through the dark door, and for the relatives who are experiencing bereavement. Let us pray together:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Thank you.

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12. St. Joseph, patron of the Church (16 February 2022)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we conclude the cycle of catecheses on the figure of St Joseph. These catecheses are complementary to the Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, written on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of St Joseph as Patron of the Catholic Church by Blessed Pius IX. But what does this title mean? What does it mean that St Joseph is “patron of the Church”? I would like to reflect on this today with you.

In this case, too, the Gospels provide us with the most correct key to interpretation. In fact, at the end of every story in which Joseph is the protagonist, the Gospel notes that he takes the Child and His mother with him and does what God has ordered him to do (cf. *Mt* 1:24; 2:14,21). Thus, the fact that Joseph’s task is to protect Jesus and Mary stands out. He is their principal guardian: “Indeed, Jesus and Mary His Mother are the most precious treasure of our faith” [1] (Apostolic letter *Patris corde*, 5). And this treasure is safeguarded by Saint Joseph

In the plan of salvation, the Son cannot be separated from the Mother, from the one who “advanced in the pilgrimage of faith and faithfully preserved her union with her Son even to the Cross” (*Lumen Gentium*, 58), as the Second Vatican Council reminds us.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph are in a sense the primordial nucleus of the Church. Jesus is Man and God; Mary, the first disciple and the Mother; and Joseph, the guardian. And we too “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.” (*Patris corde*, 5). And here there is a very beautiful trace of the Christian vocation: to safeguard. To safeguard life, to safeguard human development, to safeguard the human mind, to safeguard the human heart, to safeguard human work. The Christian — we could say — is like St Joseph: he must safeguard. To be a Christian is not only to receive the faith, to confess the faith, but to safeguard life, one’s own life, the life of others, the life of the Church. The Son of the Most High came into the world in a condition of great weakness: Jesus was born like this, weak, weak. He wanted to be defended, protected, cared for. God trusted Joseph, as did Mary, who found in him the bridegroom who loved and respected her and always took care of her and the 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. 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*” (*ibid.*).

This Child is the One who will say: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me”. (*Mt* 25:40). Therefore, every person who is

hungry and thirsty, every stranger, every migrant, every person without clothes, every sick person, every prisoner is the “Child” whom Joseph looks after. And we are invited to safeguard these people, these our brothers and sisters, as Joseph did. That is why he is invoked as protector of all the needy, the exiled, the afflicted, and even the dying – we spoke about this last Wednesday. And we too must learn from Joseph to “safeguard” these goods: to love the Child and His mother; to love the sacraments and the people of God; to love the poor and our parish. Each of these realities is always the Child and His mother (cf. *Patris corde*, 5). We must safeguard, because with this we safeguard Jesus, as Joseph did.

Nowadays it is common, it is an everyday occurrence, to criticise the Church, to point out its inconsistencies — there are many — to point out its sins, which in reality are our inconsistencies, our sins, because the Church has always been a people of sinners who encounter God’s mercy. Let us ask ourselves if, in our hearts, we love the Church as she is, the People of God on the journey, with many limitations, but with a great desire to serve and to love God. In fact, only love makes us capable of speaking the truth fully, in a non-partisan way; of saying what is wrong, but also of recognising all the goodness and holiness that are present in the Church, starting precisely with Jesus and Mary. Loving the Church, safeguarding the Church and walking with the Church. But the Church is not that little group that is close to the priest and commands everyone, no. The Church is everyone, everyone. On the journey. Safeguarding one another, looking out for each other. This is a good question: when I have a problem with someone, do I try to look after them, or do I immediately condemn them, spit on them, destroy them? We must safeguard, always safeguard!

Dear brothers and sisters, I encourage you to ask for the intercession of Saint Joseph precisely at the most difficult times in the life of you and of your communities. Where our mistakes become a scandal, let us ask St Joseph to give us the courage to speak the truth, ask for forgiveness, and humbly begin again. Where persecution prevents the Gospel from being proclaimed, let us ask St Joseph for the strength and patience to endure abuse and suffering for the sake of the Gospel. Where material and human resources are scarce and make us experience poverty, especially when we are called to serve the last, the defenceless, the orphans, the sick, the rejected of society, let us pray to St Joseph to be Providence for us. How many saints have turned to him! How many people in the history of the Church have found in him a patron, a guardian, a father!

Let us imitate their example, and for this reason, we pray today: Let us pray, all together, to Saint Joseph with the prayer that I have placed at the conclusion of the Letter *Patris corde*, entrusting to him our intentions and, in a special way, the Church that suffers and is in trial. And now, you have in your hands in various language — in four, I think — the prayer; and I think that it will also be on the screen. So together, each one in their own language, let us pray to Saint Joseph.

Hail, guardian of the Redeemer,

Spouse of the 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 to be a father,

and guide us in the path of life.

Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,

and defend us from every evil. Amen.

[1] S. Rituum Congreg., Decr. *Quemadmodum Deus* (8 December 1870): ASS 6 (1870-71), 193; cf. Pius IX, Lett. Ap. *Inclytum Patriarcham* (7 July 1871): *lo. cit.*, 324-327.

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