

A Homily on the Solemnity of St. Joseph, March 19, 2021
by the Rev. John J. McCartney
St. Agnes Cathedral, Rockville Centre, New York

At the end of last year, Pope Francis declared a special Holy Year dedicated to St. Joseph. This “Year of St. Joseph” runs from December 8, 2020, to December 8, 2021, beginning and ending, appropriately enough, on the feast of Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception. The reason Pope Francis called for this special Holy Year was twofold: first, to commemorate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the naming of St. Joseph as Patron of the Catholic Church; and second, because the Holy Father believes that the life, example and spirituality of St. Joseph has important relevance to us and to the times in which we live now.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the Catholic Church and the world were both greatly troubled. As new philosophical doctrines like rationalism and materialism, and political and economic movements like communism and socialism spread across Europe, they brought with them a wave of anti-Catholic persecution coupled with a crisis of faith.

Because of this, Pope Blessed Pius IX decided that a spiritual solution was called for: it was time to invoke the spiritual protection and the heavenly intercession of the saint whom God had chosen to watch over and care for His Son, Jesus, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. That saint, of course, was the humble carpenter from Nazareth named Joseph.

And so, on December 8, 1870, the Holy Father declared:

Because of this sublime dignity which God conferred on his most faithful servant, the Church has always most highly honored and praised blessed Joseph ... And now therefore, when in these most troublesome times the Church is beset by enemies on every side, and is weighed down by calamities so heavy that ungodly men assert that the gates of hell have at length prevailed against her ... Pope Pius IX, in order to entrust himself and all the faithful to the Patriarch St. Joseph’s most powerful patronage, has chosen to comply with the [bishops’] desire and has solemnly declared him Patron of the Catholic Church.¹

And now, one hundred and fifty years later, the present Holy Father seems to have come to much the same conclusion. The times in which we live are equally troubled and call for a new appreciation of the life and example of this great saint as a prescription for the sicknesses of the modern world.

St. Joseph makes only a handful of appearances in Sacred Scripture at the beginning of Our Lord’s life and departs the pages of the Bible without ever uttering a single word. And yet, the Church has always said that after Our Lady, no saint deserves greater reverence and devotion than St.

¹The Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Quemadmodum Deus*, 8 December 1870. [Online.] Available: www.stjsa.org/pope-pius-ix-and-st-joseph. [Accessed 18 March 2021.]

Joseph. If that sounds like a rather bold statement, remember that it was the belief of holy individuals like St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Alphonsus Liguori, all of them Doctors of the Church. And this reverence for St. Joseph was held by many more saints, blessed and popes besides.

Whenever God chooses someone to live a special vocation, He gives that person sufficient grace that corresponds to the difficulty of the task. What graces then, did St. Joseph need to receive in order to fulfill his dual vocations as spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary and as the earthly father of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity?

St. Joseph was called to live an exterior life, and an interior life. In his exterior life, he was the husband of Mary and the father of Jesus. He was a carpenter, a man who made his modest living with his hands and his creativity. He was a citizen of the community of Nazareth and would have been a faithful member of the local synagogue. With his family he made regular trips to Jerusalem for the major religious feasts. In this exterior life, Joseph would have appeared as a good, ordinary man of his time and place. That was essential, you see, because the exterior life had to conceal the interior life. It had to disguise the extraordinary beneath the ordinary, because God had decided to hide in plain sight among His people until He was ready to reveal Himself. That was crucial to God's plan, and that was St. Joseph's unique role.

As the Archangel Gabriel made the Annunciation of the Virgin Birth to Mary, so too the angel had to make a similar Annunciation to Joseph. Appearing to Joseph in a dream, the angel told him that he was not to be afraid to take Mary, who had been so favored by God, into his home and as his wife. Joseph was not an obstacle to God's plan but was an essential part of it. Mary needed a husband to love her, and protect her and provide for her, and to assist her in living out her vocation to be the Mother of God. Jesus, God Himself, would need an earthly father to love Him, and protect Him and provide for Him, but also to teach Him, in His human nature, how to be a man. In the same way that our salvation could not have been accomplished without Mary's "yes", neither could it have been accomplished without Joseph's "yes" as well. Together these three would make up an earthly Trinity of persons, in the little family that we call "Holy".

The interior life of Joseph is rather hidden from us. We do, however, get some glimpses of it from the few stories we have in Scripture. Joseph responds "immediately" to every request and instruction by God. In so doing, he is a man of actions, not words. What life was like in the home of the Holy Family we do not know. Yet we do know that it must have been very important to our Lord. For each and every year he gave to all of us through His public ministry, He gave ten years to Mary and Joseph at home. Although he would never live to hear his Son preach on the hillside to thousands, or see the miraculous cures too numerous to count, or be present to comfort his wife and his Son at the foot of the Cross, Joseph lived continuously in the Real Presence of God for years. His life could truly be said to be one of perpetual adoration. He would have been called on to make many sacrifices for his family, but sacrifices are not hard when love is great. Living daily in the presence of God Incarnate and the Immaculate Conception would have been both a challenge and an incomparable blessing. It would have required an intense and profound interior spiritual life.

In 1909, Pope St. Pius X approved the Litany of St. Joseph. In that prayer, St. Joseph is invoked twenty-four times under different titles. Six of those refer to personal qualities of St. Joseph himself. It is interesting to see how St. Joseph from his place in history stands in dramatic counterpoint to our world and our times: he is a just man, against our world racked with injustice; he is chaste when our time is obsessed with impurity; he is prudent when our world is rash and impatient; he is courageous as we are paralyzed by fear; he is obedient when our time worships rebellion; he is faithful when ours is a time of faithlessness, infidelity and inconstancy.

But make no mistake. The world was all those things during the lifetime of St. Joseph as well. The qualities that he possessed by God's grace were as unusual in his times as they are in ours. But as they were the solution to the problems of his times, so they are the solution to the problems of our times as well.

My brothers and sisters, if you look around you and read the signs of the times, you could well become discouraged or even succumb to fear. And that is why, in troubled times like ours we need our spiritual father and Patron of the Church to teach us what Pope St. John Paul II called "St. Joseph's way."² It calls us to reject the temptations of the world, which promise happiness and freedom, but which always only deliver misery and spiritual slavery.

So, let us in this Holy Year go to Joseph. Let us ask St. Joseph to be our teacher in prayer and in faith. Let us ask for his guidance to show us how to lead by example rather than words. Pray to him, and ask for his guidance and protection for yourselves, your families and for our Church. Imitate St. Joseph in his virtues: justice, chasteness, prudence, courage, obedience and faithfulness.

St. Joseph, patron of men, of husbands and fathers, pray for us! St. Joseph, patron of workers, pray for us! St. Joseph, protector and guardian of families, pray for us! St. Joseph, patron and defender of the Universal Catholic Church, pray for us!

²Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos*, ¶17, 15 August 1989. [Online]. Available: www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_15081989_redemptoris-custos.html. [Accessed 18 March 2021].