

## WITH A FATHER'S HEART

Last December, Pope Francis issued the Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde (With a Father's Heart)*. That's how St. Joseph loved Jesus, the incarnate Son of God entrusted to his care. The Letter describes several characteristics that Francis sees in Joseph and that serve as a model to all fathers in fulfilling their vocation of parenthood.

The Gospels tell us very little about Joseph – he was of the House of David, a carpenter betrothed to Mary. He was present in the life of the child Jesus, although his only role in Luke's Gospel seems to be accompanying Mary. Luke mentions his name four times: describing Mary as his betrothed, going with Mary to Bethlehem for the census, being found with Mary by the shepherds looking for the newborn child, and in a genealogy listing. Matthew's Gospel describes him as a "righteous man" and gives him a more active role, receiving angelic messages four times in dreams: to take Mary into his home because her child was conceived through the Holy Spirit, and to name the child Jesus; to flee to Egypt because Herod wanted to kill the Child; to return to Israel now that Herod was dead; and to avoid Judea because Herod's son ruled there. In each case, Joseph heeded God's message and acted to protect Mary and Jesus.

Joseph was no doubt a tender and loving father, for he saw in the Scriptures how God had cared for his people: "*When Israel was a child, I loved him ... It was I who taught Ephraim how to walk, who took them in my arms; ... I fostered them like those who raise an infant to their cheeks; I bent down to feed them.*" (Hosea 11:1, 3-4) Joseph would have done likewise with the child Jesus, becoming the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father.

Joseph was obedient to God's will. Each time God's messenger appears in a dream, Joseph acts as needed to protect Mary and Jesus. Luke's Gospel says that Jesus' parents observed all the prescriptions of the Law. As Jesus grew, Joseph showed him the importance of putting himself in God's service.

Joseph was accepting and respectful of Mary. Even without seeing the bigger picture of God's plan, he was going to protect Mary's good name and dignity when he found out she was pregnant. Then, after being enlightened by God's messenger, he willingly took her into his home and became her faithful companion through their various events with young Jesus. Even when he didn't get full explanations for the unexpected happenings in their lives, he accepted them, living with them and through them.

Like Joseph, we can receive from God the strength needed to accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments. Like him, we can respond with hope and courage, open to the deeper meaning in our lives. "*We know that all things work together for good, for those who love God.*" (Romans 8:28)

*“Joseph’s attitude encourages us to accept and welcome others as they are, without exception, and to show special concern for the weak, for God chooses what is weak. ... He is the “Father of orphans and protector of widows” (Ps 68:6), who commands us to love the stranger in our midst. I like to think that it was from Saint Joseph that Jesus drew inspiration for the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father.”*

Joseph was creatively courageous – faced with challenges, he did not give up, but trusted that God would guide his actions. No room in the inn? Find some sort of shelter, even a stable. Herod threatens the Child? Don’t wait until dawn – get up and head for Egypt in the middle of the night. Francis notes, *“the carpenter of Nazareth .. was able to turn a problem into a possibility by trusting always in divine providence. If at times God seems not to help us, surely this does not mean that we have been abandoned, but instead are being trusted to plan, to be creative, and to find solutions ourselves.”*

When the Holy Family was in Egypt, they needed to find food, shelter, and employment. Like so many migrants today, they risked their lives to escape misfortune. Francis adds: *“I consider Saint Joseph the special patron of all those forced to leave their native lands because of war, hatred, persecution and poverty.”*

Joseph was a working father, a carpenter who earned an honest living to provide for his family. From him, Jesus learned the value and dignity of human labor.

*“Work is a means of participating in the work of salvation, an opportunity to hasten the coming of the Kingdom, to develop our talents and abilities, and to put them at the service of society and fraternal communion. It becomes an opportunity for the fulfillment not only of oneself, but also of that primary cell of society which is the family. A family without work is particularly vulnerable to difficulties, tensions, estrangement and even break-up. How can we speak of human dignity without working to ensure that everyone is able to earn a decent living.”*

We can pray for St. Joseph the Worker to help us create conditions so that every person has employment with a just, living wage.

Finally, Joseph did not make himself the center of his family. His focus was on Jesus and Mary. In accepting the responsibility to raise Jesus, he wasn’t possessive, but enabling, teaching Jesus to discern God’s will for him and respond to it.

*“Being a father entails introducing children to life and reality. Not holding them back, being overprotective or possessive, but rather making them capable of deciding for themselves, enjoying freedom and exploring new possibilities.”*

Fathers can’t live their children’s lives, but must prepare them for independence, to follow God’s call as they experience it. A father who’s no longer needed is a success. Every father should be a “sign” pointing to a greater one – the heavenly Father of us all.