

Imitating the Virtues of St. Joseph, the Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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Introduction

Good evening and welcome to this presentation. I wish to sincerely thank all of you for taking time to attend this presentation. I wish to appreciate Margarita Prinz, and all the members of the Adult Faith Formation of St. Michael's Church, for ensuring that we have this annual program, despite the current transition at St. Michael's. I would like to thank Fr. Leo Wleczyk and Fr. Jim Lynes through whom I have become part of St. Michael's and St. Jerome. I wish to extend my best wishes and regards to Fr. Dwight Canizares as he begins his ministry here at St. Michael's Church.

It is not often that St. Joseph is the subject of reflection and devotion in the Church. Hence, it is exhilarating to have our presentation this year on St. Joseph, the spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Just as Christians are called to imitate the Blessed Virgin Mary, it is also important to imitate St. Joseph, because of his humble and unique role in God's plan of salvation. Oftentimes, St. Joseph is forgotten. As we continually honor the Blessed Virgin Mary, it is necessary to also cultivate devotion to St. Joseph.

This paper examines the life of St. Joseph, with emphasis on his obedience to the will of God. It then highlights devotion to St. Joseph in the Church. It further urges all Christians to emulate the sterling virtues and qualities of St. Joseph, especially his obedience to God's will.

St. Joseph in the Scriptures

The much we know about St. Joseph in the scriptures comes to us from the early chapters of the Gospels of Matthew (1-2) and Luke (1-2). Not much is known of St. Joseph from extra-biblical literature. Joseph was not mentioned during the public life and ministry of Jesus Christ, because he was believed to have died by then. The scriptures clearly show that Joseph played a pivotal role in the infancy of Jesus, and safely guarded and protected the baby Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Joseph was entrusted with the vocation of foster father of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Luke 4:23). The contemporaries of Jesus regarded Joseph as the legal father of Jesus, though the Gospels make it abundantly clear that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

St. Joseph: a model of obedience to God's will (Matthew 1:18-25)

This is the passage that reveals Joseph's obedience to God's will, just as the passage on the Annunciation of the Lord in Luke 1:26-38 reveals Mary's obedience to God's will. This passage tells us that Mary was betrothed to Joseph. For the Jewish people, betrothal was a serious and formal engagement ceremony, which gave the engaged couple the legal rights of husband and wife. However, after the engagement ceremony, the couple did not live together, and did not have sexual relations, until after the public celebration of the actual wedding ceremony a year later. It was only after the public wedding that the young woman would move to her husband's home. The betrothal was so strongly binding that it could only be formally broken through the process of a divorce.

The engaged couple were officially known as husband and wife, although they had no rights of man and wife. And if a man died after the betrothal, the woman was referred to as *a virgin who is a widow*. The betrothal took place when the girl was about thirteen years old. It was after the betrothal that Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant. Unknown to Joseph was that Mary was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scriptures calls Joseph ‘a just man,’ ‘an upright man,’ ‘a righteous man’ (Matthew 1:19). Joseph as a ‘just man’ means that he was conscientious in the observance of the Law; hence he would not want to have anything to do with a woman, who supposedly committed adultery. Joseph being ‘an upright man’ decided to divorce Mary quietly. As ‘an upright man’ who followed the Law, Joseph was required to expose Mary publicly as adulterous, who became pregnant after their engagement when he had no sexual relations with her. This was because, “Conjugal infidelity on the part of the betrothed woman was regarded as adultery in the strict sense” (New Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume 7, p. 1107). According to the Jewish Law, Mary would have been punished by stoning like any other Jewish woman who committed adultery as prescribed in the Law (Deuteronomy 22:20-21, 23-24). However, Joseph chose to divorce Mary quietly; *this is the type of divorce that the reason was not given*. This shows the goodness and kindness of Joseph.

The next stage belonged to God after Joseph had exhausted his options. It was now time for God to show Joseph what Divine Providence can do. It was when Joseph was still pondering over this serious matter of divorcing Mary that the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and revealed to him that Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and would give birth to a son who would save the world. The angel asked Joseph to take Mary as his wife and Joseph obeyed God: “When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife home” (Matthew 1:24). This means Joseph completed the public wedding ceremony and took Mary home as his wife. This underscores Joseph’s obedience to God’s will. Joseph was a faithful man, and a man of great humility too. St. Joseph received Mary with Jesus in her womb into his home. He facilitated the coming of Jesus into the world and into our lives as our Savior. St. Joseph is a model of openness and trust in God.

St. Joseph played a pivotal role in the coming of Christ into the world. He cared for Mary during her pregnancy and helped to bring Christ into the world by being there for Mary. Like the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph occupies a pre-eminent position in our salvation history. He responded positively to God’s will in his life to become the legal father of Jesus. Essentially, St. Joseph is second in holiness and dignity only to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Joseph also played a pivotal role in the infancy of Jesus and safely guarded and protected the baby Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Joseph was entrusted with the vocation of foster father of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Luke 4:23). Joseph was the guardian and protector of Mary and Jesus.

Joseph, the guardian and protector of Mary and Jesus

Furthermore, Joseph responded faithfully to God’s communication by an angel through dreams. He always did what God asked him to do. He always did the will of God. He did not complain. He was there for Mary and the baby Jesus. For example, Joseph took Mary and the child Jesus and escaped Herod’s plan to kill Jesus by fleeing to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). Joseph returned to Nazareth from Egypt as directed by the angel of the Lord (Matthew 2:19-23).

Joseph did not utter a word in the scriptures. But his actions spoke volumes. He was always present at the background protecting Mary and Jesus. When Jesus, as a boy, was found in the Temple after he had been missing for three days, it was Mary who spoke and not Joseph. Mary said to Jesus: “My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you” (Luke 2:48). We should bear in mind that the Jewish culture of that time was a patriarchal culture. Yet, Joseph was content to be at the background supporting Mary and protecting her. Thus, married men should learn from the humility and simplicity of St. Joseph, by being there for their wives and supporting them, even if it means being in the background.

Devotion to the noble St. Joseph, spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary

St. Joseph occupies a pre-eminent position in our salvation history. He responded positively to God’s will in his life to become the legal father of Jesus. Essentially, St. Joseph is second in holiness and dignity only to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In his description of St. Joseph, Pope Leo XIII noted on August 15, 1889, there “arise all his dignity, grace, holiness and glory.... Since the bond of marriage existed between Joseph and the Blessed Virgin, there can be no doubt that more than any other person he approached that supereminent dignity by which the Mother of God is raised far above all created natures” (New Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume 7, p. 1110).

St. Joseph is invoked in the Litany of St. Joseph as the patron saint of workmen, families, virgins, the sick, and the dying. In recent times in the Church, St. Joseph, because he was a carpenter and artisan “has been popularly designated as the patron of real estate, whose intercession is widely sought in the setting of houses” (The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia. Revised and Expanded Version, p. 446). In 1870 AD, Pope Pius IX declared St. Joseph as the patron saint of the Universal Church. St. Joseph is also specifically honored on May 1 as the patron saint of workers.

The Church mandated few years ago that St. Joseph’s name should be inserted in all the Eucharistic Prayers of the Church, immediately after the Blessed Virgin Mary: For example, in the Second Eucharistic prayer: “Have mercy on us all, we pray, that with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, *with blessed Joseph her spouse*, with the blessed Apostles.....” (Roman Missal: Second Eucharistic Prayer).

Imitating the virtues of St. Joseph

The sterling virtues and qualities of St. Joseph are worth imitating by all Christians. As indicated above, St. Joseph’s obedience to God’s will in all circumstances clearly stands out in his life. Essentially, St. Joseph is like the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is a model of saying ‘yes’ to God’s will. Both Mary and Joseph are models of obedience to God’s will. One of the ways of growing spiritually as a Christian is by yielding our wills to the will of God. Spiritual renewal enables us to be conformed more and more to the will of God in our lives. St. Joseph is a shining example of conforming to God’s will. Like St. Joseph, we should always strive to embrace God’s will in our life.

As Christians, a consistent life of prayer should enable us to constantly conform to God’s will. In our prayers, we should dispose ourselves to the will of God. Prayer should help us to bend our wills to God’s will. It should not be the other way around; it is not God who should bend to our

will. The fruit of prayer is to dispose ourselves to the will of God in our lives. The will of God is always for our good and peace.

Both St. Joseph and our Blessed Mother did not fully understand everything God was asking them to do, yet, they submitted to God's will. Mary replied to the angel during the Annunciation of the Lord: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Joseph did not speak in the scriptures, but his actions spoke volumes, particularly with regard to doing the will of God. For our part, we may not always understand some of the things that happen in our lives; we may not understand why God has not answered our prayers despite our fidelity to God; sometimes we feel that God has abandoned us; other times we feel God does not care about us, etc. Yet, like St. Joseph and our Blessed Mother, we should always entrust ourselves to the will of God. Things might become clearer sometime in the future. Like St. Paul we should say, "I know in whom I have put my trust" (2 Timothy 1:12). Like St. Joseph, we should keep on doing the will of God in all the circumstances of our lives.

Other ways of imitating St. Joseph

St. Joseph gave a home to Mary and Jesus. If not for St. Joseph, Mary would have been subjected to ridicule and shame as an unwed mother. Despite his initial struggle and resistance, St. Joseph opened his heart and home to receive Mary and Jesus. In the eyes of the people, St. Joseph was the real father of Jesus. The people did not always know that he was the foster father of Jesus. We see the disparaging remark of the people of Nazareth: "This is the carpenter's son, surely?" (Matthew 5:55).

It is worth asking ourselves individually:

- Can I open the door of my heart and home today to another person?
- Can I become a foster parent to a child today?
- Can I adopt one child from the orphanage?
- Can I use my God-given resources to give education to an indigent child?
- Can I offer guardian and protection to a child today?
- Can I make a difference in the life of an indigent unwed mother?
- Can I open my home to receive an unwed pregnant teenage mother?
- Do I show a *holier than thou attitude* towards unwed pregnant mothers?
- Am I judgmental of unwed mothers?
- Am I ready to accept if God should call me today to be like St. Joseph?

Evidently, these are serious questions worth pondering. These questions are at the heart of the Christian life.

Emulating the silence of St. Joseph

The silence of St. Joseph is also worth emulating. As noted above, Joseph did not utter in word in the scripture, but he was always there. He was the head of the household of the Holy Family, and yet, not a word of his was recorded in the scriptures. His wife, Mary, was the outspoken one. But Joseph was always there to support her. Humanly speaking, one might say that Joseph's role was secondary, while his wife Mary had the prominent and exalted position. But Joseph showed that rare strength of character in a patriarchal culture, by always supporting his wife. Joseph was silent, and yet very strong and active. Perhaps, we should realize that we do not always have to speak. We should strive to embrace silence in prayer. We should also endeavor to embrace silence and restraint despite the urge to speak.

There are moments in life when our presence speaks volume more than words. For example, one of the best ways to condole with those who grieve and mourn the death of their loved one is by presence and silence. Our presence speaks volume more than words. Silence and comforting presence should be preferred to the tendency to preach to those who are bereaved. Many people feel that they must say something by way of advice or preaching. But as such moments, one should embrace the virtue of silence and presence. One should say very little and be more present. Our presence should speak more than our words. And for those of us who like to talk much, we should ask for the intercession of St. Joseph for the grace to be silent when necessary.

- Other sterling virtues of St. Joseph include his fidelity, uprightness, humility, simplicity, honesty, and trust in God. These virtues are worth emulating by all Christians.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, St. Joseph is a great source of inspiration for all Christians. He accepted the role God assigned to him in God's plan of salvation. One can say that Joseph's vocation was a silent and quiet one. He was not visible but more of a behind the scene man. However, he became great by accepting and doing what God wanted of him. Thus, it is fitting that the Church honors St. Joseph with a Solemnity (March 19). Let us join the universal Church in honoring St. Joseph.

May this upright man, the foster father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, intercede for us both now and at the hour of our death! Amen.

Thank you for listening and God bless you.

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