

APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION  
**REDEMPTORIS CUSTOS**



OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF  
**JOHN PAUL II**

ON THE PERSON AND MISSION OF SAINT  
JOSEPH IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST AND OF  
THE CHURCH.

*To Bishops, To Priests and Deacons, To Men  
and Women Religious And to all the Lay  
Faithful.*

## INTRODUCTION

1. "Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took his wife" (cf. *Mt* 1 :24).

Inspired by the Gospel, the Fathers of the Church from the earliest centuries stressed that just as St. Joseph took loving care of Mary and gladly dedicated himself to Jesus Christ's upbringing,<sup>1</sup> he likewise watches over and protects Christ's Mystical Body, that is, the Church, of which the Virgin Mary is the exemplar and model.

On the occasion of the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam Pluries*,<sup>2</sup> and in line with the veneration given to St. Joseph over the centuries, I wish to offer for your consideration, dear brothers, and sisters, some reflections concerning him "into whose custody God entrusted his most precious treasures."<sup>3</sup> I gladly fulfill this pastoral duty so that all may grow in devotion to the Patron of the Universal Church and in love for the Savior whom he served in such an exemplary manner.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, IV, 23, 1 : S. Ch. 100/2, pp. 692-694.

<sup>2</sup> Leo XIII, Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam pluries* (August 15, 1889) : *Leonis XIII P.M. Acta*, IX (1890), pp. 175-182.

<sup>3</sup> *Sacror. Rituum Congreg., Decr. Quemadmodum Deus* (December 8, 1870) : *Pii IX P.M. Acta*, pars I, vol. V, p. 282 ; *Pius IX, Apostolic Letter Inclytum Patriarcham* (July 7, 1871) : loc. cit., pp. 331-335.

In this way the whole Christian people not only will turn to St. Joseph with greater fervor and invoke his patronage with trust, but also will always keep before their eyes his humble, mature way of serving and of "taking part" in the plan of salvation.<sup>4</sup>

I am convinced that by reflection upon the way that Mary's spouse shared in the divine mystery, the Church - on the road towards the future with all of humanity - will be enabled to discover ever anew her own identity within this redemptive plan, which is founded on the mystery of the Incarnation.

This is precisely the mystery in which Joseph of Nazareth "shared" like no other human being except Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Word. He shared in it with her ; he was involved in the same salvific event ; he was the guardian of the same love, through the power of which the eternal Father "destined us to be his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1 :5).

## I THE GOSPEL PORTRAIT

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. St. John Chrysostom, In Matth. Hom. V, 3 : PG 57, 57f. The Fathers of the Church and the Popes, on the basis of their common name, also saw in Joseph of Egypt a prototype of Joseph of Nazareth, inasmuch as the former foreshadowed in some way the ministry and greatness of the latter, who was guardian of God the Father's most precious treasures-the Incarnate Word and his most holy Mother : cf., for example, St. Bernard, Super "Missus est," Hom. II, 16 : S. Bernardi Opera, Ed. Cist., IV, 33f. ; Leo XIII, Encyclical Epistle Quamquam pluries (August 15, 1889) : loc. cit., p. 179.

## *Marriage to Mary*

2. "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" (Mt 1 :20-21).

In these words we find the core of biblical truth about St. Joseph ; they refer to that moment in his life to which the Fathers of the Church make special reference.

The Evangelist Matthew explains the significance of this moment while also describing how Joseph lived it. However, in order to understand fully both its content and context, it is important to keep in mind the parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke. In Matthew we read : "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" (Mt 1 :18). However, the origin of Mary's pregnancy "of the Holy Spirit" is described more fully and explicitly in what Luke tells us about the annunciation of Jesus' birth : "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David ; and the virgin's name was Mary" (Lk 1 :26-27). The angel's greeting : "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1 :28) created an inner turmoil in Mary

and also moved her to reflect. Then the messenger reassured the Virgin and at the same time revealed God's special plan for her : "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High ; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David" (Lk 1 :30-32).

A little earlier the Gospel writer had stated that at the moment of the Annunciation, Mary was "betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David." The nature of this "marriage" is explained indirectly when Mary, after hearing what the messenger says about the birth of the child, asks, "How can this be, since I do not know man?" (Lk 1 :34) The angel responds : "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you ; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Lk 1 :35). Although Mary is already "wedded" to Joseph, she will remain a virgin, because the child conceived in her at the Annunciation was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

At this point Luke's text coincides with Matthew 1 :18 and serves to explain what we read there. If, after her marriage to Joseph, Mary is found to be with child of the Holy Spirit," this fact corresponds to all that the Annunciation

means, in particular to Mary's final words : "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1 :38). In response to what is clearly the plan of God, with the passing of days and weeks Mary's "pregnancy" is visible to the people and to Joseph ; she appears before them as one who must give birth and carry within herself the mystery of motherhood.

3. In these circumstances, "her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly" (Mt 1 :19). He did not know how to deal with Mary's "astonishing" motherhood. He certainly sought an answer to this unsettling question, but above all he sought a way out of what was for him a difficult situation. "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'" (Mt 1 :20-21).

There is a strict parallel between the "annunciation" in Matthew's text and the one in Luke. The divine messenger introduces Joseph to the mystery of Mary's motherhood. While remaining a virgin, she who by law is his "spouse" has become a mother through the power of the Holy Spirit. And when the Son in Mary's womb

comes into the world, he must receive the name Jesus. This was a name known among the Israelites and sometimes given to their sons. In this case, however, it is the Son who, in accordance with the divine promise, will bring to perfect fulfillment the meaning of the name Jesus-Yehos ua' - which means "God saves."

Joseph is visited by the messenger as "Mary's spouse," as the one who in due time must give this name to the Son to be born of the Virgin of Nazareth who is married to him. It is to Joseph, then, that the messenger turns, entrusting to him the responsibilities of an earthly father with regard to Mary's Son.

"When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary as his wife" (cf. Mt 1 :24). He took her in all the mystery of her motherhood. He took her together with the Son who had come into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way he showed a readiness of will like Mary's with regard to what God asked of him through the angel.

## II THE GUARDIAN OF THE MYSTERY OF GOD

4. When, soon after the Annunciation, Mary went to the house of Zechariah to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, even as she offered her greeting she heard the words of Elizabeth, who was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 1 :41).

Besides offering a salutation which recalled that of the angel at the Annunciation, Elizabeth also said : "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1 :45). These words were the guiding thought of the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, in which I sought to deepen the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which stated the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully preserved her union with her Son even to the cross,"<sup>5</sup> "preceding"<sup>6</sup> all those who follow Christ by faith.

Now at the beginning of this pilgrimage, the faith of Mary meets the faith of Joseph. If Elizabeth said of the Redeemer's Mother, "blessed is she who believed," in a certain sense this blessedness can be referred to Joseph as well, since he responded positively to the word of God when it was communicated to him at the decisive moment. While it is true that Joseph did not respond to the angel's "announcement" in the same way as Mary, he "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took his wife." What he did is the clearest "obedience of faith" (cf. Rom 1 :5 ; 16 :26 ; 2 Cor 10 :5-6).

One can say that what Joseph did united him in an altogether special way to the faith of Mary.

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<sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 63.



He accepted as truth coming from God the very thing that she had already accepted at the Annunciation. The Council teaches: "'The obedience of faith' must be given to God as he reveals himself. By this obedience of faith man freely commits himself entirely to God, making 'the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals,' and willingly assenting to the revelation given by him."<sup>7</sup> This statement, which touches the very essence of faith, is perfectly applicable to Joseph of Nazareth.

5. Therefore he became a unique guardian of the mystery "hidden for ages in God" (Eph 3 :9), as did Mary, in that decisive moment which St. Paul calls "the fullness of time," when "God sent forth his Son, born of woman...to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4 :4-5). In the words of the Council: "It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will (cf. Eph 1 :9). His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and become sharers in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2 :18 ; 2 Pt 1 4)."<sup>8</sup>

Together with Mary, Joseph is the first guardian of this divine mystery. Together with

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<sup>7</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Mary, and in relation to Mary, he shares in this final phase of God's self-revelation in Christ and he does so from the very beginning. Looking at the gospel texts of both Matthew and Luke, one can also say that Joseph is the first to share in the faith of the Mother of God and that in doing so he supports his spouse in the faith of the divine annunciation. He is also the first to be placed by God on the path of Mary's "pilgrimage of faith." It is a path along which - especially at the time of Calvary and Pentecost - Mary will precede in a perfect way.<sup>9</sup>

6. The path that was Joseph's-his pilgrimage of faith - ended first, that is to say, before Mary stood at the foot of the cross on Golgotha, and before the time after Christ returned to the Father, when she was present in the upper room on Pentecost, the day the Church was manifested to the world, having been born in the power of the Spirit of truth. Nevertheless, Joseph's way of faith moved in the same direction : it was totally determined by the same mystery, of which he, together with Mary, had been the first guardian. The Incarnation and Redemption constitute an organic and indissoluble unity, in which "the plan of revelation is realized by words and deeds which are intrinsically bound up with each

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 63.

other."<sup>10</sup> Precisely because of this unity, Pope John XXIII, who had a great devotion to St. Joseph, directed that Joseph's name be inserted in the Roman Canon of the Mass-which is the perpetual memorial of redemption - after the name of Mary and before the apostles, popes and martyrs.<sup>11</sup>

*The Service of Fatherhood*

7. As can be deduced from the gospel texts, Joseph's marriage to Mary is the juridical basis of his fatherhood. It was to assure fatherly protection for Jesus that God chose Joseph to be Mary's spouse. It follows that Joseph's fatherhood - a relationship that places him as close as possible to Christ, to whom every election and predestination is ordered (cf. Rom 8 :28-29) - comes to pass through marriage to Mary, that is, through the family.

While clearly affirming that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that virginity remained intact in the marriage (cf. Mt 1 :18-25 ; Lk 1 :26-38), the evangelists refer to Joseph as Mary's husband and to Mary as his wife (cf. Mt 1 :16, 18-20, 24 ; Lk 1 :27 ; 2 :5).

And while it is important for the Church to profess the virginal conception of Jesus, it is no

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<sup>10</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Sacred Congregation of Rites, Decree *Novis hisce temporibus* (November 13, 1962) : AAS 54 (1962), p. 873.

less important to uphold Mary's marriage to Joseph, because juridically Joseph's fatherhood depends on it. Thus one understands why the generations are listed according to the genealogy of Joseph : "Why," St. Augustine asks, "should they not be according to Joseph ? Was he not Mary's husband ?... Scripture states, through the authority of an angel, that he was her husband. Do not fear, says the angel, to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was told to name the child, although not born from his seed. She will bear a son, the angel says, and you will call him Jesus. Scripture recognizes that Jesus is not born of Joseph's seed, since in his concern about the origin of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph is told that it is of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, he is not deprived of his fatherly authority from the moment that he is told to name the child. Finally, even the Virgin Mary, well aware that she has not conceived Christ as a result of conjugal relations with Joseph, still calls him Christ's father."<sup>12</sup>

The Son of Mary is also Joseph's Son by virtue of the marriage bond that unites them : "By reason of their faithful marriage both of them deserve to be called Christ's parents, not only his mother, but also his father, who was a parent in the same way that he was the mother's spouse : in

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<sup>12</sup> St. Augustine, Sermo 51, 10, 16 : PL 38, 342.

mind, not in the flesh."<sup>13</sup> In this marriage none of the requisites of marriage were lacking: "In Christ's parents all the goods of marriage were realized—offspring, fidelity, the sacrament: the offspring being the Lord Jesus himself; fidelity, since there was no adultery; the sacrament, since there was no divorce."<sup>14</sup>

Analyzing the nature of marriage, both St. Augustine and St. Thomas always identify it with an "indivisible union of souls," a "union of hearts," with "consent."<sup>15</sup> These elements are found in an exemplary manner in the marriage of Mary and Joseph. At the culmination of the history of salvation, when God reveals his love for humanity through the gift of the Word, it is precisely the marriage of Mary and Joseph that brings to realization in full "freedom" the "spousal gift of self" in receiving and expressing such a love.<sup>16</sup> "In this great undertaking which is the renewal of all things in Christ, marriage—it too purified and renewed—becomes a new reality, a sacrament of the New Covenant. We see that at

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<sup>13</sup> St. Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, I, 11, 12 : PL 44, 421 ; cf. *De consensu evangelistarum*, II, 1, 2 : PL 34, 1071 ; *Contra Faustum*, III, 2 : PL 42, 214.

<sup>14</sup> St. Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, I, 11, 13 : PL 44, 421 ; cf. *Contra Iulianum*, V, 12, 46 : PL 44, 810.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. St. Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, XXIII, 8 : PL 42, 470f. ; *De consensu evangelistarum*, II, 1, 3 : PL 34, 1072 ; *Sermo*, 51, 13, 21 : PL 38, 344f. ; St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 29, a. 2 in conclus.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Discourses of January 9, 16, February 20, 1980 : *Insegnamenti*, III/I (1980), pp. 88-92 ; 148-152 ; 428-431.

the beginning of the New Testament, as at the beginning of the Old, there is a married couple. But whereas Adam and Eve were the source of evil which was unleashed on the world, Joseph and Mary are the summit from which holiness spreads all over the earth. The Savior began the work of salvation by this virginal and holy union, wherein is manifested his all-powerful will to purify and sanctify the family - that sanctuary of love and cradle of life."<sup>17</sup>

How much the family of today can learn from this! "The essence and role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church his bride."<sup>18</sup> This being the case, it is in the Holy Family, the original "Church in miniature (*Ecclesia domestica*),"<sup>19</sup> that every Christian family must be reflected. "Through God's mysterious design, it was in that family that the

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<sup>17</sup> Paul VI, Discourse to the "Equipes Notre-Dame" Movement (May 4, 1970), n. 7 : AAS 62 (1970), p. 431. Similar praise of the Family of Nazareth as a perfect example of domestic life can be found, for example, in Leo XIII, Apostolic Letter *Neminem fugit* (June 14, 1892) ; Leonis XIII PM. Acta, XII (1892), p. 149f. ; Benedict XV, *Motu Proprio Bonum sane* (July 25, 1920) : AAS 12 (1920), pp. 313- 317.

<sup>18</sup> Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), 17 : AAS 74 (1982), p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 49 : loc. cit., p. 140 ; cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Genium*, 11 ; Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11.

Son of God spent long years of a hidden life. It is therefore the prototype and example for all Christian families."<sup>20</sup>

8. St. Joseph was called by God to serve the person and mission of Jesus directly through the exercise of his fatherhood. It is precisely in this way that, as the Church's Liturgy teaches, he "cooperated in the fullness of time in the great mystery of salvation" and is truly a "minister of salvation."<sup>21</sup> His fatherhood is expressed concretely "in his having made his life a service, a sacrifice to the mystery of the Incarnation and to the redemptive mission connected with it ; in having used the legal authority which was his over the Holy Family in order to make a total gift of self, of his life and work ; in having turned his human vocation to domestic love into a superhuman oblation of self, an oblation of his heart and all his abilities into love placed at the service of the Messiah growing up in his house."<sup>22</sup>

In recalling that "the beginnings of our redemption" were entrusted "to the faithful care of Joseph,"<sup>23</sup> the Liturgy specifies that "God placed him at the head of his family, as a faithful and prudent servant, so that with fatherly care he

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<sup>20</sup> Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), 85 : loc. cit., pp. 189f.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. St. John Chrysostom, In *Matth. Hom. V, 3* : PG 57, 57f.

<sup>22</sup> Paul VI, Discourse (March 19, 1966) : *Insegnamenti, IV* (1966), p. 110.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Roman Missal, Collect for the Solemnity of St. Joseph, Husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

might watch over his only begotten Son."<sup>24</sup> Leo XIII emphasized the sublime nature of this mission : "He among all stands out in his august dignity, since by divine disposition he was guardian, and according to human opinion, father of God's Son. Whence it followed that the Word of God was subjected to Joseph, he obeyed him and rendered to him that honor and reverence that children owe to their father."<sup>25</sup>

Since it is inconceivable that such a sublime task would not be matched by the necessary qualities to adequately fulfill it, we must recognize that Joseph showed Jesus "by a special gift from heaven, all the natural love, all the affectionate solicitude that a father's heart can know."<sup>26</sup>

Besides fatherly authority over Jesus, God also gave Joseph a share in the corresponding love, the love that has its origin in the Father "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph 3 :15).

The Gospels clearly describe the fatherly responsibility of Joseph toward Jesus. For salvation-which comes through the humanity of Jesus-is realized in actions which are an everyday part of family life, in keeping with that

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Preface for the Solemnity of St. Joseph, Husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

<sup>25</sup> Leo XIII, Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam pluries* (August 15, 1889) : *loc. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>26</sup> Pius XII, Radio Message to Catholic School Students in the United States of America (February 19, 1958) : AAS 50 (1958), p.174.



"condescension" which is inherent in the economy of the Incarnation. The gospel writers carefully show how in the life of Jesus nothing was left to chance, but how everything took place according to God's predetermined plan. The oft-repeated formula, "This happened, so that there might be fulfilled...", in reference to a particular event in the Old Testament serves to emphasize the unity and continuity of the plan which is fulfilled in Christ.

With the Incarnation, the "promises" and "figures" of the Old Testament become "reality" : places, persons, events and rites interrelate according to precise divine commands communicated by angels and received by creatures who are particularly sensitive to the voice of God. Mary is the Lord's humble servant, prepared from eternity for the task of being the Mother of God. Joseph is the one whom God chose to be the "overseer of the Lord's birth,"<sup>27</sup> the one who has the responsibility to look after the Son of God's "ordained" entry into the world, in accordance with divine dispositions and human laws. All of the so-called "private" or "hidden" life of Jesus is entrusted to Joseph's guardianship.

#### *The Census*

9. Journeying to Bethlehem for the census in obedience to the orders of legitimate authority, Joseph fulfilled for the child the significant task

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<sup>27</sup> Origen, Hom. XIII in Lucam, 7 : S. Ch. 87, pp 214f.

of officially inserting the name "Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth" (cf. Jn 1 :45) in the registry of the Roman Empire. This registration clearly shows that Jesus belongs to the human race as a man among men, a citizen of this world, subject to laws and civil institutions, but also "savior of the world." Origen gives a good description of the theological significance, by no means marginal, of this historical fact : "Since the first census of the whole world took place under Caesar Augustus, and among all the others Joseph too went to register together with Mary his wife, who was with child, and since Jesus was born before the census was completed : to the person who makes a careful examination it will appear that a kind of mystery is expressed in the fact that at the time when all people in the world presented themselves to be counted, Christ too should be counted. By being registered with everyone, he could sanctify everyone ; inscribed with the whole world in the census, he offered to the world communion with himself, and after presenting himself he wrote all the people of the world in the book of the living, so that as many as believed in him could then be written in heaven with the saints of God, to whom be glory and power for ever and ever, Amen."<sup>28</sup>

*The Birth at Bethlehem*

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<sup>28</sup> Origen, Hom. XI in Lucam, 6 : S. Ch. 87, pp. 196f.

10. As guardian of the mystery "hidden for ages in the mind of God," which begins to unfold before his eyes "in the fullness of time," Joseph, together with Mary, is a privileged witness to the birth of the Son of God into the world on Christmas night in Bethlehem. Luke writes : "And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Lk 2 :6-7).

Joseph was an eyewitness to this birth, which took place in conditions that, humanly speaking, were embarrassing-a first announcement of that "self-emptying" (cf. Phil 2 :5-8) which Christ freely accepted for the forgiveness of sins. Joseph also witnessed the adoration of the shepherds who arrived at Jesus' birthplace after the angel had brought them the great and happy news (cf. Lk 2 :15- 16). Later he also witnessed the homage of the magi who came from the East (cf. Mt 2 :11).

#### *The Circumcision*

11. A son's circumcision was the first religious obligation of a father, and with this ceremony (cf. Lk 2 :21) Joseph exercised his right and duty with regard to Jesus.

The principle which holds that all the rites of the Old Testament are a shadow of the reality (cf. Heb 9 :9f ; 10 :1) serves to explain why Jesus

would accept them. As with all the other rites, circumcision too is "fulfilled" in Jesus. God's covenant with Abraham, of which circumcision was the sign (cf. Gn 17 :13), reaches its full effect and perfect realization in Jesus, who is the "yes" of all the ancient promises (cf. 2 Cor 1 :20).

#### *Conferral of the Name*

12. At the circumcision Joseph names the child "Jesus." This is the only name in which there is salvation (cf. Acts 4 :12). Its significance had been revealed to Joseph at the moment of his "annunciation" : "You shall call the child Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (cf. Mt 1 :21). In conferring the name, Joseph declares his own legal fatherhood over Jesus, and in speaking the name he proclaims the child's mission as Savior.

#### *The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple*

13. This rite, to which Luke refers (2 :22ff.), includes the ransom of the first-born and sheds light on the subsequent stay of Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve.

The ransoming of the first-born is another obligation of the father, and it is fulfilled by Joseph. Represented in the first-born is the people of the covenant, ransomed from slavery in order to belong to God. Here too, Jesus - who is the true "price" of ransom (cf. 1 Cor 6 :20 ; 7 :23 ; 1 Pt 1 :19) - not only "fulfills" the Old Testament rite, but at the same time transcends it, since he is

not a subject to be redeemed, but the very author of redemption.

The gospel writer notes that "his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him" (Lk 2 :23), in particular at what Simeon said in his canticle to God, when he referred to Jesus as the "salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" and as a "sign that is spoken against" (cf. Lk 2 :30-34).

#### *The Flight into Egypt*

14. After the presentation in the Temple the Evangelist Luke notes : "And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom ; and the favor of God was upon him" (Lk 2 :39-40).

But according to Matthew's text, a very important event took place before the return to Galilee, an event in which divine providence once again had recourse to Joseph. We read : "Now when [the magi] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, '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). Herod learned from the magi who came from the East about the birth of the

"king of the Jews" (Mt 2 :2). And when the magi departed, he "sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under" (Mt 2 :16). By killing them all, he wished to kill the new-born "king of the Jews" whom he had heard about. And so, Joseph, having been warned in a dream, "took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' " (Mt 2 :14-15 ; cf. Hos 11 :1).

And so Jesus' way back to Nazareth from Bethlehem passed through Egypt. Just as Israel had followed the path of the exodus "from the condition of slavery" in order to begin the Old Covenant, so Joseph, guardian and cooperator in the providential mystery of God, even in exile watched over the one who brings about the New Covenant.

### *Jesus' Stay in the Temple*

15. From the time of the Annunciation, both Joseph and Mary found themselves, in a certain sense, at the heart of the mystery hidden for ages in the mind of God, a mystery which had taken on flesh : "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1 :14). He dwelt among men, within the surroundings of the Holy Family of Nazareth-one of many families in this small town in Galilee, one of the many families of the land of

Israel. There Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom ; and the favor of God was upon him" (Lk 2 :40). The Gospels summarize in a few words the long period of the "hidden" life, during which Jesus prepared himself for his messianic mission. Only one episode from this "hidden time" is described in the Gospel of Luke : the Passover in Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years old. Together with Mary and Joseph, Jesus took part in the feast as a young pilgrim. "And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it" (Lk 2 :43). After a day's journey, they noticed his absence and began to search "among their kinsfolk and acquaintances." "After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions ; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Lk 2 :47). Mary asked : "Son, why have you treated us so ? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously" (Lk 2 :48). The answer Jesus gave was such that "they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them." He had said, "How is it that you sought me ? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house ?" (Lk 2 :49-50)

Joseph, of whom Mary had just used the words "your father," heard this answer. That, after all, is what all the people said and thought :

Jesus was the son (as was supposed) or Joseph" (Lk 3 :23). Nonetheless, the reply of Jesus in the Temple brought once again to the mind of his "presumed father" what he had heard on that night twelve years earlier : "Joseph...do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." From that time onwards he knew that he was a guardian of the mystery of God, and it was precisely this mystery that the twelve- year-old Jesus brought to mind : "I must be in my Father's house."

*The Support and Education of Jesus of Nazareth*

16. The growth of Jesus "in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Lk 2 :52) took place within the Holy Family under the eyes of Joseph, who had the important task of "raising" Jesus, that is, feeding, clothing and educating him in the Law and in a trade, in keeping with the duties of a father.

In the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the Church venerates the memory of Mary the ever Virgin Mother of God and the memory of St. Joseph,<sup>29</sup> because "he fed him whom the faithful must eat as the bread of eternal life."<sup>30</sup>

For his part, Jesus "was obedient to them" (Lk 2 :51), respectfully returning the affection of his "parents." In this way he wished to sanctify

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer I.

<sup>30</sup> Sacror. Rituum Congreg., Decr. Quemadmodum Deus (December 8 1870) : loc. cit., p. 282.



the obligations of the family and of work, which he performed at the side of Joseph.

### III A JUST MAN A HUSBAND

17. In the course of that pilgrimage of faith which was his life, Joseph, like Mary, remained faithful to God's call until the end. While Mary's life was the bringing to fullness of that fiat first spoken at the Annunciation, at the moment of Joseph's own "annunciation" he said nothing ; instead he simply "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (Mt 1 :24). And this first "doing" became the beginning of "Joseph's way." The Gospels do not record any word ever spoken by Joseph along that way. But the silence of Joseph has its own special eloquence, for thanks to that silence we can understand the truth of the Gospel's judgment that he was "a just man" (Mt 1 :19).

One must come to understand this truth, for it contains one of the most important testimonies concerning man and his vocation. Through many generations the Church has read this testimony with ever greater attention and with deeper understanding, drawing, as it were, "what is new and what is old" (Mt 13 :52) from the storehouse of the noble figure of Joseph.

18. Above all, the "just" man of Nazareth possesses the clear characteristics of a husband. Luke refers to Mary as "a virgin betrothed to a

man whose name was Joseph" (Lk 1 :27). Even before the "mystery hidden for ages" (Eph 3 :9) began to be fulfilled, the Gospels set before us the image of husband and wife. According to Jewish custom, marriage took place in two stages : first, the legal, or true marriage was celebrated, and then, only after a certain period of time, the husband brought the wife into his own house. Thus, before he lived with Mary, Joseph was already her "husband." Mary, however, preserved her deep desire to give herself exclusively to God. One may well ask how this desire of Mary's could be reconciled with a "wedding." The answer can only come from the saving events as they unfold, from the special action of God himself. From the moment of the Annunciation, Mary knew that she was to fulfill her virginal desire to give herself exclusively and fully to God precisely by becoming the Mother of God's Son. Becoming a Mother by the power of the Holy Spirit was the form taken by her gift of self : a form which God himself expected of the Virgin Mary, who was "betrothed" to Joseph. Mary uttered her fiat. The fact that Mary was "betrothed" to Joseph was part of the very plan of God. This is pointed out by Luke and especially by Matthew. The words spoken to Joseph are very significant : "Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1 :20).

These words explain the mystery of Joseph's wife : In her motherhood Mary is a virgin. In her, "the Son of the Most High" assumed a human body and became "the Son of Man."

Addressing Joseph through the words of the angel, God speaks to him as the husband of the Virgin of Nazareth. What took place in her through the power of the Holy Spirit also confirmed in a special way the marriage bond which already existed between Joseph and Mary. God's messenger was clear in what he said to Joseph : "Do not fear to take Mary your wife into your home." Hence, what had taken place earlier, namely, Joseph's marriage to Mary, happened in accord with God's will and was meant to endure. In her divine motherhood Mary had to continue to live as "a virgin, the wife of her husband" (cf. Lk 1 :27).

19. In the words of the "annunciation" by night, Joseph not only heard the divine truth concerning his wife's indescribable vocation ; he also heard once again the truth about his own vocation. This "just" man, who, in the spirit of the noblest traditions of the Chosen People, loved the Virgin of Nazareth and was bound to her by a husband's love, was once again called by God to this love.

"Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded him ; he took his wife" into his home (Mt 1 :24) ; what was conceived in Mary

was "of the Holy Spirit." From expressions such as these are we not to suppose that his love as a man was also given new birth by the Holy Spirit? Are we not to think that the love of God which has been poured forth into the human heart through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rm 5 :5) molds every human love to perfection? This love of God also molds-in a completely unique way-the love of husband and wife, deepening within it everything of human worth and beauty, everything that bespeaks an exclusive gift of self, a covenant between persons, and an authentic communion according to the model of the Blessed Trinity.

"Joseph...took his wife ; but he knew her not, until she had borne a son" (Mt 1 :24-25). These words indicate another kind of closeness in marriage. The deep spiritual closeness arising from marital union and the interpersonal contact between man and woman have their definitive origin in the Spirit, the Giver of Life (cf. Jn 6 :63). Joseph, in obedience to the Spirit, found in the Spirit the source of love, the conjugal love which he experienced as a man. And this love proved to be greater than this "just man" could ever have expected within the limits of his human heart.

20. In the Liturgy, Mary is celebrated as "united to Joseph, the just man, by a bond of marital and virginal love."<sup>31</sup> There are really two

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<sup>31</sup> Collectio Missarum de Beata Maria Virgine, 1, "Sancta Maria de Nazareth," Praefatio.

kinds of love here, both of which together represent the mystery of the Church - virgin and spouse - as symbolized in the marriage of Mary and Joseph. "Virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God not only does not contradict the dignity of marriage but presupposes and confirms it. Marriage and virginity are two ways of expressing and living the one mystery of the Covenant of God with his people."<sup>32</sup> the Covenant which is a communion of love between God and human beings.

Through his complete self-sacrifice, Joseph expressed his generous love for the Mother of God, and gave her a husband's "gift of self." Even though he decided to draw back so as not to interfere in the plan of God which was coming to pass in Mary, Joseph obeyed the explicit command of the angel and took Mary into his home, while respecting the fact that she belonged exclusively to God.

On the other hand, it was from his marriage to Mary that Joseph derived his singular dignity and his rights in regard to Jesus. "It is certain that the dignity of the Mother of God is so exalted that nothing could be more sublime ; yet because Mary was united to Joseph by the bond of marriage, there can be no doubt but that Joseph approached as no other person ever could that

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<sup>32</sup> Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), 16 :106. cit., p. 98.

eminent dignity whereby the Mother of God towers above all creatures. Since marriage is the highest degree of association and friendship involving by its very nature a communion of goods, it follows that God, by giving Joseph to the Virgin, did not give him to her only as a companion for life, a witness of her virginity and protector of her honor : he also gave Joseph to Mary in order that he might share, through the marriage pact, in her own sublime greatness."<sup>33</sup>

21. This bond of charity was the core of the Holy Family's life, first in the poverty of Bethlehem, then in their exile in Egypt, and later in the house of Nazareth. The Church deeply venerates this Family, and proposes it as the model of all families. Inserted directly in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Family of Nazareth has its own special mystery. And in this mystery, as in the Incarnation, one finds a true fatherhood : the human form of the family of the Son of God, a true human family, formed by the divine mystery. In this family, Joseph is the father : his fatherhood is not one that derives from begetting offspring ; but neither is it an "apparent" or merely "substitute" fatherhood. Rather, it is one that fully shares in authentic human fatherhood and the mission of a father in the family. This is a consequence of the

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<sup>33</sup> Leo XIII, Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam pluries* (August 15, 1889) : loc. cit., pp. 177f.

hypostatic union : humanity taken up into the unity of the Divine Person of the Word-Son, Jesus Christ. Together with human nature, all that is human, and especially the family - as the first dimension of man's existence in the world - is also taken up in Christ. Within this context, Joseph's human fatherhood was also "taken up" in the mystery of Christ's Incarnation.

On the basis of this principle, the words which Mary spoke to the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple take on their full significance : "Your father and I... have been looking for you." This is no conventional phrase : Mary's words to Jesus show the complete reality of the Incarnation present in the mystery of the Family of Nazareth. From the beginning, Joseph accepted with the "obedience of faith" his human fatherhood over Jesus. And thus, following the light of the Holy Spirit who gives himself to human beings through faith, he certainly came to discover ever more fully the indescribable gift that was his human fatherhood.

#### IV WORK AS AN EXPRESSION OF LOVE

22. Work was the daily expression of love in the life of the Family of Nazareth. The Gospel specifies the kind of work Joseph did in order to support his family : he was a carpenter. This simple word sums up Joseph's entire life. For Jesus, these were hidden years, the years to which

Luke refers after recounting the episode that occurred in the Temple: "And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them" (Lk 2 :51). This "submission" or obedience of Jesus in the house of Nazareth should be understood as a sharing in the work of Joseph. Having learned the work of his presumed father, he was known as "the carpenter's son." If the Family of Nazareth is an example and model for human families, in the order of salvation and holiness, so too, by analogy, is Jesus' work at the side of Joseph the carpenter. In our own day, the Church has emphasized this by instituting the liturgical memorial of St. Joseph the Worker on May 1. Human work, and especially manual labor, receive special prominence in the Gospel. Along with the humanity of the Son of God, work too has been taken up in the mystery of the Incarnation, and has also been redeemed in a special way. At the workbench where he plied his trade together with Jesus, Joseph brought human work closer to the mystery of the Redemption.

23. In the human growth of Jesus "in wisdom, age and grace," the virtue of industriousness played a notable role, since "work is a human good" which "transforms nature" and makes man "in a sense, more human."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (September 14, 1981), 9 : AAS 73 (1981), pp. 599f.



The importance of work in human life demands that its meaning be known and assimilated in order to "help all people to come closer to God, the Creator and Redeemer, to participate in his salvific plan for man and the world, and to deepen...friendship with Christ in their lives, by accepting, through faith, a living participation in his threefold mission as Priest, Prophet and King."<sup>35</sup>

24. What is crucially important here is the sanctification of daily life, a sanctification which each person must acquire according to his or her own state, and one which can be promoted according to a model accessible to all people : "St. Joseph is the model of those humble ones that Christianity raises up to great destinies ;...he is the proof that in order to be a good and genuine follower of Christ, there is no need of great things-it is enough to have the common, simple and human virtues, but they need to be true and authentic."<sup>36</sup>

## V THE PRIMACY OF THE INTERIOR LIFE

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 24 : loc. cit., p. 638. The Popes in recent times have constantly presented St. Joseph as the "model" of workers and laborers ; Cf., for example, Leo XIII, Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam pluries* (August 15, 1889) : loc. cit., p. 180 ; Benedict XV, *Motu proprio Bonum sane* (July 25, 1920) : loc. cit., pp. 314-316 ; Pius XII, Discourse (March 11, 1945), 4 : AAS 37 (1945), p. 72 : Discourse (May 1, 1955) : AAS 47 (1955), p. 406 ; John XXIII, Radio Address (May 1, 1960) : AAS 52 (1960), p. 398.

<sup>36</sup> Paul VI, Discourse (March 19, 1969) : *Insegnamenti*, VII (1969), p. 1268.

25. The same aura of silence that envelops everything else about Joseph also shrouds his work as a carpenter in the house of Nazareth. It is, however, a silence that reveals in a special way the inner portrait of the man. The Gospels speak exclusively of what Joseph "did." Still, they allow us to discover in his "actions" - shrouded in silence as they are - an aura of deep contemplation. Joseph was in daily contact with the mystery "hidden from ages past," and which "dwelt" under his roof. This explains, for example, why St. Teresa of Jesus, the great reformer of the Carmelites, promoted the renewal of veneration to St. Joseph in Western Christianity.

26. The total sacrifice, whereby Joseph surrendered his whole existence to the demands of the Messiah's coming into his home, becomes understandable only in the light of his profound interior life. It was from this interior life that "very singular commands and consolations came, bringing him also the logic and strength that belong to simple and clear souls, and giving him the power of making great decisions-such as the decision to put his liberty immediately at the disposition of the divine designs, to make over to them also his legitimate human calling, his conjugal happiness, to accept the conditions, the responsibility and the burden of a family, but, through an incomparable virginal love, to

renounce that natural conjugal love that is the foundation and nourishment of the family.<sup>37</sup>

This submission to God, this readiness of will to dedicate oneself to all that serves him, is really nothing less than that exercise of devotion which constitutes one expression of the virtue of religion.<sup>38</sup>

27. The communion of life between Joseph and Jesus leads us to consider once again the mystery of the Incarnation, precisely in reference to the humanity of Jesus as the efficacious instrument of his divinity for the purpose of sanctifying man: "By virtue of his divinity, Christ's human actions were salvific for us, causing grace within us, either by merit or by a certain efficacy."<sup>39</sup>

Among those actions, the gospel writers highlight those which have to do with the Paschal Mystery, but they also underscore the importance of physical contact with Jesus for healing (cf. for example, Mk 1 :41), and the influence Jesus exercised upon John the Baptist when they were both in their mothers' wombs (cf. Lk 1 :41-44).

As we have seen, the apostolic witness did not neglect the story of Jesus' birth, his circumcision, his presentation in the Temple, his flight into Egypt and his hidden life in Nazareth.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. : loc. cit., p. 1267.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. St. Thomas, Summa Theol. II-IIae, q. 82, a. 3, ad 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., III, q. 8, a. 1, ad 1.

It recognized the "mystery" of grace present in each of these saving "acts," inasmuch as they all share the same source of love : the divinity of Christ. If through Christ's humanity this love shone on all mankind, the first beneficiaries were undoubtedly those whom the divine will had most intimately associated with itself : Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Joseph, his presumed father.<sup>40</sup>

Why should the "fatherly" love of Joseph not have had an influence upon the "filial" love of Jesus ? And vice versa why should the "filial" love of Jesus not have had an influence upon the "fatherly" love of Joseph, thus leading to a further deepening of their unique relationship ? Those souls most sensitive to the impulses of divine love have rightly seen in Joseph a brilliant example of the interior life.

Furthermore, in Joseph, the apparent tension between the active and the contemplative life finds an ideal harmony that is only possible for those who possess the perfection of charity. Following St. Augustine's well-known distinction between the love of the truth (*caritas veritatis*) and the practical demands of love (*necessitas caritatis*),<sup>41</sup> we can say that Joseph experienced both love of the truth-that pure contemplative

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Haurietis aquas* (May 15, 1956), III : AAS 48 (1956), pp. 329f.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.* II-IIae, q. 182, a. 1, ad 3.

love of the divine Truth which radiated from the humanity of Christ-and the demands of love-that equally pure and selfless love required for his vocation to safeguard and develop the humanity of Jesus, which was inseparably linked to his divinity.

## VI PATRON OF THE CHURCH IN OUR DAY

28. At a difficult time in the Church's history, Pope Pius IX, wishing to place her under the powerful patronage of the holy patriarch Joseph, declared him "Patron of the Catholic Church."<sup>42</sup> For Pius IX this was no idle gesture, since by virtue of the sublime dignity which God has granted to his most faithful servant Joseph, "the Church, after the Blessed Virgin, his spouse, has always held him in great honor and showered him with praise, having recourse to him amid tribulations."<sup>43</sup>

What are the reasons for such great confidence? Leo XIII explained it in this way: "The reasons why St. Joseph must be considered the special patron of the Church, and the Church in turn draws exceeding hope from his care and patronage, chiefly arise from his having been the husband of Mary and the presumed father of Jesus..., Joseph was in his day the lawful and

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Sacror. Rituum Congreg., Decr. Quemadmodum Deus (December 8, 1870) : loc. cit., p.283.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. : loc. cit., pp. 282f.

natural guardian, head and defender of the Holy Family.... It is thus fitting and most worthy of Joseph's dignity that, in the same way that he once kept unceasing holy watch over the family of Nazareth, so now does he protect and defend with his heavenly patronage the Church of Christ."<sup>44</sup>

29. This patronage must be invoked as ever necessary for the Church, not only as a defense against all dangers, but also, and indeed primarily, as an impetus for her renewed commitment to evangelization in the world and to re-evangelization in those lands and nations whereas I wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* - "religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing and...are now put to a hard test."<sup>45</sup> In order to bring the first proclamation of Christ, or to bring it anew wherever it has been neglected or forgotten, the Church has need of special "power from on high" (cf. Lk 24 :49 ; Acts 1 :8) : a gift of the Spirit of the Lord, a gift which is not unrelated to the intercession and example of his saints.

30. Besides trusting in Joseph's sure protection, the Church also trusts in his noble example, which transcends all individual states of

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<sup>44</sup> Leo XIII, Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam pluries* (August 15, 1889) : loc. cit., pp. 177-179.

<sup>45</sup> Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifidele Laici* (December 30, 1988), 34 : AAS 81 (1989), p. 456.

life and serves as a model for the entire Christian community, whatever the condition and duties of each of its members may be.

As the Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council has said, the basic attitude of the entire Church must be that of "hearing the word of God with reverence,"<sup>46</sup> an absolute readiness to serve faithfully God's salvific will revealed in Jesus. Already at the beginning of human redemption, after Mary, we find the model of obedience made incarnate in St. Joseph, the man known for having faithfully carried out God's commands.

Pope Paul VI invited us to invoke Joseph's patronage "as the Church has been wont to do in these recent times, for herself in the first place, with a spontaneous theological reflection on the marriage of divine and human action in the great economy of the Redemption, in which economy the first-the divine one-is wholly sufficient unto itself, while the second-the human action which is ours-though capable of nothing (cf. Jn 15 :5), is never dispensed from a humble but conditional and ennobling collaboration. The Church also calls upon Joseph as her protector because of a profound and ever present desire to reinvigorate

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<sup>46</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 1.

her ancient life with true evangelical virtues, such as shine forth in St. Joseph."<sup>47</sup>

31. The Church transforms these needs into prayer. Recalling that God wished to entrust the beginnings of our redemption to the faithful care of St. Joseph, she asks God to grant that she may faithfully cooperate in the work of salvation ; that she may receive the same faithfulness and purity of heart that inspired Joseph in serving the Incarnate World ; and that she may walk before God in the ways of holiness and justice, following Joseph's example and through his intercession.<sup>48</sup>

One hundred years ago, Pope Leo XIII had already exhorted the Catholic world to pray for the protection of St. Joseph, Patron of the whole Church. The Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam Pluries* appealed to Joseph's "fatherly love...for the child Jesus" and commended to him, as "the provident guardian of the divine Family," "the beloved inheritance which Jesus Christ purchased by his blood." Since that time-as I recalled at the beginning of this Exhortation-the Church has implored the protection of St. Joseph on the basis of "that sacred bond of charity which united him to the Immaculate Virgin Mother of God," and the Church has commended to Joseph all of her

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<sup>47</sup> Paul VI, Discourse (March 19, 1969) : Insegnamenti, VII (1969) p. 1269.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Roman Missal, Collect, Prayer over the Gifts for the Solemnity of St. Joseph, Husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary ; Prayer after Communion from the Votive Mass of St. Joseph.



cares, including those dangers which threaten the human family.

Even today we have many reasons to pray in a similar way : "Most beloved father, dispel the evil of falsehood and sin...graciously assist us from heaven in our struggle with the powers of darkness...and just as once you saved the Child Jesus from mortal danger, so now defend God's holy Church from the snares of her enemies and from all adversity."<sup>49</sup> Today we still have good reason to commend everyone to St. Joseph.

32. It is my heartfelt wish that these reflections on the person of St. Joseph will renew in us the prayerful devotion which my Predecessor called for a century ago. Our prayers and the very person of Joseph have renewed significance for the Church in our day in light of the Third Christian Millennium.

The Second Vatican Council made all of us sensitive once again to the "great things which God has done," and to that "economy of salvation" of which St. Joseph was a special minister. Commending ourselves, then, to the protection of him to whose custody God "entrusted his greatest and most precious treasures,"<sup>50</sup> let us at the same time learn from

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Leo XIII, "Oratio ad Sanctum Iosephum," contained immediately after the text of the Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam pluries* (August 15, 1889)-*Leonis XIII P.M. Acta*, IX (1890), p. 183.

<sup>50</sup> *Sacror Rituum Congreg., Decr. Quemadmodum Deus* (December 8 1870) : loc. cit., p. 282.

him how to be servants of the "economy of salvation." May St. Joseph become for all of us an exceptional teacher in the service of Christ's saving mission, a mission which is the responsibility of each and every member of the Church : husbands and wives, parents, those who live by the work of their hands or by any other kind of work, those called to the contemplative life and those called to the apostolate.

This just man, who bore within himself the entire heritage of the Old Covenant, was also brought into the "beginning" of the New and Eternal Covenant in Jesus Christ. May he show us the paths of this saving Covenant as we stand at the threshold of the next millennium, in which there must be a continuation and further development of the "fullness of time" that belongs the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation of the Word.

May St. Joseph obtain for the Church and for the world, as well as for each of us, the blessing of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

*Given at Rome, in St. Peter's, on August 15 - the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary - in the year 1989, the eleventh of my Pontificate.*

JOHN PAUL II