

St. Joseph: A humble model for all fathers

One of St. Joseph's most devoted followers, St. Peter Julian Eymard, recommends we use the March 19 feast of St. Joseph as an opportunity to seal a devotion to him, saying: "I consecrate myself to you, good St. Joseph, as my spiritual father; I choose you to rule my soul and to teach me the interior life, the life hidden away with Jesus, Mary and yourself." St. Peter Julian is following the recommendation of a faithful devotee of St. Joseph, St. Teresa of Avila, who says, "If a person cannot find anyone to teach him how to pray, let him take this glorious saint for his guide, and he will not lose his way."

But what could this possibly mean? No teaching of St. Joseph is recorded. He is silent in Scripture.

Finding St. Joseph

The journey to find the answer to that question has been a personal one. After years of overlooking him, I discovered St. Joseph later in life by, ironically, noticing he was not being noticed. In our church, there are side altars to the Blessed Virgin, to the Sacred Heart and to St. Joseph. After Mass one Sunday, I noticed that while the first two always had many votive lights burning, there were usually far fewer before St. Joseph.

The inequity of this struck me. After all, St. Joseph was head of the Holy Family! True, his wife was the Mother of God, and his son was God Incarnate – but still, I thought, he was the dad, responsible for his wife and her child, whom he had welcomed as his own, securing their safety, earning their livelihood. He seemed to deserve more respect. I'm a dad, too – was this all projection out of a moment of self-pity?

Whatever the reason, I went to light a candle at his altar so there would at least be one more. Thus, almost accidentally, began my devotion to “this glorious saint.”

About A.D. 112, the martyr Ignatius of Antioch wrote: “Mary’s virginity was hidden from the prince of this world; so was her giving birth; and so was the death of the Lord. All these three secrets, to be revealed at the appropriate time, were brought to pass in the deep silence of God.” Origen of Alexandria, in the next century, commented on this passage from Ignatius, explaining that it was primarily the presence of Joseph that preserved these three secrets until Jesus’ “hour” had come.

Although the Annunciation was only to Mary, it was to Mary as betrothed to Joseph.

Faith in God

Now we are ready to see the true depths of the mystery of St. Joseph, who, Scripture says, is “just.” He is not an unthinking stage prop just taking up space to make things look normal. He was betrothed to Mary, and, perhaps against his better judgment but in obedience to a vision that tells him the babe in Mary’s womb is conceived by the Holy Spirit, he took Mary into his home as his wife, giving up his own chance at natural paternity to be the father of a child about whose very existence he was not even consulted. In other words, the economy of the virginal conception and birth of Jesus, and even his death, are “hidden” in the loving generosity of St. Joseph – hidden from the prince of this world by the only thing he can’t see – self-giving love – because he doesn’t believe in it.

<p>Prayer to St. Joseph</p>



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Dear St. Joseph, you were an ordinary man, a humble carpenter. But you were a prayerful, holy soul, the foster father of Jesus, a model for us all. Please guide me in my own journey through life, and help me be aware of God's specific call to me. Help me to see that in my own life God is calling me to greater things for his glory. Please pray to the Blessed Trinity for me to be granted the graces that I need most. I pray that I can be faithful to my state of life, totally trusting in God's divine providence for me. St. Joseph, pray for all who invoke your aid. If it is in God's holy will, please grant me (here mention your request). Amen.

– From [“Catholic Saints Prayer Book: Moments of Inspiration from Your Favorite Saints,”](#) (OSV, \$8.95).

The generous obedience of St. Joseph to the vision of God is astonishing. No one asked him how he felt about his wife's being consulted on an intimate matter affecting their whole married life, or about raising someone else's child and giving up his own natural paternity for good. But his sacrifice in generous obedience to the will of God became a home in this world for Jesus, his legal son, and Mary, his wife, both treasures of divine initiative.

This act submerges Joseph in the profound “silence of God,” as Ignatius calls it. St. Paul says in Colossians, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). There is something intrinsically “hidden” about the Christian life, and we see the form of this revealed in St. Joseph. His

life, by its very structure, cannot provide an accounting of itself without undoing itself. Joseph has no one to tell his story to, and he exercises a prudential silence about himself. St. Peter Julian writes: "St. Joseph stands out as one of the great men of silence. He observed ... the silence of fidelity in keeping strictly secret the divine mystery of which he was the confidant. Nothing could make him break this secret of God."

A strong father

A mosaic of St. Joseph, commissioned by Pope St. John XXIII and placed over the side altar in St. Peter's Basilica where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, uniquely depicts the warmth and beauty of this saint. In the picture, Joseph is outside, holding the child Jesus in his right arm. Jesus looks about 2 years old. This gives Joseph's figure a look of immense strength, because he manages to hold such a big, active child in one arm with no trouble. In his left hand, he holds his identifying iconic sign, the staff blooming with the lilies of purity. He holds it a little stiffly, as though a neighbor had chanced upon him and asked him to pose for a picture with his son, insisting Joseph hold the staff, too. He is in the middle of taking care of his 2-year-old and someone has asked him to pose. But he tolerantly obliges, picks up the baby and looks at the "camera." His face is calm but hardly grave; rather, even though posing for an annoying family picture, his face seems to take it in stride and seems to radiate happiness. It's a face familiar to any dad.

Here is the hiddenness of St. Joseph, who accepts the utterly common lot of a dad holding his child, without fanfare, though he is holding the Word Incarnate, and could claim glory and fame. Jesus does not pay any attention to the imaginary photographer, but rather seems wholly delighted with his dad, for what on St. Joseph's side is the continuous immolation of self-gift, is on Jesus' side the brilliant radiance, comfort and charity of paternal love, that cloak of invisibility that

gives even the Word of God a genuine childhood and keeps him hidden from the Prince of Darkness until it is time for him to confront him alone, armed only with the love he had learned, in part, from his earthly dad. It is as though he was learning, in a truly human way, from his true and legal human dad, St. Joseph, the dimensions of the generosity of the Eternal One he will later call his Father in a wholly unique way. After all, just like the eternal Father, Joseph “loves the Son and has given everything over to him” (Jn 3:35).

Model of selflessness

Here is St. Teresa again: “I took for my patron and lord the glorious St. Joseph, and recommended myself earnestly to him. ... I cannot call to mind that I have ever asked him at any time for anything which he has not granted.”

I believe that I can say the same thing, though in some cases I have had to grow up a little in order to see it. But isn't that the job of a dad, to help his kids grow up by seeing beyond their childish concerns, even as those concerns are warmly received and not dismissed as merely childish?

Devotion to St. Joseph has shown me why he has so few, comparatively speaking, candles at his altar. It is because he wills it. He has always willed his family to shine beyond himself, deflecting attention from himself to them. Devotion to St. Joseph means that, as the genuine mystery of his person is revealed to us little by little, we grow up to accept the form of the Christian life as, in baptism, a hidden one, a death to the noise of the world and a life in the silence of God that is nothing other than his eternal love.

Thank you, St. Joseph!

John Cavadini is director of the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame.