

150 years after being named patron of the Church, St. Joseph remains vital to the world

This Dec. 8 commemorates 150 years since Blessed Pope Pius IX declared St. Joseph to be patron of the universal Church. At the time, Pius IX wrote that the Church was going through “most troublesome times ... beset by enemies on every side, and ... weighed down by calamities so heavy that ungodly men assert that the gates of hell have at length prevailed against her” and “besought his intercession in times of trouble.” Although it was 1870, the declaration could have been written today. Perhaps what is old is new again, or maybe it’s just that there is nothing new under the sun. Either way, St. Joseph is a patron for our times, and this anniversary should not go unmarked.

More important than marking the anniversary, however, is the opportunity to contemplate the ways in which St. Joseph’s witness and intercession can be most fruitful and effective at this point in our history. St. Joseph, as our patron, keeps us safe by showing us the way. Because our own cooperation with God’s will is necessary for our salvation, St. Joseph’s witness of his own cooperation with God is a model the Church needs right now. At a time when the domestic Church needs to be strengthened, the universal Church needs to be healed and reformed, and the coronavirus is plaguing the world, St. Joseph is here for us. Here’s how.

Part I: St. Joseph can help protect

and bring life to our domestic churches

In 21st-century America, the family is facing significant challenges. This nucleus of society has been neglected, rejected and redefined until it has become nearly unrecognizable. But because, as Pope St. John Paul II observed, “the future of humanity passes by way of the family,” the way we live in relationship to Christ and to one another within our families – the domestic church – can help reverse the tide.



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But we cannot do it alone. We need the help of the Blessed Trinity, of the Blessed Mother and of the saints in heaven – including, in a special way, of St. Joseph. As patron of the universal Church, a father and a husband, St. Joseph is a powerful witness to and example for the domestic church, known as the “Glory of Domestic Life.”

When our families are truly living as the domestic Church, our homes are a place where God and others are loved. Christ, too, was a member of the pattern for the domestic church, and he learned the ways of love in the home of St. Joseph. He also

learned from St. Joseph, at least in part, what obedience and sacrifice look like and how one should live life by embracing both. These are no small lessons, as these very themes are at the heart of our salvation. For Christ, in total obedience to the Father, laid down his life for mankind in the greatest act of love that set us free.

It is hard to imagine that Jesus could have entered into the saving events of Holy Week without reflecting on various scenes from his own life when St. Joseph unknowingly helped his son prepare to submit to his passion and death. When the Lord beckons us to take up our own crosses daily – something we first learn to do in our own families – we might turn to St. Joseph for inspiration and assistance.

As guardian and protector of the Church – including our domestic churches – St. Joseph offers us many virtues worthy of consideration and emulation. In doing so, we can strengthen family life and allow the family to truly be the place where our children can learn what matters most, just as Jesus himself did under St. Joseph's care.

Most faithful

St. Joseph is called “most just,” which means, among other things, he excelled in the virtues. In fact, he did so, as our Catholic tradition tells us, more than any saint aside from the Blessed Virgin Mary. St. Joseph was, therefore, a man of great faith. And his faith was the arbiter for his own decision-making, as he was ever-attentive to God's voice.

We see this in Scripture where we learn that Joseph, after learning Mary was with child, remained faithful to her. But even though St. Joseph responded to the revelation of God's plan through angelic dreams with obedience, and took Mary into his home as the Lord commanded, it does not mean that the way forward was smooth. There would have been talk, ridicule and condemnation. Joseph, though, responded immediately and

firmly.

Knowing St. Joseph's deep fidelity, God was able to entrust to him with the most precious of missions – to be the foster father of the incarnate Christ, and to thereby change the world. That did not mean it was easy.

And so, at a time when the domestic Church is facing significant obstacles to its flourishing, it is important to recall St. Joseph's patronage. With the help of St. Joseph's example and prayers, we can ask ourselves: How can we be more attentive to God's will for us and, like St. Joseph, be moved to righteous action? How can we, too, be people of greater faith?

Foster-father of Jesus

St. Joseph taught Jesus the ways of life and faith pertaining to the Jewish practice of his day and, as such, Jesus was formed well. Under the watchful eye of St. Joseph, Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom" (Lk 2:40). In the same way, parents today are called and obliged to be, in the context of the domestic church, the first evangelists for and catechists of their children. This cannot be understated.

Scripture tells us that after three days of panicked searching, St. Joseph and Mary found Jesus, then 12 years old, in the temple in Jerusalem. There, he was "sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (Lk 2:46). When considering that familiar episode from Jesus' life, we might naturally focus on his parents' anxiety or how Jesus was single-hearted in his mission, even from a young age. But his presence in the temple might also offer an opportunity for us to reflect upon the effectiveness of Mary and Joseph's formation of their son. Their teaching and example – the archetype for a vibrant and authentic domestic Church – prepared him for that moment.

In an age when young people are leaving the Church in droves, St. Joseph's example can help strengthen parents, emboldening them to be effective, coherent and loving disciples who are forming the future of the Church. As in the home of the Holy Family, certain guiding principles can shape our approach, including pursuit of virtue, simplicity of life, adherence to teachings of the Church and religious practices.

Emulating St. Joseph in everyday moments

In the daily moments of family life, St. Joseph serves as a model for any family truly wishing to build up its domestic church. When trust might be lacking among family members, or when it is hard to communicate the truth in charity, we can emulate St. Joseph, who offers us a model of acting upon God's word. Our families would likely look different – truly the domestic Church wherein God dwells – if we approach difficulties and troubles in the manner of St. Joseph. Consider:

- What might God be speaking to us in moments of difficulty among our families?
- What actions can we take to allow God's word to bear fruit?

Becoming a 'watchful defender of Christ'

One of St. Joseph's titles is "Watchful Defender of Christ." This is the same Christ that made each of us members of his own body in our baptism. Consider:

- What can St. Joseph offer parents as they assume greater responsibility to watchfully defend Christ, who is alive in our children?
- What must we be watchful about?
- What must we defend?

Part 2: St. Joseph can be our strength in time of pandemic

In the book I recently co-authored with Father Harrison Ayre on the coronavirus pandemic, titled ["Finding Christ in the Crisis: What the Pandemic Can Teach Us"](#) (OSV, \$1.95), Father Ayre and I reflected on the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites, which was certainly a moment of profound failure and hardship for God's chosen people. Captives in a strange land, the Israelites found themselves faced with the choice of abandoning God or living in the memory of his goodness, which equipped them to sing songs of joy even in the midst of their sorrow.



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No doubt there is a common theme that connects this episode of salvation history to our current time, as well. So much of what we have known has been taken away or changed indefinitely. One of the most painful consequences has been the separation of Catholics even from the most precious gift of our faith – the holy Eucharist. And there will be an institutional cost to the Church, as we have already started to see.

While the physical effects of the pandemic are real – St. Joseph, by the way, has been invoked for centuries as “Hope of the Sick” and “Patron of the Dying” – the spiritual effects of the pandemic are just as real, and they require our attention and contemplation. In this regard, St. Joseph again provides a model for emulation as we face these days of uncertainty and change, sickness and death.

The Israelites’ captivity was part of the fabric of faith that made up St. Joseph’s own consciousness. Similarly, the Gospel of Matthew tells us, Joseph had to find ways to adapt when, after the birth of Jesus, he was commanded by an angel of the Lord to flee with his family to Egypt. When violence and death threatened the Christ child, St. Joseph had to find a new way of living in order to keep his family safe. Detached from the familiar or the comfortable, St. Joseph had to find a way for the Holy Family to survive. He knew their exile would not be forever – but even if it was, he must have been reassured to have Christ with them. St. Joseph’s life had purpose, chiefly defined by his role as Christ’s earthly father, even amid the confusion and darkness. Meditating on this scene from Christ’s life (found in Matthew’s second chapter) with the benefit of *lectio divina* can be a spiritual consolation for our present situation.

How else might St. Joseph be of assistance to us?

- When our churches are restricted for the good of others, or we have less frequent recourse to the sacraments so that others might live, we can turn our thoughts to St. Joseph.
- When our activities are diminished and our freedom feels limited, we can think about St. Joseph’s experience.
- When we are wrestling with seeing how God is active in our time and what word he might be speaking to us through this global crisis, we can consider St. Joseph’s response to God during

similar circumstances.

Consistently and generously, St. Joseph lived his life for others. But he did so freely, with a pure heart aflame with charity. His witness reminds us that we are not masters of the universe – a hard lesson we have had to learn during this time of crisis. But we can resign ourselves to God's will and give of ourselves for others. We can embrace the cross and help others carry theirs. This is what it means to be just, and what it means to live like St. Joseph.

With St. Joseph as our unique and special patron, we can turn to his example and intercession as a means to process our reaction to the pandemic and its effects. In a 2009 homily, Pope Benedict XVI offered a meditation on the importance of turning to St. Joseph in times like our own: "If discouragement overwhelms you, think of the faith of Joseph; if anxiety has its grip on you, think of the hope of Joseph, that descendant of Abraham who hoped against hope; if exasperation or hatred seizes you, think of the love of Joseph, who was the first man to set eyes on the human face of God in the person of the Infant conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Let us praise and thank Christ for having drawn so close to us, and for giving us Joseph as an example and model of love for him."

Embracing suffering

As his litany describes him, St. Joseph is "Solace of the Afflicted." He was well-acquainted with a life of troubles, difficulties and suffering. But through it all, he remained steadfast in his obedience to the Lord – the true mark of a believer. St. Joseph certainly knows our own suffering, and we can turn to him as we look for a model for how to embrace it willingly and selflessly. In this crisis, we must seek Christ continually. St. Joseph can help us. St. Madeleine Sophie Barat observed the importance of St. Joseph in the spiritual life: "What else did he do in all his life but contemplate,

study, and adore Jesus, even in the midst of his daily labors? Behold, therefore, our model.”

Part 3: St. Joseph can help heal our wounded Church

As the flames of the clergy sexual abuse crisis have been fanned in recent years – most recently with Nov. 10’s release of the Holy See’s “McCarrick report” – Catholics have been open and honest about a need for reform in the Church. No reform is possible, of course, without more saints who respond to the will of God with hearts full of love. Part of the reform, therefore, will require men and women in the Church to live more clearly and speak more forcefully about the virtues in which any such reform would be grounded. St. Joseph offers to us, by his own witness, many of the virtues the Church needs to magnify today in light of the ongoing clergy scandals. As Pope St. John Paul II put it, “Joseph and Mary are the summit from which holiness spreads all over the earth.”

Model for clergy

St. Joseph has been praised throughout the Church’s tradition as “most chaste,” and chastity certainly is one thing that comes to mind as lacking regarding the clergy abuse crisis. St. Joseph is a defender and protector of innocence, purity and truth. As the spouse of Mary, St. Joseph’s heart was one with hers – one with her Immaculate Heart. They were a match made by God. St. Joseph’s chaste heart is what enabled him to be authentic in his mission and single-hearted in his dedication to the Lord.



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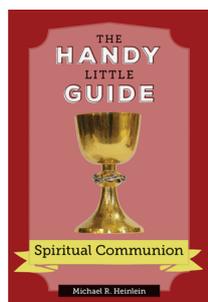
The patterns of sexual abuse by clergy and coverups of such scandals make it clear that those same characteristics did not define the hearts of some clergy. We are left to contemplate: How can the Church collectively ensure that the hearts of men pursuing priesthood desire such an authentic dedication to Christ? And how can they be formed to live that call in the manner St. Joseph did? As St. Bridget of Sweden observed, “So perfectly was he dead to the world and the flesh, that he desired nothing but the things of heaven.” In the wake of the McCarrick report and the many clergy scandals throughout the world, we can rejoice in the example of St. Joseph and pray that all in leadership within the Church do the same.

The priests and bishops who hold the sacred Lord in their hands in the sacrament of the altar hold him who St. Joseph first held. What a beautiful reminder of their obligation to pattern their lives after his. Priests and bishops as spiritual fathers have the high calling to be at the service of the faithful, to help them win the world for Christ and become the saints God made them to be. St. Joseph, because of the role God entrusted him was also called to great holiness. In the words of St. John Henry Newman, “He is Holy Joseph, because his office, of being spouse and protector of Mary, specially demanded sanctity.”

As we have seen time and again in the various scandals that have disturbed the Church to its core, other characteristics

belonging to St. Joseph can be fostered and proposed as part of the solution to move forward. Keeping in mind the model of St. Joseph, then, how might he help us move beyond some of the painful realities that continue to surface during the clergy crisis?

AN ACT OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION WITH ST. JOSEPH



Glorious St. Joseph, guardian of Our Lord and spouse of Mary, come to my aid. Pray that Jesus will come to me just as he chose to dwell under your fatherly care. I firmly believe that he is present in the Eucharist, body, blood, soul and divinity – just as present still as he was in your arms after his holy birth at Bethlehem. Although I cannot receive him now in sacramental Communion, beg him to reside in my heart just as he did at your home in Nazareth. Lord Jesus, hasten to come and abide in me and never let me be parted from you. Amen.

– [“The Handy Little Guide to Spiritual Communion”](#) by Michael R. Heinlein (OSV, \$5.95)

In addition to the actual abuse, the Church is faced with the reality of denials of truth and cover-ups that took place with the intention of sparing the Church embarrassment and financial loss. Some might have argued that trying to spare the Church from scandal was prudent, but we now know that the cost of concealing the truth has been far more damaging. St. Joseph, as a man “most prudent,” shows that we must embrace suffering, even for the good of others, as he did. We have nothing to fear from the truth. As Servant of God Father John Hardon explained, “St. Joseph teaches us that prudence is correct knowledge about things to be done or, more broadly, the knowledge of things that ought to be done and of things

that should be avoided.” St. Joseph’s hidden life of prudence, in service and suffering, offers an opportunity for contemplation by our leaders as they continue to confront the clergy crisis and its effects on the Church.

There is no question that the clergy crisis has had an effect on the faith of believers. St. Joseph, “most faithful,” had a simple, robust faith. In his experiences, he bore the cost of living for Christ – for living according to the truth. Likewise, our clergy can look to him for inspiration as they are called to do the same in the wake of the crisis plaguing the Church. We are called to live our faith boldly, not fleeing from the truth, diminishing it or concealing it. We are called to recognize, as St. Joseph’s life attests, that all things work for the good. For, as we know, the cost of not doing so is too great. Instead of giving believers reasons to call their faith into question or even abandon it, our clergy can be inspired by St. Joseph to boldly acknowledge that we have nothing to fear if God is on our side. St. Joseph, “most courageous,” went to extraordinary lengths to protect Christ from harm, never counting the personal cost. Each of us, clergy, religious and lay faithful, are called to the same.

As patron of the universal Church, St. Joseph inspires and intercedes for all the faithful who seek to pursue the life of virtue at which the saint excelled. These qualities and characteristics of holiness we find in him apply to all of God’s children, clergy and laity, who can work together in service to the Church to bring about the healing, conversion and reform needed to emerge stronger from the clergy crisis. With the help of St. Joseph’s prayers and example, may we all be committed to this task together.

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PRAYER TO ST. JOSEPH FOLLOWING THE ROSARY

In our tribulation we fly to Thee, O blessed Joseph; and, after imploring the help of thy most holy Spouse, we ask also with confidence for thy patronage. By the affection which united thee to the Immaculate Virgin Mother of God, and the paternal love with which thou didst embrace the Child Jesus, we beseech thee to look kindly upon the inheritance which Jesus Christ acquired by His precious Blood, and by thy powerful aid to help us in our needs. Protect, most careful Guardian of the Holy Family, the chosen people of Jesus Christ. Keep us, most loving father, from all pestilence of error and corruption. Be mindful of us, most powerful protector, from thy place in heaven, in this warfare with the powers of darkness: and, as thou didst snatch the Child Jesus from danger of death, so now defend the holy Church of God from the snares of the enemy and from all adversity. Guard each one of us by thy perpetual patronage, so that, sustained by thine example and help, we may live in holiness, die a holy death, and obtain the everlasting happiness of heaven.