

Learning from the patron of the universal Church

St. Joseph may be the patron of the universal Church, but as a namesake for a Catholic university or college, the foster father of Jesus presents an interesting paradox.

For an institution of higher learning, where professors are lecturing and intellectuals hone their thinking and prepare themselves to debate in the public square, St. Joseph cuts against the grain in that he is not quoted once in sacred Scripture.

“We’re talking, professing things and presenting information we hold to be important, and yet our patron is silent. It is kind of funny in that regard,” said Cristian Murphy, the director of campus ministry at St. Joseph’s College in Patchogue, Long Island.

But while St. Joseph’s patronage is not renowned for the saint’s erudition or rhetoric, some of the virtues that his life has come to embody – diligence, hard work, faith, fatherhood, protection of migrants, to name a few – have come to resonate on the campus communities named for him.

Core values

“As a Catholic institution that believes in the value, integrity and dignity of work, and as an organization that aspires to be a workplace where people can find fulfillment, I think St. Joseph provides us with some valuable guidance,” said Christopher Fuller, the vice president and chief mission integration and sponsorship officer at Saint Joseph’s College of Maine.

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Fuller told Our Sunday Visitor that he has been thinking about how to create settings for conversations and reflections for the campus community to talk about St. Joseph, especially in a year where Pope Francis has dedicated to the foster father of Jesus.

“St. Joseph will be a model and an inspiration over the coming year for how the college lives out its Catholic identity,” said Fuller, who noted that the Sisters of Mercy founded the Saint Joseph’s College of Maine in 1912 a few decades after arriving from Ireland.

“St. Joseph is one of the patrons of the Sisters of Mercy,” Fuller said. “St. Joseph is a natural expression of the sisters’ own charism.”

In connection with the feast of St. Joseph every March 19, Fuller said the college dedicates each March to its patron saint. When he arrived on campus two years ago, Fuller said he proposed focusing each March on one core value of the institution.

“And this year in particular because of Pope Francis’ declaration of the Year of St. Joseph, we focused on our core value of integrity,” Fuller said. “We had a series of conversations, at noontime, one per week, on different attributes of St. Joseph as they related to integrity.

“So we had one week on St. Joseph and the integrity of work, another week on St. Joseph and the integrity of faith, one week of St. Joseph and the integrity of fathers, and then another week of St. Joseph and the integrity of immigrants,” Fuller said, adding that the month got him thinking about how St. Joseph shapes the campus community.

“So it’s not just a namesake,” said Fuller, who further emphasized Saint Joseph’s College of Maine as a Catholic institution that believes in the value, integrity and dignity of work, and as an organization that aspires to be a workplace

where people can find fulfill their human potential.

“And I think St. Joseph provides us with some guidance there as well,” he said.

More than good grades

Murphy, the director of campus ministry at St. Joseph’s College in Long Island, told Our Sunday Visitor that the Catholic campus ministry has as its three main pillars social gatherings, service to the greater community and personal spirituality.

“We use a lot of service work to connect us back to our faith and then drive people to our Catholic sacramental aspects, so to speak,” Murphy said, adding that there is much to learn from St. Joseph’s quiet example even in an academic setting.

“I think for me, it’s really special because it serves as a constant reminder of the fact that no matter what knowledge and education our students receive, and the education is great and it’s awesome, that there’s still this call to be humble, still and quiet when appropriate, and to be diligent in your work,” he said.

Whereas college students can fall into the temptation of preparing themselves for the competitive “rat race” of corporate America, Murphy said he draws on St. Joseph’s virtues and example in encouraging the students to slow down and “take it all in.”

“You gotta fall in love with the process of the work that you’re doing, that you feel called to,” Murphy said. “That I think is how St. Joseph watches over us and our students. Sure, we want them to really get a great education and a good GPA. But my thing with (the students) is always to be aware of the process of what you’re doing. Do you really love it? Are you in love with the study of what you’re doing? Can you see that propelling you into a carefully thought out career and

vocation? That's how I feel called to discuss St. Joseph with our students, to make sure that they're really thinking about him, and that they understand how he can be watching over them, and that they really love what they do, and that they feel that call to the process."

In the Year of St. Joseph, Murphy said "a fire has been lit under" him to be more vocal about the college's patron, and more intentional in living out the virtues he embodied in his day-to-day life in first century Palestine.

"I think we do a really good job to stress the importance of getting involved and really bearing witness to their community, whether it means they become superstar-involved students, or they just become aware of what's going on around them," Murphy said. "We really stress that, and I think that's another element of how St Joseph is at work here. We have a lot of people, faculty included, who work to let students know that they can do more than just get good grades."

A model in today's world

Father Dan Joyce, SJ, executive director of mission programs for St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, said three faculty members were inspired by Pope Francis' letter on the Year of St. Joseph to write essays reflecting on how their work at the university corresponds to the values of the school's patron saint. Also, each month the university has been publishing a reflection on St. Joseph from a community member or one of the university's partner organizations in the Philadelphia area.



Pope Francis blesses a sculpture during a brief stop at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia in 2015. CNS photo/Paul Haring

"So we've been thinking about this a lot," Father Joyce said. "One of the things we've been tuning into is St. Joseph and his creative courage, that he had to act courageously in a many number of situations and did that in a creative way, which we think of as a model for the way we prepare our students for the future."

At St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, a statue of St. Joseph the Worker greets students in front of the main building. The statue was donated by night students who were working jobs while studying for their degree. Inside the university chapel is a statue of St. Joseph lying down sleeping. The statue, a replica of one that Pope Francis keeps in his private quarters, shows Joseph sleeping while taking Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

"He embodies two values of what our faculty and students should be about: making decisions in the world, especially in difficult circumstances, being a person of action and of vision, and following God's will."

In the midst of a pandemic, Father Joyce also said St. Joseph is a good model to respond to the world's unpredictability.

“His example became an inspiration for us as we managed through the pandemic,” Father Joyce said. “The Year of St. Joseph has also given us an opportunity to re-appreciate our own patron as a model for any number of virtues we like to teach to our university and we hope our students model.”

Brian Fraga writes from Massachusetts.