

2 THE VALUE OF THOSE WHO LIVE A HIDDEN LIFE

a) Only a father can speak of the father

In the introduction to His Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* (With a Father's Heart), Pope Francis tells us what inspired Him to write this letter. Of course, on the 8th December 2020, when He published this Letter, was the 150th Anniversary of the Decree *Quemadmodum Deus* by which Blessed Pius IX proclaimed St Joseph as the Patron of the Catholic Church. But this was the occasion that made Pope Francis publish this Letter and inaugurate the Year of St Joseph. However, what inspired Him is the unprecedented common and global experience of the pandemic.

First of all He says: *"I would like to share some personal reflections on this extraordinary figure, so close to our own human experience. For, as Jesus says, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt 12:34)." So beautiful! He speaks of a Great and Special Father with a father's heart! You need to be a father to speak about the father! Even more so: you need to be a father to feel like a father!*

In fact, Pope Francis continues: *"My desire to do so increased during these months of pandemic, when we experienced, amid the crisis, how "our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines, or on the latest television show, yet in these very days are surely shaping the decisive events of our history. Doctors, nurses, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests, men and women religious, and so very many others. They understood that no one is saved alone... How many people daily exercise patience and offer hope, taking care to spread not panic, but shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday ways, how to accept and deal with a crisis by adjusting their routines, looking ahead and encouraging the practice of prayer. How many are praying, making sacrifices and interceding for the good of all".[6] Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble. Saint Joseph reminds us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation. A word of recognition and of gratitude is due to them all."*

For a real father no one goes unnoticed. Everyone of his children is important and draws his attention. For the real father, the children that do not seek attention, draw his attention precisely for that! Finally we have someone who appreciates, thinks and give merit to ordinary people, people often overlooked... people who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines, or on the latest television show... people who are surely shaping the decisive events of our history.... people who daily exercise patience and offer hope, taking care to spread not panic, but shared responsibility! This is the father we lost and we need. These are the type of politicians, philosophers, thinkers, writers and journalists we need. And let us be

sincere, these are the bishops, parish priests, priests and pastoral workers, like leaders and co-leaders of cells, groups and communities we need in the Church!

For the real father, the children and their needs come before all other managerial, administrative, organisational, institutional aspects of the family and the home. For the real father, all these aspects become a preoccupation for him only in relationship to the well being and the needs of the children. Those who do not have a heart of a father, those who live for their office and the interests of their organisation and institution, are insensitive to those who do not serve their interests. Finally, we have a father who make ordinary people like doctors, nurses, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests, men and women religious, and so very many others, welcome. At least welcome in the Church which is not, as Pope St John Paul II said in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31, for “a few “uncommon heroes” of holiness.... The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this high standard of ordinary Christian living.” Ordinary people with an extraordinary heart!

b) Firm foundations are hidden

I think the keyword which we are going to hear very often during the Year of St Joseph, and surely in the School of St Joseph, is the word “hidden”.

Look at the floor where you are sitting or standing. You might not be in the ground floor; whatever. If you are not at the seaside, on some sandy beach, you must be standing on a firm foundation. The foundations of the building where you stand at this moment is hidden, you cannot see it, you might have never saw it and maybe you will never see it. Yet, all the house or block of apartments stands on that firm foundation. The most important part of the building is hidden!

In the Gospels, St Joseph never says a word. Mary did say something, very few sentences, they are known as the Seven Words of Mary. But Joseph, not even a single word! In the story of Jesus’ infancy, we know that Joseph is present, till He was twelve for sure; but always in the shadow.

Sometimes we project our sentiments, inclinations and desires on God. Very often instead of trying to imitate God, we try to make God look like us. A showy God, a prima-donna God, a God who likes and seeks to be the centre of attention is not the God of the bible, is not how God revealed Himself in the bible. It is we who like to show off, we who like to be the protagonists in every event, we who like and seek to draw all the attention on ourselves!

Why? Because we are insecure, we have very low self esteem, we do not know who we are and we do not accept ourselves! Psychologically it works the contrary: he who feels secure does not feel the need to proof anything; he who has self esteem does not feel the need of the admiration or appreciation of others; he who is happy with who he is and with himself, is not terrified by moments of solitude and being left alone or forgotten.

This is the father we are blessed to contemplate together during this year. This is the fathers that humanity needs today. This is the God that we are called to proclaim in this world that is drawing near the end of an era of darkness.

c) Like father like son

It is said: like father like son. We know that this axiom is true. It is true in both ways. Look at the father and you know what you should expect from his son. Or else, look at the son and you get an idea what type of a father he must have had.

In our case, we have only one instance when we meet the child Jesus and His father Joseph together. It is a meeting that almost scandalises us and has always confused us. Jesus was twelve year old, and He was lost. For three whole days, His parents were seeking for Him, and when they found Him, His Mother asks Him: *“My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you.”* To which He answered: *“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”* (Lk 2,48-49) We think that Joseph must have felt offended. But do you think so? Or was he overjoyed to see his son having already, at such a young age, become like him?! Was it not Joseph himself to put astray his personal human sentiments and ties to embrace the plan of God for him and for his pregnant wife?!

However, the fact is that although we could have guessed what type of man Jesus would have been, having had such a father as Joseph, we are on the other side of history. We are not looking at the father and trying to imagine who his son might become. Today we happen to know so much about the son, and very little about His father. So we are wondering who could have been this unique man who has educated such a Son.

It is no wonder that what strikes us most in St Joseph is precisely his hidden life and his being always in the shadow. In fact, although we see Jesus growing in popularity and becoming a very important figure in His time, and of course He is the protagonist of the Gospel, in reality Jesus sought to be hidden. Not only, but He was conceived in the shadow of the Holy Spirit: *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God.”* (Lk 1,35)

90% of Jesus’ life we do not know anything about it, in fact we refer to His first thirty years of His life as the hidden life of Jesus. After His baptism, the Holy Spirit led Him to the desert (Mk 1,12). It had to be His Mother to push Him into the public ministry when she told the servants at the marriage feast in Cana: *“Do whatever He tells you.”* (Jn 2,5) The Evangelists make it very clear that, what moved Jesus to heal, work miracles, and even instruct people, was never His desire to come out into the open and become the centre of attention or to show His capabilities and power but only the compassion towards people who suffer and people who were like sheep without a shepherd! In fact, He always ordered the evil spirits to reveal who He was. This hidden aspect in Jesus is not something accidental or insignificant. In fact, this is one of the signs of the Kingdom of God: the hidden pearl; the hidden

coin; the yeast that is lost, hidden within the dough. Jesus is the hidden treasure that when one finds Him, goes and sell everything to acquire it.

If this is Jesus, then this must have been His father Joseph, in whose school He was formed and trained for around thirty years in Nazareth.

In the midst of the pandemic that has hit us so tragically, which might have been caused by whatever evil spirits or intentions, thanks to the providential Year of St Joseph, we are discovering how important and fundamental are the people who live a hidden life or work in a dedicated and generous manner in the hiding. This does not only apply to doctors, nurses, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests, men and women religious.... But also to you, dear leaders and co-leaders of cells, you who welcome in your home a small group of your oikos every week, very often unrecognised not even by your pastors! When I was a parish priest, I was very often criticised for what people saw it as my obsession with the cells of evangelisation. Many times I asked such people whether they knew how many cells there were in the parish. Of course, no one knew! Only I knew! They were hidden from everybody. But then, I have a letter from a succeeding parish priest thanking me because the people he found prepared and disposed to collaborate with him in the parish, in different ministries, were the people of the Cells! May St Joseph give us courage and strength to maintain our hidden life and mission of our cells!