

### 3 ST JOSEPH PATRON OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

#### Introduction

Dear sisters and brothers, before returning to the Father, Jesus promised us that He will always be with us. In a few days He sent the Holy Spirit marking the birth of the Church, the Spirit that is not just with us, but lives within us, within every baptised person, making God, as St Augustine said, more us than we are to ourselves! This presence is constant in the life and history of the Church, it is the guarantee that the Church will survive any attack or crisis. Even when things would seem impossible, without any hope of survival, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Lord, will make us hope against all hope.

For us, disciple of Jesus Christ, there are no problems.... I mean, yes, there are problems, crisis, difficult and threatening situations.... But we are never crushed by them. The Holy Spirit frees us from the fear of losing what we have and know. The Holy Spirit frees us from the fear of what is new, to discover new things, new depths, new knowledge. The Holy Spirit is continuously accompanying us not to be afraid to grow, to change, even radically. Problems, crisis, difficulties, and threats can arise even within the Christian community itself, within the Church.

Those of us who have studied history, and maybe even the history of the Church, know how man passed from one culture to another, from one era to another; know how many conflicts and wars presided over new consciousness, new styles of living and new values; know how the Church accompanied man during these radical passages in human history, not by rigidity and fundamentalism, but by deepening and discovering how its message can continue to be relevant to man, even a Good News in all times.

The Church grew and matured thanks to the challenges she had from time to time. In the first millennium we have the dogmas regarding Jesus Christ. In the second millennium we have the dogmas regarding Mary, the Mother of Jesus. I do not want to sound presumptuous or prophetic, but who knows whether the third millennium would give us new dogmas regarding St Joseph. After all, Pope Saint John Paul II has already expressed some desire of this kind when He wrote in His Apostolic Exhortation on St Joseph, *Redemptoris Custos* in 1989: *“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.”* (*Redemptoris Custos*, 32)

As we reflected in the first teaching, it seems that St Joseph has a great relevance to humanity and the Church as it draws towards the much needed end of this era of total darkness and dawns a new era where the dignity of fatherhood is restored and where the beauty of fatherhood will free from the abuse women, children, family and civil and ecclesial authority.

According to the dealings of God with His people in the Bible, He always announce beforehand what He intends to do. For this reason, the prophets have always had a very important role in the life of the People of God. Prophecy did not disappear with the New Testament. Rather it became the call of every baptised who, by being crafted into Christ participates in His prophetic mission of announcing the Good News. One may wonder why in such a long history of the Church the recognition of St Joseph as the Universal Patron of the Church came only 150 years ago!! Did St Joseph wait Blessed Pope Pius IX and the year of 1870 to start patronising and taking care of the Church?! Surely not! Therefore why now? Why are we drawing our attention to this unique and special man and father just in our times?! Maybe the Holy Spirit is inspiring the whole Church in a time of total crisis of authority, of lack of guidance and role models and point of references, and whole generations without a father, to turn its attention to St Joseph and draw from him the light that she needs for Herself and to be the light that humanity needs so much today!!

## **1. Joseph's special relationship to the Mother of the Church**

Popular devotion towards St Joseph led him be considered as the Patron Saint of workers, of course, because St Joseph was himself a workman, a carpenter. It led him also to be considered Patron Saint of a happy death, because tradition holds it that he died when Jesus had still not left home, therefore he surely must have had Jesus present at his death bed. However, the title of Universal Patron of the Church is something so wider all embracing and unique.

There are two main reasons why St Joseph deserves this unique title of being the Universal Patron of the Church. First and foremost because of his special relationship to Mary, the Mother of the Church. There was a time when the Church seemed to be shy to call Joseph the spouse of Mary. Unfortunately, marriage was considered inferior to virginity, celibacy and religious consecration, with regard to holiness. It is not our purpose to discuss this and what led to this negative attitude. However, we need to recognise this fact and thank God for the sexual revolution that man felt the need for in the midst of last century. You see, if we do not come to the beauty of the Gospel through our openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as we read the Word of God, God makes us do so through external pressures which, at the beginning we even see them as a threat and condemn them for their lack of values!

St Joseph is the real husband of Mary. He can really be considered as a great model how to be a real, loving and holy husband. According to the Jewish law and custom, marriage is contracted and celebrated even a year before the couple went to live together. We know that even if the thought of divorcing Her crossed his mind, he never did so. On the contrary, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that the angel told him: *“do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.... When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home”* (Mt 1,20.24). Whether they had sexual relationships or not or whether Mary remained virgin or not is irrelevant: he was, he is and he remains the only, loving and faithful husband of Mary! However, to say that Joseph is the real husband of Mary, does not

need one to refuse what catholic tradition has always held that Mary remained a virgin even after the birth of Jesus and therefore they did not have any sexual relationships between them. On the contrary, if Joseph accepted the Will of God to confirm Mary as his wife even with a son that was not his, he could have also accepted the inspiration of God to renounce any sexual contact with Mary. For those who know what real love, the biblical love is, this does not diminish Joseph's love as a husband towards Mary, but reflects to perfection the way God loves us.

Love is unconditional. Love is disinterested. Sexuality is the human expression of one's own exclusive love and commitment towards his or her beloved. But human love is not expressed only through sexual intimacy, it can also be expressed through its renunciation, for one reason or another, temporary or for a longer period. It is a pity that these ideas in today's world sound from another planet! Yet, those who really love their wife or their husband, can testify how true this is!

I cannot understand how we can honour Mary and neglect such an essential part of Her. Maybe one day She will reveal to us who St Joseph is for Her, and for us! It is never too late. Well it took Her almost two thousand years to reveal to us Her Immaculate Conception!

If Mary's holds such a unique place in the Church, to whom Jesus entrusted as Mother, Her husband must surely be assisting Her and offering the special care he took of Her for the Church and all Her children!

## **2. Joseph's special relationship to Jesus Christ, whose Body is the Church**

The second reason for which St Joseph truly deserves to be considered Universal Patron of the Church is precisely for his special and unique relationship to the Son of Mary. St Joseph accepted, not only to continue to take care of Mary as His wife, but also to take care of Her Son Jesus, thus becoming His legal father. So much so, that it was he who gave Him His name according to what was asked from him by the angel. Joseph gave Jesus the right to the royalty of King David's lineage.

Joseph assumed all the responsibility of fatherhood for Jesus. Pope Leo XIII, in His Encyclical *Quamquam Pluries*, in 1889 wrote: "*Joseph shines among all mankind by the most august dignity, since by divine will, he was the guardian of the Son of God and reputed as His father among men. Joseph became the guardian, the administrator, and the legal defender of the divine house whose chief he was.*"

It is rightly accepted that because Mary is the Mother of Christ and the Church is the Body of Christ, Mary is the Mother of the Church and of all of the members of Christ's body. The same logic should hold for St. Joseph: if Joseph is the father of Christ and the Church is the Body of Christ, then Joseph is the father of the Church and of all the members of Christ's body.

Nevertheless, we tend to downplay Joseph's fatherhood of Jesus, because it is adopted and not natural. How many times is Jesus referred to as the Son of David in the New Testament? David had received a promise about his descendants, as we see in Psalm 89: "*You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.'*" Although some argue that Mary is also from the royal line,

Jesus's lineage is traced from his adopted father. Why? It is Joseph, the carpenter, who is the royal son of David at the beginning of the New Testament. Jesus's inherits the throne of David from Joseph. Jesus was not obedient to a random man, but to the heir of David's throne, a truly just and holy man, who merited to be the spouse of sinless Virgin Mary.

### **Conclusion: Litany and Novena to St Joseph Universal Patron of the Church's**

The patronage of St Joseph is to be the guardian of the Church. The patronage of St Joseph is to care and protect the Church as he cared and protected his special wife Mary and his special child Jesus, the Mother of the Church, which is Christ's Mystical Body.

It is very significant that the Novena to St Joseph is known as the Holy Cloak Novena. The Cloak of St Joseph is a special clothing of a man and father in those days. A man did not only use the cloak to cover himself during the night to keep warm, but it was also used to cover dear wife especially when outside in wintery days. Not only his wife, but also his children.

Isaiah says: *"He put on saving justice like a breastplate, on his head the helmet of salvation. He put on the clothes of vengeance like a tunic and wrapped himself in jealousy like a cloak."* (59,17) Or as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says: *"Like a cloak you will roll them up, like a garment, and they will be changed. But you never alter and your years are unending."* (1,12)

All that we have said is condensed in the short but meaningful Litany of St Joseph. Listen:

|                                  |                          |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Illustrious son of David,        | Joseph most faithful,    |
| Light of the patriarchs,         | Mirror of patience,      |
| Spouse of the Mother of God,     | Lover of poverty,        |
| Chaste guardian of the Virgin,   | Model of workmen ,       |
| Foster-father of the Son of God, | Glory of domestic life,  |
| Watchful defender of Christ,     | Guardian of virgins,     |
| Head of the Holy Family,         | Pillar of families,      |
| Joseph most just,                | Solace of the afflicted, |
| Joseph most chaste,              | Hope of the sick,        |
| Joseph most prudent,             | Patron of the dying,     |
| Joseph most valiant,             | Terror of demons,        |
| Joseph most obedient,            | Protector of Holy Church |