

## **Paternity and Paternalism**

### **Introduction**

The apostolic letter of the Pope – who, at the beginning of his pontificate, called him ‘Custodian / Guardian of Creation’ – is very much in tune with the Pontifical Magisterium, since beforehand Blessed Pius IX had declared him "Patron of the Catholic Church"; the venerable Pius XII had named him "Patron of Workers" and St. John Paul II had presented him as ‘Guardian of the Redeemer.’

In addition to this, and as a way of illuminating today's times, the Holy Father recognizes that, in the midst of the crisis, ‘an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble’ can be found in the figure of St. Joseph.

As the argument of the letter develops, he presents him as a father loved by the Christian people, as well as a tender father in whom ‘Jesus saw the tender love of God.’ And that is why it conveys the message that human frailty does not deserve God's implacable judgement, but that it is an opportunity to experience his tenderness, which ‘embraces, sustains and forgives us... comes out to meet us, restores our dignity.’

This year dedicated to Saint Joseph has not simply opened as an ephemeris to be remembered, but it has all its meaning at the moment that our society is currently living. Indeed, we are witnessing a crisis of fatherhood. Along the same lines, the figure of the leader accompanying processes is increasingly being devalued.

### **David's offspring.**

The second book of Samuel 7, 4-16, immediately leads us to think of the fatherhood of St. Joseph; a fatherhood that will last forever because to this day the new offspring of children into the church has arrived. The spiritual offspring initiated with the water and blood from Christ's side on the first Good Friday in history has been watering all continents of the planet and reaching all cultures. This promise of the prophet Nathan to

King David is fulfilled in the spiritual offspring of Christ. Let us note that being a father is not confined to transmitting biological inheritance to the next generation, but it is about helping the son in the truth of things, knowing the meaning of existence, the horizon of meaning that creation is filled with.

### **What it means to be a father.**

Mary's pregnancy took Joseph totally by surprise. Upon learning of this situation, being a righteous man, he did not want to use his right to publicly repudiate his fiancée, for in that case he would have exposed her to being stoned, in accordance with the provisions of the Law (Cf. Dt 23:20-21). Having failed to understand what had happened, Joseph initially decides to abandon Mary, preferring everyone to think that it is he who unjustifiably fails to comply with the marriage commitment made. It is in this context that he receives (in dreams) a message from the angel of the Lord saying, *'do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.'* (Mt 1:20). It should be noted that Joseph does not have the appearance of an angel, nor any other spectacular vision, all the divine messages he receives, he receives them in 'dreams'. The Gospel says that *'when Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him'* (Mt 1:24). It is worth highlighting Joseph's obedience to the Will of the Lord: he renounces his own plans to embrace God's own plans. Joseph's attitude reminds us of Mary's response to the angel's proclamation: *'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.'* (Lk 1:38). Joseph also says, implicitly: Here I am Lord to do your will. Joseph, moved by his faith, takes on responsibility for taking charge of Mary to fulfill his role as husband and father of Jesus.

Joseph's fatherhood was not limited to providing sustenance, security, and protection to Jesus; it went way beyond that. Good fathers are well aware of the inexpressible love born out of having a child, embracing him, giving him affection and attention; all of that is priceless. Joseph can't be less than the best parents in this world. Joseph was

overabundant in love for his son Jesus. There would be no proper words to describe the filial parental relationship established between Joseph and Jesus. Those who have been fortunate enough to have a responsible and loving father know what that means. Hence, when referring to St Joseph, we simply have to say: the "*father of Jesus*"; it is not necessary to add the adjective "*adoptive*". In no way should we relativize Joseph's fatherhood to emphasize that Jesus is the Son of God (second person of the Trinity), for Jesus is fully man and fully God.

Saint Joseph is the father of Jesus because he helped him to relate to things and people. He helped him to pray, to develop a trade, to know how to be part of a family, a sign of God the Father's love for him. To be a parent is to know how to educate. 'Educate' comes from the verb *educere* which means to get out of that inside, to bring to light, to bring out what is still in germ. Through the relationship with St. Joseph Jesus was able to make explicit all that he was and where he came from. The human condition requires another to help us discover who we really are, what our true identity is. We cannot do it on our own. A father, a leader, cannot generate if he is not generated by another, so in the Gospel of St. Matthew, he begins with the last link of Jesus' genealogy, reminding us that St. Joseph is the fruit of a whole tradition and history that he has received and, in turn, will pass on to his son. We cannot give anything we have not received ourselves before.

### **Responding to reality**

The first condition to be educated is to be able to respond to reality. St. Joseph surely had his plans; he would have imagined a future with his wife, Mary. He probably thought about where to live and how to organize family life. The news of Mary's pregnancy must have been like a jug of cold water for him; the end of his life with Mary. But St. Joseph is constantly listening to the Lord, he knows that the fate of men is in the hands of God as he would have so often read and prayed in the psalms. In the face of the revealing dream of the angel St. Joseph accepts the new reality, rises up and begins to act as he has been

told. St. Joseph obeys because he knows that God is the true master; the one who makes us mature and grow to our true human stature.

Let us ask St. Joseph for the courage to be true parents and leaders, docile to God's will with a clear judgment of what is right and what is wrong. In a society in which it is not clear what is proper and what is not, it is important that the figure of the father emerges again with force to accompany the disciples, on the path of truth and justice. St. Joseph raised his son Jesus; that is, he helped him to bring out what he had received from his father; may his example help us remember that we too have been generated by God and that, from here, we can generate and educate new cell members to be missionary disciples.