

## **Saint Joseph's experience of obedience**

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In his beautiful letter *Patris Corde*, Pope Francis devoted a chapter to Saint Joseph as « An obedient father».

Saint Joseph obeys his enlightened conscience, in the word God has addressed to him, in the religious Law like in the civil law... . The Gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint Luke describe Saint Joseph as a man who, « *In every situation, Joseph declared his own "fiat", like those of Mary at the Annunciation and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.* » (Pope Francis, *Patris Corde* 3).

### **Obedience to the conscience**

« *In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor.* » (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 16)

The catechism of the Catholic Church, relying on the Council, reminds each of us that we must, firstly, form our conscience by allowing it to be enlightened by the Word of God and in addition obey our conscience.

Being preoccupied by the pregnancy of Mary and refusing to publicly repudiate her, Saint Joseph is a perfect example. « *He did not know how to deal with Mary's "astonishing" motherhood. He certainly sought an answer to this unsettling question, but above all he sought a way out of what was for him a difficult situation.* » (Saint John-Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos* 3). He seeks to act according to his conscience, according to « *this voice, that never ceases to press him to*

*love and to accomplish the good and avoid the bad* ». He has no ill-will towards Mary. On the contrary, he seeks good. He must choose with the means that are available to him and he prepares to follow his conscience, to obey it.

## **Obedience to the Word of God**

If « *Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, committed to the Church.* » (Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* 10), the Lord also addresses some people according to their particular capacities. In the Bible, dreams « *were considered a way for God to make His will known* » (Pope Francis, *Patris Corde* 3).

We make ourselves available to the Word of God when, in the light of the Holy Spirit, we listen to this Word contained in the Holy Scriptures and carried by the Tradition of the Church. In fact, we are perfectly available when our acts stem from such listening, following the counsel of Saint James : « *Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like.* » (Jas 1, 22-24).

More than the Scriptures that Saint Joseph knows and puts into practice – we will come back to that -, it is through the visit of an angel in his sleep, in a dream, that he also hears the word that the Lord addresses to him three times. « *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. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.* » (Mt 1, 20-21) : first dream. « *Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.* » (Mt 2, 13) : second dream. « *Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.* » (Mt 2, 20) : third dream. There is a fourth dream that the Gospel speaks of, but without describing it precisely,

except through the response of Saint Joseph, who withdraws to Nazareth.

The spontaneity of Saint Joseph's response through his acts is impressive. He does not enter into a dialogue with the angel in his dream. He does not seek to know more or to convey the difficulties. He obeys. Period. « *When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.* » (Mt 1, 24) ; « *Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt.* » (Mt 2, 14) ; « *He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.* » (Mt 2, 21). We see how the verbs that express the action carried out by Saint Joseph correspond exactly with the word the angel addresses to him in the dream : Rise / he rises, take the child and his mother / he took the child and his mother... We will come back to this when we talk about the characteristics of the obedience of Saint Joseph : He immediately accomplishes what the Lord asks of him.

Vatican Council II teaches : « *The obedience of faith* » « *is to be given to God who reveals, (Rm 16, 26 ; cf. Rm 1, 5 ; 2 Co 10, 5- 6), by which man commits his whole self freely to God, « offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals » and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him.* » (*Dei Verbum* 5). The attitude of Saint Joseph, regarding the dreams he receives, illustrates beautifully this obedience of faith. His faith is the driving force of his obedience. The beatitude that the Virgin Mary receives from her cousin Elisabeth applies perfectly to Saint Joseph : « *Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.* » (Cf. Lk 1, 45).

## **Obedience to the religious Law**

Jesus has come « *not to abolish but to fulfill the Law* » (Mt 5, 17).

Saint Joseph has a profound respect for the Law that God gave to His people. He observes all the precepts, as underlined by Saint Luke :

« *When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he*

*was conceived in the womb. When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord." » (Lk 2, 21-23)*

The Law does include the redemption of the first-born child, consecrated to the Lord (Ex 13, 13 ; 34, 20). But in presenting him to the Lord in Jerusalem, Saint Joseph, with the Virgin Mary, earnestly fulfills the task that God has given him. He chooses to live this consecration in the best possible place : the Temple of Jerusalem. He obeys the Law of God not by contenting himself with applying the commandments. He lives them in their deepest meaning : he obeys the Law of God in the spirit of the Law.

### **Obedience to the civil authorities**

Saint Paul and Saint Peter remind us of the importance of obeying the authorities, without forgetting that they, themselves, obey a higher authority : God. « *Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God.* » (Rm 13, 1) « *Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king as supreme or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the approval of those who do good.* » (1 P 2, 13-14).

This obedience to the civil authorities – to the extent that the things asked do not go against the conscience – is experienced by Saint Joseph. He respects the edict of the Emperor Augustus who orders the census of the entire world : « *So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.* » (Lk 2, 3-5)

Of course, when Herod ordered the killing of all children under the age of two years in Bethlehem, Saint Joseph does not submit to this decree that goes against his conscience. He protects the child from an arbitrary decision that goes against the Law of God.

### **The obedience of Jesus**

« *Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you.* » (Ex 20,12) Saint Luke, the evangelist, takes great care to indicate that Jesus « *was obedient* » to his parents (Lk 2, 52). The obedience of Saint Joseph to his conscience, to the Word of God, to the Law and the authorities, is a model. It gave him the authority to allow Jesus to obey him and through him, to obey God whom Saint Joseph obeyed. The obedience of Saint Joseph is also a model for all of us.