

The characteristics of the obedience of Saint Joseph

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After having contemplated Saint Joseph in his attitude of obedience, we can try to address some characteristics of his obedience.

A free obedience, without constraint

The dreams that Saint Joseph receives aim at reassuring and explaining to him what the Lord expects of him. We clearly see in their formulation that there is no constraint. He receives no threat from the angel, in the event he would not follow the way that is indicated to him. « *Do not be afraid* », the angel says to him to reassure him (Mt 1, 20).

« *For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption* » writes Saint Paul (Rm 8, 15). God expects neither of Saint Joseph nor of each one of us servile obedience. He is not a dictator who imposes his will. He expects, on our part, free consent to his project of love. It is the liberty of the son who is in communion with the will of the father. It is the liberty of the Son of God who is in communion with the will of God the Father, and who teaches us to obey like a son, in complete liberty.

An obedience without hesitation

Saint Joseph does not wait for confirmation of the word that he receives. Neither does he seek to have his dream interpreted. As we were saying, speaking of the experience of the obedience of Saint Joseph, it is striking to find that the verbs that express the actions taken by Saint Joseph correspond exactly to the words that the angel addresses to him in the dream: rise / he rose, take the child and his mother / he took the child and his mother. The obedience of Saint Joseph is always immediate and without any hesitation.

The only hesitation that certain people could identify in him would be at the moment when he is thinking of secretly

repudiating Mary. But this is not really a hesitation. He acts according to what his conscience tells him to be the best way, before, through a new light received from God in a dream, he is shown another solution, much better than the one he imagined and chose. Strengthened by this new light, he does not hesitate a single moment.

An obedience in silence : without question and without eclat

Saint Joseph obeys without questioning and without asking himself questions.

Of course, we have the right to ask ourselves questions, like the Virgin Mary does when she asks the angel: « *How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?* » (Lk 1, 34) The angel said to Saint Joseph « *For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.* » (Mt 1, 20), which corresponds with the angel Gabriel's response to the Virgin Mary: « *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.* » (Lk 1, 35). That was enough for him. He did not ask to know anything further.

More than the questions he could have asked, we can see that Saint Joseph does not ask questions about the difficulties he is going to encounter. When he leaves with the Virgin Mary towards Bethlehem for the census, he knows very well that the day of giving birth is approaching. He could have imagined that leaving in such a way was imprudent. When he leaves for Egypt, he is going to a foreign land, perhaps an inhospitable one. When we are sometimes tempted to anticipate a little too much, Saint Joseph gives us the example of a man who advances step by step and who knows by obeying the Lord he will be able to face the difficulties that will be before him.

His obedience can seem to some like a form of carelessness condemned by Jesus: « *Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him and say, "This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish!"* » (Lk 14, 28-

30) One could ask oneself if Saint Joseph is not building a little too quickly and if he is not being careless. The fact that he fully assumes his responsibilities shows that it is not at all the case. Saint Joseph is not passive in his act of obedience: it is not a servile obedience but the obedience of the son. If he is the purported father of Jesus the Son of God, he is, himself, above all the loved son of the Father who sees « *what he does in secret and will repay him* » (Cf. Mt 6, 4. 6. 18). In this regard, we can note that his obedience is always discreet. In the Gospel, he is the one who does not speak and does not attract attention to himself. He obeys without question and without éclat. It is the obedience of the faith of the one who trusts in God and who steps aside in front of Him.

An obedience that involves his entire self

In the way in which Saint Joseph obeys, we can identify four steps that involve his entire self, with his intelligence, memory and will:

- the discernment
- the decision
- the action
- assuming his responsibilities.

His thinking as to what he must do regarding the one who is granted to him in marriage and who is expecting, reveals a man who takes the time to discern. He looks inside his conscience to avoid what is bad and to accomplish what is good. He welcomes the new light that the Lord grants his conscience through the word of the angel that he receives in a dream. The gift of counsel received during our Confirmation, along with the six other gifts of the Holy Spirit, is there to enlighten us in our discernment. In order to obey, one must listen and therefore hear what is the path that the Lord draws for us and that he wishes us to choose freely.

The second step that involves Saint Joseph is to decide. It is a free act. It is the *fiat* of the Virgin Mary. Or even the « *not my Will but Yours be done* » of Jesus at Gethsemane (Lk 22, 42). Saint Joseph brings the same response when he chooses promptly to obey. For him, it is the decision to rise that he

makes several times, and sometimes in the middle of the night.

His decision is manifested in an act that goes all the way. When he takes Mary home, he does not reject her later. When he leaves for Egypt, he really goes and stays there until the moment the angel promised to alert him. When he welcomes Mary in his home, he does not content himself with obeying what God asked him through the angel. He takes in his wife, respecting the particular way she wishes to live. In a sense, he also obeys the Virgin Mary. Saint Bridget of Sweden (1300-1373) relates this private revelation received from the Virgin Mary: « *Moreover, you ought to know for very certain that before Joseph betrothed me, he understood, in the Holy Spirit, that I had vowed my virginity to God and that I was immaculate in thought, word, and deed. He betrothed me with the intention that he might serve me, treating me as his lady, not as his wife.* » (*Secret Revelations*, book VII, c. 25) After having let ourselves be enlightened by the Holy Spirit in an act of discernment, with the gift of counsel, it is good to rely on the gift of fortitude which helps us to go all the way in the decision that we take.

Finally, Saint Joseph fully assumes his responsibilities. He acts as the father of Jesus in giving Him his name, in consecrating Him to the Lord, but also protecting Him from the danger of Herod or Arkelaus.

An obedience without limit

Saint Joseph withholds nothing. He does not do things half-way. His limitless obedience is the expression of a total gift of himself to the Lord, to His Will. We still see the expression of an obedience that finds its source in faith. The Virgin Mary believes the word of the angel and she knows that she has no relations with a man. Saint Joseph believes the word of the angel, he believes that she has no relations with a man, according to the word of the angel. His complete faith leads him to obey without limit. It encourages us to make an act of faith, and to say to the Lord « *Increase our faith* » (Lk 17,5), so that we, in turn, obey without limit.

Obedience is the virtue of the disciple

The disciple is the one who listens to the Word of Christ and who puts it into practice. The disciple then belongs to the family of Christ: « *My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it.* » (Lk 8, 21). Of course, here, Jesus does not use the expression « my father » to avoid any confusion for He is the Son of God. However, we see that this word applies perfectly to the one who was given to Him as an adoptive father, Saint Joseph, who listened to the Word of God and put it into practice, which is a definition of obedience to God.

Saint Joseph teaches us then to be disciples of the Lord, to promptly obey him and without limit, to say to him each morning: « Here I am, Lord ! Let it be done to me according to your Word. »