

First Topic: Saint Joseph's Struggle to accept Mary

Let us read few salient verses of the Infancy Narrative as portrayed to us by the evangelist Matthew:

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”¹

“And her husband Joseph, being righteous and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, intended to dismiss her quietly.”²

“But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph... do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”³

“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife...”⁴

1. Matthew, unlike Luke, doesn't really tell us about the *birth* of Jesus. Matthew instead tells us *where Jesus came from*, and it tells the story through the eyes of Joseph.
2. Matthew plainly (without the greater detail found in the Gospel of Luke) presents the virginal conception and subsequent birth of Jesus.
3. Joseph was understandably troubled by Mary's mysterious pregnancy, her future, and what he should do towards her. Though he had decided, “*to dismiss her quietly* [secretly],” he was not comfortable with that decision.

“When we have to do a severe thing, let us choose the tenderest manner. Maybe we shall not have to do it at all.”⁵

4. It seems that Mary had not told Joseph that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. This shouldn't surprise us; how could she (or how could anyone except God) explain such a thing? This angelic word to Joseph was persuasive.

¹ Matthew 1:18

² Matthew 1:19

³ Matthew 1:20-21

⁴ Matthew 1:24

⁵ Charles Spurgeon, the 19th century English Baptist preacher, known as the “Prince of Preachers”

5. Joseph's obedience is remarkable. He did not doubt nor waver; he instantly understood the truth and the importance of the angelic messenger that came to him in the dream.

In Saint Joseph there is no separation between faith and action; his faith had a decisive effect on his actions; he is "*righteous*" because his existence is adapted to the word of God. Joseph reveals to us the secret of a humanity which dwells in the presence of mystery and is open to that mystery at every moment of everyday life. Paradoxically, it was by acting, by carrying out his responsibilities as legal father of Jesus in God's plan of salvation, that he stepped aside and left God free to act, placing no obstacles in his way. The "*new creature*" is outlined in him, who looks with trust and courage to the future; he does not follow his own plans but entrusts himself unreservedly to God's infinite mercy who will fulfil the prophecies and open the time of salvation.

Joseph's *four dreams*, that is to say, his accepted response to Jesus' conception, his migration to Egypt, were calls from God, his return to Israel after the death of Herod the Great, and his settling in Nazareth after hearing that Herod the Great's son, Archelaus, took over Judea, Samaria and Idumea, were not easy to accept, but through them he made of his life a gift; they led him into experiences he would never have imagined.⁶ After each dream, he had to change his plans and take a risk, sacrificing his own plans in order to follow the mysterious designs of God, whom he trusted completely. Amid all these upheavals, he found the courage to follow God's will. Why? Because his heart was already inclined towards God. A small indication was enough for his watchful "inner ear" to recognize God's voice. This applies also to our calling: God does not like to reveal himself in a spectacular way; he does not overwhelm us with dazzling visions but quietly speaks in the depths of our heart, drawing near to us and speaking to us through our thoughts and feelings. In this way, as he did with Saint Joseph, he sets before us profound and unexpected horizons; he surprises us but never disappoints us.

God's call always urges us to take a first step, to give ourselves, to press forward. There can be no faith without risk. Only by abandoning ourselves confidently to grace, setting aside our own programmes and comforts, can we truly say "yes" to God. And every "yes" bears fruit because it becomes part of a larger design, of which we glimpse only details, but which the divine artisan carries out, making of every life a masterpiece; we only have life if we give it; we truly possess it only if we generously give it away. In this regard, Saint Joseph is an outstanding example of acceptance of God's plans. Yet his was "*certainly not passively resigned, but courageously and firmly proactive. In our own lives, acceptance and welcome can be an expression of the Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude. Only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments.*"⁷

The evangelists Matthew and Luke, the two who speak most of Joseph, tell us that he lived entirely for others and never for himself; he has been actually invoked by God's people as the "*chaste servant*," based on his ability to love unreservedly.

Chaste is the antidote to and freedom from possessiveness. A chaste love is a true love as it allows the other to decide and explore possibilities in freedom; a possessive, overprotective and proprietorial love chokes the other. God's love for humanity is a chaste love so much so that "*he left us free even to go astray and set ourselves against him.*" Joseph is precisely the epitome of someone who serves God by looking after Jesus, but not in a controlling way; his non-proprietary attitude towards Jesus truly implements Jesus' words: "*... call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.*"⁸

By freeing love from all possessiveness, Joseph became open to an even more fruitful service; his service – as a concrete expression of the gift of self – did not remain simply a high ideal, but became a rule for daily life. His service and sacrifices were only possible, however, because they were sustained by a greater love:

⁶ Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13; 2:19-21; 2:22-23

⁷ Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter, *Patris Corde*, article 4

⁸ Matthew 23:9

“Joseph found happiness not in mere self-sacrifice but in self-gift. In him, we never see frustration but only trust... Every true vocation is born of the gift of oneself, which is the fruit of mature sacrifice... Whatever our vocation, whether to marriage, celibacy or virginity, our gift of self will not come to fulfilment if it stops at sacrifice; were that the case, instead of becoming a sign of the beauty and joy of love, the gift of self would risk being an expression of unhappiness, sadness and frustration.”⁹

⁹ Pope Francis’ Apostolic Letter, *Patris Corde*, article 7