

## Parish Cells of Evangelization

### School of St. Joseph

#### **St. Joseph's challenges and problems**

Life's problems and troubles are challenges that make us grow. If, hypothetically, someone could live without ever experiencing some difficulty, some suffering or probation, that person would not mature and his life would not be fruitful. Before life's hardships we often have to make choices. And we can always choose good or evil. But the choices we make shape our character and behaviour. For a believer, all challenges must be experienced in the light of God, as He does not abandon us, rather He makes everything contribute for His love plan.

S. Joseph experiences all the difficulties and tribulations of his journey as husband and father in obedience to God's will, which always shows him the way to follow. As we look at some of the challenges and problems that St Joseph experienced, as the Scripture presents them, the important thing is that they may help us to face our own life difficulties with the same faith, obedience and courage that he did.

In this teaching I will refer to 4 challenges that St. Joseph had to face and how he overcame them.

#### **First Challenge:**

*"His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit." (Mt 1:18)*

This was the Joseph's first dilemma we know. What should he do? Slander her, repudiate her and thus condemn her to death by stoning, as was provided in the Law for similar cases? Or simply leave her secretly, so as not to see her suffer? And the text tells us: *"Her husband Joseph; being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. (Mt 1:19)*

But Joseph's suffering does not let him sleep and produces cold sweats in him together with a heartrending question: How could Mary, whom he loved and respected so much, have got into that situation?

*"He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit.:21 She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins. (...) When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home. 25 and, though he had not had intercourse with her, she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus. (Mt 1:20-21; 24-25)*

Let us imagine for a moment that Joseph had been overcome by anguish and anger and had slandered Mary, abandoning her to her fate? In a single decision Joseph would have condemned both the Mother and the Son, who would no longer have been born. But his love for Mary and, above all, his ability to listen to God's will, at a life-changing situation, resulted in the salvation of the mother's life and the possibility for the Son's birth.

Could Joseph have chosen another way? In theory he could, as he was not conditioned to do only good. This is always a choice of our freedom. But when the biblical text states that Joseph was a just man, that is, one who always conformed to God's will, then it means that his freedom, enlightened by faith and love, does not consider choosing evil, but rather always doing what God wants. And God always leads us to choose life, because he wishes *"that we may have life and have it abundantly"*. As a result of his obedience, Mary will give birth to the One whom Joseph will name Jesus. (cf Mt 1:25)

### **Second Challenge:**

The birth in a manger in Bethlehem

In the Letter to the Romans St. Paul states, *"Let all submit to public authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. 2Therefore, whoever resists authority opposes the order willed by God, and those who oppose it will receive condemnation."* (Rom 13:1-2)

S. Joseph is obedient to God and, therefore, obeys the authorities and laws of the Roman empire under which his country was.

*"So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, (...) in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child."* (Lk2:4)

We know what happened next. When the time came for the Child to be born, Joseph knocked on all doors of inns and guesthouses, but all of them were closed, either because of being fully booked, due to the census, or because they did not want to be in trouble with a pregnant woman. What a challenge for Joseph who wishes to be a protective husband and a provident father! Subject to the circumstances, Joseph leads his wife to a stable where Mary gives birth and wraps her Child in cloths that she had brought with her.

Usually, we see Joseph immediately doing what God asks him in a dream, through the angels. But now neither dreams nor angels are mentioned. He decides to go to Bethlehem to register, obeying the civil law, and he decides to take his wife to a stable, not because an angel told him to do so, but because circumstances determined it, and Joseph knows that God shows his will, even through circumstances, through events, as

they present themselves to us, when we can do nothing to change them. If it was not possible to do otherwise, if all the doors were shut, then it was because God, in his providence, wanted it that way. And, on Christmas Eve, it was where the angels led the shepherds and next the Magi from the East.

### **Third challenge:**

*"After they had left, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child and do away with him'.*

*2:14 So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, left that night for Egypt. (Mt 2:13-14*

What an adventure God is asking him now! A lowly carpenter who must never have left his small country, is now called to become an immigrant in a country of unknown language and culture! What difficulties will he have to face on the way? How to find a home and work when he gets there? "But Joseph did not hesitate to obey, regardless of the hardship involved." (Patris Corde 3)

His focus is on obedience to God's will and his family's protection which means the same. Given this, Joseph does not wonder about the pitfalls of the journey. He accepts the challenge with creative courage and sets out. The life of that Child and his mother were at stake and through Him the salvation of his people: *"you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins."* (Mt 1:21)

### **Fourth challenge:**

Herod died and so the angel told Joseph to return to Israel. It doesn't seem a great challenge, but rather a great relief and contentment, to be able to return to his land.

*"But when he learnt that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as ruler of Judaea he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he left for the region of Galilee" (Mt 2:22)*

First there was fear, that is, concern about what might happen to the Child and his mother since he came to know who governed in Judea: might they still be in danger? The text says: "being warned in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee". It may happen that when we so often hear about Joseph being guided by dreams and angels, we might think that it was easy for him, because God was always telling him what to do and that doesn't happen with us. However, what happened to Joseph is what happens to anyone who wants to follow the will of God above all. I can imagine that when Joseph was aware of who was reigning in Judea, might have wondered a lot about what he should do. He may have asked God to enlighten him and guide him, and perhaps during the night, while he was thinking about it, a clear idea, a strong intuition

came to his mind and heart: Go to Galilee. All those who usually do God's will testify that, from a certain time onwards, He leads them to act according to inner lights that He gives them. In a famous book on obedience Reniero Cantalamessa says: "When God meets a soul who is determined to obey, He takes his life in his hands, like one who takes the helm of a boat or the reins of a horse. He really becomes "The Lord", and not only in theory, that is, He is the one who 'directs,' the one who 'governs'- determining, so to speak, step by step, that person's gestures, words, his way of using time, everything in short". (Fr. Reniero Cantalamessa, Emanuel Editions Portugal, p.73)

So was St Joseph in God's hands, as Mary was and as Jesus was to be - above all nurturing himself by doing God's will. Jesus attended a good school, the one of his parents, from whom he learned to live everything under the eyes of God and letting himself be totally led by Him.

S. Joseph faced many challenges, from which I have highlighted four, but they were all overcome by his faith and obedience to God who led him and by whom he let himself be led.

May this example of St. Joseph, Jesus' Father in the heart, teach us to live all our challenges with the same faith and creative courage and always listening to God's will.

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