

JOHN PAUL II



Guardian
of the
Redeemer

ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

With Commentary by
Dr. Joseph C. Atkinson

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Preface

On the 100th anniversary of Leo XIII's encyclical on Saint Joseph, *Quamquam Pluries*, John Paul II decided to turn his gaze, and thereby the gaze of the whole Church, upon the guardian of Jesus, the spouse of Mary, and the patron of the universal Church. The pope's aim was to encourage all to grow in their devotion to Saint Joseph.

Saint Joseph's importance as husband and father was recognized from the very beginning of the Church and recorded in Scripture. Nonetheless, devotion to Saint Joseph followed a rather long and slow trajectory. Clearly Joseph played a key role in the initial preparation for the Incarnation. Yet he was taken officially into the heart of the Church's liturgical life only after centuries of theological development.

It was not until 1962, in fact, that John XXIII at Vatican Council II inserted Joseph's name into the Roman Canon of the Mass. While it appears that specific forms of devotion to Joseph developed in the early centuries of the Coptic Church (and were often associated with the flight into Egypt), it was not until the Middle Ages that a cult of Saint Joseph began

in the West. In 1359 Saint Joseph's name was added to the Litany of Saints, but it was omitted during the Tridentine reforms of the sixteenth century and restored again in 1726. The first indulgenced novena to Saint Joseph was approved in 1713 by Clement XI, yet it was not until 1909 that Pius X give formal approval to a public litany of Saint Joseph.*

This slow theological development culminated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the foundational truths of Scripture and the centuries-old theological intuitions concerning Saint Joseph finally coalesced. In 1870, Pius IX declared Saint Joseph to be the patron of the Catholic Church. Then, in 1899, Leo XIII supplemented Pius's initiative by issuing *Quamquam Pluries* to encourage the Christian people to invoke Saint Joseph, trusting in his intercession. At the time, morals and faith were degenerating, and so the pope urged that "devotion to Saint Joseph should engraft itself upon the daily pious practices of Catholics" (*QP 2*).

God always provides what is most needed for the good of the Church. Why then has Joseph become so prominent in the Church's awareness in this modern period? Perhaps the answer is that opposition to the faith today centers primarily on the family. It is being attacked in an unprecedented manner by many who wish to deform and destroy it (see *Familiaris Consortio* 3). Today human life has only accidental

* See *Saint Joseph in the Liturgy* at www.osjoseph.org/stjoseph/liturgy/partB.php. Here, the Oblates of Saint Joseph provide a helpful comprehensive history of Saint Joseph.

value, sexuality is a human or government construct, and chastity is scorned. Yet, even within the darkness of our own times, there are signs of hope as people begin to seek to discover God's will for marriage and family.

In many ways our culture is like the world culture of Jesus's time. He was born into a world dominated by paganism and violence. God commanded Joseph, the head of the Holy Family, to bring to safety "his precious treasures" (RC 1) Jesus and Mary. Now, as the Church is again surrounded by a destructive culture, she turns in prayer to Christ and invokes the protection and powerful intercession of Saint Joseph.*

John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* theologically strengthened recovery of the value of Joseph. In this work, the Holy Father reveals the inner logic of Saint Joseph's interior life and vocation. While his entire being was permeated by silence (we have no recorded words of Joseph), John Paul II saw this contemplative silence as the foundation for Joseph's entire life.

The unique contribution John Paul II makes in this document is his emphasis on the *realism* of Joseph and Mary's marriage. In Catholic theology there is no room for dualism, which views the body and the soul in opposition to each other. For human persons both the body and the spirit are essential, yet they are configured in a specific

* Interestingly, in May 2013, Pope Francis wanted to intentionally turn the gaze of the Church upon the *fatherly* care of Joseph by inserting Saint Joseph's name into three more canons of the Mass.

manner. John Paul II *boldly* states that it is as important for the Church to uphold the reality of Joseph and Mary's marriage as it is to profess the virginal conception of Jesus (RC 7). Unflinchingly, the Holy Father addresses the seeming impossibility for virginity and real conjugal love to co-exist in their marriage. He carefully unpacks the paradox here and shows how these mutually exclusive loves can, in fact, be united in one who is sanctified. Virginity and conjugal love are thus intrinsically related. On this basis, John Paul II demonstrates how by the Spirit conjugal love is perfected in Saint Joseph. Joseph is not less a father or a husband, rather he actually realizes the full meaning of both through the total gift of self.

Given the current crisis of the family and fatherhood, it seems providential that such a humble and just figure be raised up for our consideration. Joseph models for us what it is to be a just man, a holy husband, and a faithful father, one who can intercede powerfully for us and for the Church.

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APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION OF THE
SUPREME PONTIFF JOHN PAUL II

Guardian of the Redeemer

Redemptoris Custos

On the Person and Mission of Saint Joseph
in the Life of Christ and of the Church

To Bishops, to Priests and Deacons, to Men and Women
Religious, and to all the Lay Faithful

Introduction

1. “Joseph did *as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took his wife*” (cf. Mt 1:24).

Inspired by the Gospel, the Fathers of the Church from the earliest centuries stressed that just as Saint Joseph took loving care of Mary and gladly dedicated himself to Jesus Christ’s upbringing,¹ he likewise watches over and protects Christ’s Mystical Body, that is, the Church, of which the Virgin Mary is the exemplar and model.

On the occasion of the centenary of Pope Leo XIII’s Encyclical Epistle *Quamquam Pluries*,² and in line with the veneration given to Saint Joseph over the centuries, I wish to offer for your consideration, dear brothers and sisters, some reflections concerning him “into whose custody God entrusted his most precious treasures.”³ I gladly fulfill this pastoral duty so that all may grow in devotion to the Patron of the Universal Church and in love for the Savior whom he served in such an exemplary manner.

In this way the whole Christian people not only will turn to Saint Joseph with greater fervor and invoke his patronage with trust, but also will always keep before their eyes his

humble, mature way of serving and of “taking part” in the plan of salvation.⁴

I am convinced that by reflection upon the way that Mary’s spouse shared in the divine mystery, the Church—on the road toward the future with all of humanity—will be enabled to discover ever anew her own identity within this redemptive plan, *which is founded on the mystery of the Incarnation.*

This is precisely the mystery in which Joseph of Nazareth “shared” like no other human being except Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Word. He shared in it with her; he was involved in the same salvific event; he was the guardian of the same love, through the power of which the eternal Father “destined us to be his sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:5).



PONDER

Why should we focus on Saint Joseph? The answer given by the Church, which John Paul II affirms, is that God *entrusted* his most precious treasures to this humble carpenter. Jesus, the Son of God, and Mary, the immaculate mother of the Christ, were given into Joseph's care (see *RC* 1 and footnote 4). If God trusts Joseph with responsibility for Jesus and Mary, we too can confidently entrust ourselves to his intercession and patronage.

In our modern age, it sounds odd to speak of someone being a patron of someone else. This goes against the spirit of today's world, which believes everyone is an autonomous individual. But the Scriptures show us that salvation is always both personal and corporate. God alone is the source of our salvation but, in respecting the freedom he gave us, the Lord invites us to cooperate with him. Jesus does not simply show up in human history. Rather, Mary and Joseph cooperate with the Father to bring into the world the very cause of our salvation, Jesus, and to protect and nourish him.

In this exhortation, John Paul II links devotion to Saint Joseph with our love for Jesus, thereby showing the Christological foundation of devotion to this saint. We are to grow "in love for the Savior whom he [Joseph] served" (*RC* 1). Devotion to Saint Joseph ultimately springs from a love of Jesus himself. As we grow in devotion to Joseph we

will find that he, like Mary, always points us to Jesus, “whom he served.”

Joseph fulfills a twofold ministry to the People of God. First, he is an *intercessor* for us, a powerful intercessor whom we can trust. If God entrusts so much to him, so can we. We can ask him to be our patron, to accompany us on our pilgrimage through life, and to intercede with God on our behalf. Second, he is a preeminent *model* for all Christians. By his life, Joseph gives us the example of how a person takes part in salvation (*RC 1*). He shows us how to “work out . . . [our] salvation” (Phil 2:12) with both humility and maturity.

Saint Joseph is not only a model for the individual Christian, but also for the Church itself. No other human being, besides Mary, shared so deeply in the divine mystery of Jesus becoming man. Consequently, John Paul II is convinced that as the Church reflects on how Joseph “shared in the divine mystery” (*RC 1*), she will also be able to rediscover her own identity within that plan. What Joseph did, the Church is called to do: be humble, be open to God, and be the guardian of the divine life in this world.

1. The saints are fellow Christians who have been perfected by the love of Jesus. The Book of Revelation speaks of the “bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones” (Rev 5:8). Because of their love for Jesus, the saints intercede for us before our heavenly Father. What do I know about the Communion of Saints? How can I cultivate love for the saints and strengthen my relationship with them?

2. Other than Mary, no one experienced the mystery of the Incarnation as profoundly as Joseph did. The fragility of the divine infant life was handed over to him to care for, protect, and guide. What must it have been like for Joseph to take on the role of father to the Son of God? How must he have felt and dealt with these emotions?
3. Joseph played a specific role in salvation history. The Church has affirmed that God entrusted “his most precious treasures” to him. Do I see myself as having a vocation within the body of Christ or do I see my spiritual life as just something personal? How can I discover the vocation God has planned for me? How can I live my vocational commitment with greater love?

PRAY

Father, in love you created us and redeemed us. In love you make us a part of the body of your Son, so that now we never have to live in isolation from you or from one other. Thank you for the Communion of Saints, our fellow Christians who have gone before us, perfected by the love of Christ. In particular, help us come to know the foster father of your Son, Saint Joseph. Knowing that you entrusted to him your most precious treasures, Jesus and Mary, may we have ever greater confidence in his intercession for us. Amen.

Act

Read books or visit Catholic websites (e.g., www.osjoseph.org) that deal with the life of Saint Joseph so you can become more familiar with him and his role in salvation history.

PART I

The Gospel Portrait

Marriage to Mary

2. “Joseph, Son of David, *do not fear to take Mary* your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:20–21).

In these words we find the core of biblical truth about Saint Joseph; they refer to that moment in his life to which the Fathers of the Church make special reference.

The evangelist Matthew explains the significance of this moment while also describing how Joseph lived it. However, in order to understand fully both its content and context, it is important to keep in mind the parallel passage in the *Gospel of Luke*. In Matthew we read: “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 of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:18). However, the origin of Mary’s pregnancy “of the Holy Spirit”

is described more fully and explicitly in *what Luke tells us about the annunciation of Jesus' birth*: "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary" (Lk 1:26–27). The angel's greeting: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28), created an inner turmoil in Mary and also moved her to reflect. Then the messenger reassured the Virgin and at the same time revealed God's special plan for her: "*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David*" (Lk 1:30–32).

A little earlier the Gospel writer had stated that at the moment of the annunciation, Mary was "betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David." The nature of this "*marriage*" is explained indirectly when Mary, after hearing what the messenger says about the birth of the child, asks, "How can this be, *since I do not know man?*" (Lk 1:34) The angel responds: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Lk 1:35). Although Mary is already "wedded" to Joseph, she will remain a virgin, because the child conceived in her at the annunciation was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

At this point Luke's text coincides with Matthew 1:18 and serves to explain what we read there. If, after her

marriage to Joseph, Mary “is found to be with child of the Holy Spirit,” this fact corresponds to all that the annunciation means, in particular to Mary’s final words: “*Let it be to me according to your word*” (Lk 1:38). In response to what is clearly the plan of God, with the passing of days and weeks Mary’s “pregnancy” is visible to the people and to Joseph; she appears before them as one who must give birth and carry within herself the mystery of motherhood.

3. In these circumstances, “her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, *resolved to send her away quietly*” (Mt 1:19). 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. “*But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (Mt 1:20–21).

There is a strict parallel between the “annunciation” in Matthew’s text and the one in Luke. *The divine messenger introduces Joseph to the mystery of Mary’s motherhood.* While remaining a virgin, she who by law is his “spouse” has become a mother through the power of the Holy Spirit. And when the Son in Mary’s womb comes into the world, he must receive the name Jesus. This was a name known among the Israelites and sometimes given to their sons. In this case, however, *it is the Son who*, in accordance with the

divine promise, *will bring to perfect fulfillment the meaning of the name Jesus—Yehos ua’—which means “God saves.”*

Joseph is visited by *the messenger* as “Mary’s spouse,” as the one who in due time must give this name to the Son to be born of the Virgin of Nazareth who is married to him. It is *to Joseph*, then, that the messenger turns, *entrusting to him the responsibilities of an earthly father with regard to Mary’s Son.*

“When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary as his wife” (cf. Mt 1:24). He took her in all the mystery of her motherhood. He took her together with the Son who had come into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this way *he showed a readiness of will like Mary’s* with regard to what God asked of him through the angel.



PONDER

At the heart of the mystery of Saint Joseph is his relationship to Mary, through which he enters into the mystery of the Incarnation. John Paul II thus begins his reflection by examining Joseph's marriage to Mary. This provides the background for Joseph's own form of an "annunciation" as recounted in Matthew 1:18–25 (RC 3). Like Mary, Joseph faced a moment of decision that would determine the whole course of his life. For Mary this seemingly came in a moment of quiet. For Joseph, this moment of decision came in a way that caused great agitation because the woman he was betrothed to was found with child.

In ancient Israel, one became legally betrothed first, then later married with the right to marital relations. Both states were legally binding. As a pious Jew, Joseph would have wanted to marry a virgin to protect his family lineage, but Mary appeared to have compromised her state. The Gospels make it clear that Joseph was not the father of the child. He then had to decide how he would live this moment of his life.

Here Joseph's character became a determining factor. The Gospel states that he was both a *just* man and *unwilling* to put her to shame (see Mt 1:19). Feeling shame himself because of the seeming betrayal, Joseph did not seek revenge. Rather, his love for Mary held firm and he resolved to send

her away (Scripture uses the Hebrew term for divorce) quietly. As John Paul II notes, Joseph did not know how to deal with Mary's "astonishing" motherhood (*RC* 3). However, motivated by love, he sought a quiet way to resolve the situation.

Into this perplexing and bewildering context God entered and did what is seemingly impossible. He assured Joseph that Mary was still a virgin. Joseph was commanded not to fear to take Mary as his wife and to give the child the name of Jesus. Yet this still must have been mystifying. How could a woman be pregnant without "knowing" a man? Besides, what could it mean that this child was to save people from their sins? Who was this child? How could he possibly take away sins?

All of this profoundly challenged the landscape of Joseph's thought-world. He was asked to believe the impossible: that a child could be born of a virgin and could take away the sins of the world. At that point, this just man simply accepted the word of God. Like Mary, like Abraham, he trusted in the Lord. By accepting this word, he accepted the whole path of life that would flow from it. In obedience to God, Joseph named the child. By so doing he took upon himself the role of father with all its responsibilities. The bond of fatherhood, which was not his biologically, was replaced with the bond of paternity, which was his spiritually. Joseph's very openness to God allowed him to enter deeply into the mystery of salvation and enabled him to play his part.

1. Joseph faced a dilemma. To marry a pregnant woman would bring shame on the family and endanger the purity of the family line. Yet, motivated by justice and mercy, he did not want to bring shame on Mary. This was an impossible situation. How was it resolved? What steps did Joseph first take? What happened next? How do you usually react when you must face a crisis or difficult situation? How can you open yourself to God during these times?
2. Joseph faced a critical moment when he could either take a risk and follow God's words, or he could play it safe and refuse God's plan for his life. Think of times when you sensed God was calling you to do something. How did you respond? Are you more able to respond positively to God today? How do you listen for the word God sends to direct your life? What can you do to be more open to hearing God speak to you?
3. Joseph was faced with seeming infidelity. He knew Mary's character and could only feel bewildered over her "astonishing" motherhood, as John Paul II notes (*RC 3*). In this context, Joseph acted justly and lovingly because of his character and virtues. Then God intervened. How am I seeking to become a more virtuous person? In what ways am I cooperating with God to form and shape my character? (A good indication of this is how frequently I participate in the sacrament of Reconciliation.)

PRAY

Father, you have given us the example of Abraham, Mary, and Joseph as people who hear a seemingly impossible word from you and yet believe. By trusting in you, they have helped to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. Give me the faith of Abraham so that I may believe even when I am old and outwardly useless; give me the faith of Mary so that I may trust even when following you may bring shame; and give me the faith of Joseph so that I may put my hand in yours and have utter confidence in you. Like them, may I say, "May it be done according to your word." Amen.

ACT

The next time you are in a situation where you feel confused, bewildered, or betrayed, pause in the midst of your angst and think of Saint Joseph and his response to Mary. Ask Saint Joseph to intercede for you, that you might experience calm and be able to trust that God will work everything out for the good.