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Saint Joseph, Man of Silence

In his 15 December general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on Saint Joseph, stressing the role of silence in his life.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our journey of reflection on Saint Joseph. After illustrating the environment in which he lived, his role in salvation

history and his being just and the spouse of Mary, today I would like to consider another important personal aspect: silence. Very often nowadays we need silence. Silence is important. I am struck by a verse from the Book of Wisdom that was read with Christmas in mind, which says: “While gentle silence enveloped all things, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven”. The moment of most silence God manifested himself. It is important to think about silence in this age in which it does not seem to have much value.

The Gospels do not contain a single word uttered by Joseph of Nazareth: nothing, he never spoke. This does not mean that he was taciturn, no: there is a deeper reason why the Gospels do not say a word. With his silence, Joseph confirms what Saint Augustine writes: “To the extent that the *Word* – that is, the Word made man - *grows in us, words diminish*”.

[1] To the extent that Jesus, the spiritual life, grows, words diminish. What we can describe as “parroting”, speaking like parrots, continually, diminishes a little. John the Baptist himself, who is “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’ ” (*Mt* 3:3) says in relation to the Word, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (*Jn* 3:30). This means that he must speak and I must be silent, and through his silence, Joseph invites us to leave room for the Presence of the Word made flesh, for Jesus.

Joseph’s silence is not mutism, he is not taciturn; it is a silence full of *listening*, an *industrious* silence, a silence that brings out his great interiority. “The Father spoke a word, and it was his Son”, comments St John of the Cross, the Father said a word and it was his Son - “and it always speaks in eternal silence, and

in silence it must be heard by the soul” [2].

Jesus was raised in this “school”, in the house of Nazareth, with the daily example of Mary and Joseph. And it is not surprising that he himself sought spaces of silence in his days (cf. *Mt* 14:23) and invited his disciples to have such an experience by example: “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while” (*Mk* 6:31).

How good it would be if each one of us, following the example of Saint Joseph, were able to recover this *contemplative dimension of life, opened wide in silence*. But we all know from experience that it is not easy: silence frightens us a little, because it asks us to delve into ourselves and to confront the part of us that is true. And many people are afraid of silence, they have to speak, and speak, and speak, or listen to

radio or television... but they cannot accept silence because they are afraid. The philosopher Pascal observed that “all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber”. [3]

Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn from Saint Joseph how to cultivate spaces for silence in which another Word can emerge, that is, Jesus, the Word: that of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, that Jesus brings. It is not easy to recognise that Voice, which is very often confused along with the thousand voices of worries, temptations, desires, and hopes that dwell within us; but without this training that comes precisely from the practice of silence, *our tongue can also ail*. Without practicing silence, our tongue can also ail. Instead of making the truth shine, it can become a dangerous weapon. Indeed, our words can become

flattery, bragging, lies, backbiting and slander. It is an established fact that, as the Book of Sirach reminds us, “many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not so many as have fallen because of the tongue” (28:18), the tongue kills more than the sword. Jesus said clearly: whoever speaks ill of his brother or sister, whoever slanders his neighbour, is a murderer (cf. *Mt* 5:21-22). Killing with the tongue. We do not believe this, but it is the truth. Let us think a little about the times we have killed with the tongue: we would be ashamed! But it will do us good, a great deal of good.

Biblical wisdom affirms that “death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (*Pr* 18:21). And the Apostle James, in his Letter, we read at the beginning, develops this ancient theme of the power, positive and negative, of the word with striking

examples, and he says: “If any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also... So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing” (3:2-10).

This is why we must learn from Joseph to cultivate silence: that space of interiority in our days in which we give the Spirit the opportunity to regenerate us, to console us, to correct us. I am not saying to fall into muteness, no. Silence. But very often, each one of us look inside, when we are working on something and when we finish, immediately we look for our telephone to make another call... we are always like this. And this does not help, this makes us slip into superficiality. Profoundness of the heart grows with silence, silence that

is not mutism as I said, but which leaves space for wisdom, reflection and the Holy Spirit. We are afraid of moments of silence. Let us not be afraid! It will do us good. And the benefit to our hearts will also heal our tongue, our words and above all our choices. In fact, Joseph *combined silence with action*. He did not speak, but he acted, and thus demonstrated what Jesus once told his disciples: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21). Silence. Fruitful words when we speak, and we remember that song: “Parole, parole, parole...”, words, words, words, and nothing of substance. Silence, speaking in the right way, and biting your tongue a little, which can be good at times instead of saying foolish things.

Let us conclude with a prayer:

Saint Joseph, man of silence,
you who in the Gospel did not utter a
single word,
teach us to fast from vain words,
to rediscover the value of words that
edify, encourage, console and
support.
Be close to those who suffer from
words that hurt,
like slander and backbiting,
and help us always to match words
with deeds. Amen.
Thank you.

[1] *Discourse* 288, 5: *PL* 38, 1307.

[2] *Dichos de luz y amor*, BAC,
Madrid, 417, n. 99.

[3] *Pensées*, 139.

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