

Return to Nazareth: Magisterium, Saints, Poets

The Holy Family's return to Nazareth, as seen in texts from the Magisterium, saints and Christian poets.

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VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

When the Holy Family returns to Nazareth after Herod's death, there begins the long period of the hidden life. She "who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was

spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk. 1:45) lives the reality of these words day by day. And daily at her side is the Son to whom "she gave the name Jesus"; therefore in contact with him she certainly uses this name, a fact which would have surprised no one, since the name had long been in use in Israel. Nevertheless, Mary knows that he who bears the name Jesus has been called by the angel "the Son of the Most High" (cf. Lk. 1:32).

Mary knows she has conceived and given birth to him "without having a husband," by the power of the Holy Spirit, by the power of the Most High who overshadowed her (cf. Lk. 1:35), just as at the time of Moses and the Patriarchs the cloud covered the presence of God (cf. Ex. 24:16; 40:34-35; I Kings 8:10-12). Therefore Mary knows that the Son to whom she gave birth in a virginal manner is precisely that "Holy One," the Son of God, of whom the angel spoke to her.

During the years of Jesus' hidden life in the house at Nazareth, Mary's life too is "hid with Christ in God" (cf. Col. 3:3) through faith. For faith is contact with the mystery of God. Every day Mary is in constant contact with the ineffable mystery of God made man, a mystery that surpasses everything revealed in the Old Covenant. From the moment of the Annunciation, the mind of the Virgin-Mother has been initiated into the radical "newness" of God's self-revelation and has been made aware of the mystery. She is the first of those "little ones" of whom Jesus will say one day: "Father, ...you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes" (Mt. 11:25). For "no one knows the Son except the Father" (Mt. 11:27).

If this is the case, how can Mary "know the Son"? Of course she does not know him as the Father does; and

yet she is the first of those to whom the Father "has chosen to reveal him" (cf. Mt. 11:26-27; 1 Cor. 2:11). If though, from the moment of the Annunciation, the Son--whom only the Father knows completely, as the one who begets him in the eternal "today" (cf. Ps. 2:7)--was revealed to Mary, she, his Mother, is in contact with the truth about her Son only in faith and through faith! She is therefore blessed, because "she has believed," and continues to believe day after day amidst all the trials and the adversities of Jesus' infancy and then during the years of the hidden life at Nazareth, where he "was obedient to them" (Lk. 2:51). He was obedient both to Mary and also to Joseph, since Joseph took the place of his father in people's eyes; for this reason, the Son of Mary was regarded by the people as "the carpenter's son" (Mt. 13:55).

The Mother of that Son, therefore, mindful of what has been told her at the Annunciation and in subsequent events, bears within herself the radical "newness" of faith: the beginning of the New Covenant. This is the beginning of the Gospel, the joyful Good News. However, it is not difficult to see in that beginning a particular heaviness of heart, linked with a sort of "night of faith"--to use the words of St. John of the Cross--a kind of "veil" through which one has to draw near to the Invisible One and to live in intimacy with the mystery.

And this is the way that Mary, for many years, lived in intimacy with the mystery of her Son, and went forward in her "pilgrimage of faith," while Jesus "increased in wisdom...and in favor with God and man" (Lk. 2:52). God's predilection for him was manifested ever more clearly to people's eyes. The first human creature thus permitted to

discover Christ was Mary, who lived with Joseph in the same house at Nazareth.

from John Paul II, Encyclical letter "Redemptoris Mater," 25 March 1987, no. 17

Nazareth is a kind of school where we may begin to discover what Christ's life was like and even to understand his Gospel. Here we can observe and ponder the simple appeal of the way God's Son came to be known, profound yet full of hidden meaning. And gradually we may even learn to imitate him.

Here we can learn to realise who Christ really is. And here we can sense and take account of the conditions and circumstances that surrounded and affected his life on earth: the places, the tenor of the times, the culture, the language, religious customs, in brief, everything which Jesus used to make

himself known to the world. Here everything speaks to us, everything has meaning. Here we can learn the importance of spiritual discipline for all who wish to follow Christ and to live by the teachings of his Gospel.

How I would like to return to my childhood and attend the simple yet profound school that is Nazareth! How wonderful to be close to Mary, learning again the lesson of the true meaning of life, learning again God's truths. But here we are only on pilgrimage. Time presses and I must set aside my desire to stay and carry on my education in the Gospel, for that education is never finished. But I cannot leave without recalling, briefly and in passing; some thoughts I take with me from Nazareth.

First, we learn from its silence. If only we could once again appreciate its great value. We need this wonderful state of mind, beset as we

are by the cacophony of strident protests and conflicting claims so characteristic of these turbulent times. The silence of Nazareth should teach us how to meditate in peace and quiet, to reflect on the deeply spiritual, and to be open to the voice of God's inner wisdom and the counsel of his true teachers.

Nazareth can teach us the value of study and preparation, of meditation, of a well-ordered personal spiritual life, and of silent prayer that is known only to God.

Second, we learn about family life. May Nazareth serve as a model of what the family should be. May it show us the family's holy and enduring character and exemplify its basic function in society: a community of love and sharing, beautiful for the problems it poses and the rewards it brings, in sum, the perfect setting for rearing children – and for this there is no substitute.

Finally, in Nazareth, the home of a craftsman's son, we learn about work and the discipline it entails. I would especially like to recognise its value – demanding yet redeeming – and to give it proper respect. I would remind everyone that work has its own dignity. On the other hand, it is not an end in itself. Its value and free character, however, derive not only from its place in the economic system, as they say, but rather from the purpose it serves.

*from Paul VI, Address in Nazareth,
January 5, 1964*

VOICE OF THE SAINTS

Both St Matthew and St Luke tell us that Joseph came from a noble line — the house of David and Solomon, kings of Israel. The details of his ancestry are not quite clear. We don't know which of the Gospel's two genealogies refers to Joseph, Jesus' father according to Jewish law, and

which to Mary, his Mother according to the flesh. Nor do we know if Joseph came from Bethlehem, where he went for the census, or Nazareth, where he lived and worked.

On the other hand, we do know that he was not well-to-do: he was just a worker, like so many millions of people throughout the world. He worked at the same demanding and humble job which God chose for himself when he took our flesh and came to live just like the rest of us for thirty years....

Joseph's faith does not falter, he obeys quickly and to the letter. To understand this lesson better, we should remember that Joseph's faith is active, that his docility is not a passive submission to the course of events. For the Christian's faith has nothing whatever to do with conformity, inertia or lack of initiative.

Joseph entrusted himself unreservedly to the care of God, but he always reflected on events and so was able to reach that level of understanding of the works of God which is true wisdom. In this way he learned little by little that supernatural plans have a logic which at times upsets human plans...

That's the way St Joseph's faith was: full, confident, complete. And it expressed itself in an effective dedication to the will of God and an intelligent obedience. With the faith went love. His faith nurtured his love of God, who was fulfilling the promises made to Abraham, Jacob and Moses, and his affection for Mary his wife and her Son. This faith, hope and love would further the great mission which God was beginning in the world through, among others, a carpenter in Galilee: the redemption of mankind.

from St. Josemaria's homily "In Joseph's Workshop," in "Christ Is Passing By"

VOICE OF THE POETS

The Hands That First Held Mary's Child

The hands that first held Mary's Child

Were hard from working wood

From boards they sawed and planed and filed

And splinters they withstood

This day they gripped no tool of steel

They drove no iron nail

But cradled from the head to heel

Our Lord, newborn and frail

When Joseph marveled at the size

Of that small breathing frame
And gazed upon those bright new
eyes
And spoke the Infant's name
The angel's voice he once had
dreamed
Poured down from heaven's height
And like the host of stars that
gleamed
Blessed earth with welcome light
This Child will be Emmanuel
Not God upon the throne
But God-with-us, Emmanuel
As close as blood and bone
The tools which Joseph laid aside
A mob would later lift

And use with anger, fear and pride

To crucify God's gift

The tiny form in Joseph's palms

Confirmed what he had heard

And from his heart rose hymns and
psalms

For heaven's human Word

This Child will be Emmanuel

Not God upon the throne

But God-with-us, Emmanuel

As close as blood and bone

by Thomas H. Troeger (1985)

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