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Saint Joseph, Our Father and Lord

A meditation given by Saint Josemaria in Rome on 19 March 1968, the solemnity of Saint Joseph.

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(Liturgical texts are from the Roman Missal then in use.)

We are celebrating the feast of Saint Joseph, our Father and Lord, protector and patron of the universal Church and of this family of God's sons and daughters, Opus Dei. I

suppose that you have sometimes asked yourselves: How is it possible for the devotion to Saint Joseph to have taken such deep root in the Work when it is a relatively recent devotion, having begun to flourish in the West only around the 16th century? I would reply that our affection, piety, and devotion for Saint Joseph is a consequence of our contemplative life. All of us in the Work try to be very close to Jesus and our Lady; and we cannot be on intimate terms with our Lord and his Mother – our Blessed Mother – unless we are very familiar also with the holy Patriarch who was head of the Family of Nazareth.

Then, too, my children, the Church has rightly recommended him as Patron of the interior life. Who is there with more interior life than Joseph? What human being was closer to Jesus and Mary? Is there

anyone more humble than Joseph, who goes completely unnoticed?

A few days ago, while reading at Mass a passage from the book of Kings, a thought came to my mind and my heart about the simplicity our Lord asks of us in life – the very thing that characterized Joseph.

When Naaman, the Syrian commander, finally goes to see the prophet Elisha in order to be cured of his leprosy, he is told to do something very simple: *Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.*^[1] Naaman thinks arrogantly to himself: So the rivers in my country don't have water as good as those in this land of Elisha? Have I come all the way from Damascus for this? I expected something striking, something extraordinary. But no! You are unclean; go and wash, says the prophet. And not just once, but

repeatedly – seven times – a figure, it seems to me, of the sacraments.

All this brought to mind the simple, hidden life of Joseph, who does nothing but ordinary things. Saint Joseph goes completely unnoticed. Sacred Scripture barely mentions him to us. But it does let us see him fulfilling the role of the head of a family.

Hence if Saint Joseph is Patron of our interior life, if he is an incentive for our contemplative life, and if it is good for all God's sons and daughters in Opus Dei to be close to him, then he also seems to me an excellent example for those who hold positions of government in the Work. He intervenes only when necessary, and then he does so firmly but without violence. That's how Joseph is. Don't be surprised, then, that the Mass on his feast begins with the words, *iustus ut palma florebit*.^[2] That's how

Joseph's holiness flourished. *Sicut cedrus Lybani multiplicabitur.*[3] That makes me think of you. Each individual in Opus Dei is like the mother or father of a great family, responsible for very many souls throughout the world. Then I explain to my younger daughters and sons that in the work of Saint Raphael they ought to become especially close friends with three or four or five; and of these friends perhaps only two will fit in, but later on each of those will bring three or four more hanging from each finger – what is that but flourishing like the just man and multiplying like the cedars of Lebanon?

Plantatus in domo Domini: in atriis domus Dei nostri.[4] Like Joseph, all my children are safe: their souls are safely within the Lord's house, even though they live in the thick of things, in the midst of the world's anxieties, sharing the concerns of

their colleagues, of their fellow-citizens.

It's not surprising that the Church's liturgy applies these words of the book of Wisdom to the holy Patriarch: *dilectus Deo et hominibus, cuius memoria in benedictione est.*^[5] It tells us that he is beloved of the Lord and offers him to us as a model. It invites us, too, as good children of God – even though we are poor unfortunates, like me – to bless this fine saintly young man, the Spouse of Mary. On a relief in the oratory of the Father he is depicted as an old man. But he isn't! Elsewhere I have had him painted young, as I imagine him to be – perhaps a few years older than our Lady, but young, strong, in the prime of life. Behind that classical mode of depicting Saint Joseph as aged lies the idea – a too human one – that it is not easy for a young person to be pure. That's not so. The Christian faithful refer to him

as a Patriarch, but I always think of him as young in heart and body and old in virtue; and hence young also in soul.

Glorificavit illum in conspectu regum, et iussit illi coram populo suo, et ostendit illi gloriam suam. [6] Let's not forget that our Lord wishes to glorify him. And we have given him a central place in our home, making him the Patriarch of our house too. That's why the most solemn and intimate feast of our family, when all the members of the Work come together to ask Jesus our Saviour to send labourers into his harvest, is especially dedicated to the Spouse of Mary. So he is our mediator, the lord of our house; that way we can all trust in his prudence, in his purity, in his affection, in his power. So is not our Father and Lord, Saint Joseph, a truly powerful figure?

Model of a priestly soul

How often I have been moved on reading the prayer the Church proposes for priests to say before Mass! *O felicem virum beatum Ioseph, cui datum est Deum quem multi reges voluerunt videre et non viderunt, audire et non audierunt...* [7] Haven't you ever envied the Apostles and disciples for being so close to Jesus? And then haven't you almost been ashamed, for perhaps – and without the perhaps; I'm sure of it, given my own weakness – you might have been among those who fled, among those who sneaked away and would not stay with him on the Cross?

Quem multi reges voluerunt videre et non viderunt, audire et non audierunt; non solum videre et audire, sed portare, deosculari, vestire et custodire! [8] I can't conceal from you that sometimes when I am alone and feel my wretchedness, I take a statue of Baby Jesus into my arms, and I kiss him and rock him... I'm not

ashamed to tell you this. If we could take Jesus into our arms, what would we do? Did you ever have little brothers and sisters, quite a bit younger than you? I did. I picked him up and rocked him in my arms. What would I have done with Jesus?

Ora pro nobis, beate Joseph. And of course we have to add: *ut digni efficiamur promissionibus Christi.*^[9] Saint Joseph, teach us to love your Son, our Redeemer, the God-Man! Pray for us, O blessed Joseph!

My sons, let's continue with our consideration of the Church's prayer for priests before celebrating the holy Sacrifice.

Deus, qui dedisti nobis regale sacerdotium...^[10] The priesthood is royal for all Christians but especially for those God has called to his Work. We all have a priestly soul. *Praesta, quaesumus; ut, sicut beatus Joseph unigenitum Filium tuum, natum ex*

Maria Virgine...[11] Have you noticed what a man of faith he is? Do you see how much that most upright man admires his Spouse, how he believes her incapable of the slightest sin, and how he receives the divine light of God's inspirations in the midst of such tremendous darkness? And how readily he obeys! *Take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt*,[12] the divine messenger commands him. And he does it. He believes in the work of the Holy Spirit! He believes in Jesus, the Redeemer promised by the Prophets, who has been awaited for generations and generations by all those who belonged to the People of God: the Patriarchs, the Kings...

... ut, sicut beatus Joseph unigenitum Filium tuum, natum ex Maria Virgine, suis manibus reverenter tractare meruit et portare...[13] My children, all of us, priests and laity, carry God – Jesus – in our souls, in the centre of our lives, with the Father and the

Holy Spirit, giving supernatural value to all our actions. How often we actually touch him with our hands!

... suis manibus reverenter tractare meruit et portare...[14] We don't deserve it. It is only through his mercy, only through his goodness, only through his infinite love that we carry him with us, that we are bearers of Christ.

... ita nos facias cum cordis munditia...[15] That is how he wants us to be: clean of heart. *Et operis innocentia*[16]– the innocence of deeds is rectitude of intention – *tuis sanctis altaribus deservire.*[17] We serve him not only at the altar, but throughout the world – which for us is an altar. All the works of men are done as if on an altar, and each one of you, in that union of contemplative souls that is your day, in some way says 'his Mass', which

lasts twenty-four hours, in expectation of the Mass to follow, which will last another twenty-four hours, and so on until the end of our lives.

... Ut sacrosanctum Filii tui corpus et sanguinem hodie digne sumamus, et in futuro saeculo praemium habere mereamur aeternum. [18] My children, Joseph's teachings are those of a father; they are wonderful teachings. Perhaps you will exclaim, as I do through sad experience: I can do nothing, I have nothing, I am nothing. But I am a child of God, and our Lord, through the Psalmist, announces to us that he fills us with loving blessings; *praevenisti eum in benedictionibus dulcedinis.* [19] He announces that he is preparing our way for us in advance – the general way of the Work and, within that, each person's individual path – holding us fast to the way of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

If you are faithful, my children, what the liturgy says of the holy Patriarch Joseph will be said of you too:

posuisti in capite eius coronam de lapide pretioso. [20] How sad it makes me to see pictures or statues of the saints without a halo! Someone gave me – and I was very glad to receive them – two small statues of my friend Saint Catherine, she of the agile tongue, she of the knowledge of God and outspokenness. And right away I asked for halos to be put on them, crowns that will not be made of *lapide pretioso*, but that will bear a fair likeness to gold – no more than a resemblance, like us men.

All our life at God's service

Notice how Joseph behaves towards Mary and Jesus in order to follow the command of the Father and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He gives up his whole being and places his life as a tradesman at God's

service. Joseph, a creature, feeds the Creator; a lowly craftsman, he sanctifies his professional work – something which Christians have forgotten to do for centuries, and which Opus Dei has come to remind them of once more. He gives God his life, he offers him the love in his heart and the fondness of his attention; he places at his service the strength of his arm; he gives... all that he is and all he can do; the ordinary everyday work that is part of his station in life.

Beatus vir qui timet Dominum.[21]

Blessed is the man who fears the Lord; blessed is the one who loves the Lord and tries not to displease him. This is the *timor Domini*, the only fear that I feel and understand.

Beatus vir qui timet Dominum; in mandatis eius cupit nimis.[22] Blessed is the soul whose ambition, whose longing is to fulfil the divine commands. This solicitude never

ceases. If we ever waver because our mind doesn't see very clearly or because our passions rise up like serpents, that is the moment to say: My God! I long to serve you, I want to serve you, I hunger to love you with all the purity of my heart.

What, then, will we lack? Nothing! *Gloria et divitiae erunt in domo eius.* [23] We don't seek earthly glory; ours will be the glory of heaven. All the means at our disposal – that's what the 'riches' of the earth really are – must serve to make us saints, to sanctify our work, and to sanctify others through our work. And in our hearts there will always be great peace. *Et iustitia eius*, God's justice, God's logic, *manet in saeculum saeculi*[24] will last forever – if we don't cast it out of our lives by sinning. For this divine justice, this holiness he has placed in our souls, demands – always with peace and joy – a personal interior struggle that is

never noisy or unruly. It is too ardent for that, and so intimate that we don't lose it unless we break it, unless we break it as if it were a clay pitcher. If that happens, to repair it we have the Norms, we have confession and the fraternal conversation with the Director. And once again peace, joy! Once again we feel a greater desire to fulfil the Lord's commands, a more noble ambition to serve God, and all souls for his sake!

An example of chastity

Cum esset desponsata Mater Iesu Maria Ioseph... When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. [25] Here we have the touchstone of the admirable holiness of that perfect man, Joseph. *Ioseph autem, vir eius, cum esset iustus et nollet eam traducere: her husband*

Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame...[26]

No, in conscience he can't do it. He suffers. He knows that his wife is immaculate, that she is a spotless soul, but he doesn't understand the miracle that has been worked in her. That is why *voluit occulte dimittere eam*, [27] he resolved to send her away quietly. He hesitates; he doesn't know what to do, but he resolves it in the purest manner.

Haec autem eo cogitante..., while he was thinking about these things, light came to him from God. Our Lord will never fail us, my children, be assured of that! *Ecce, Angelus Domini apparuit in somnis...: 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."* [28] He is the first man to receive this divine declaration of the

Redemption which was now being wrought. *Pariet autem filium, et vocabis nomen eius Iesum...: She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*[29] And Joseph is left calm, serene, full of peace.

My children, doesn't this man deserve all our love, all our gratitude? Isn't he a wonderful example of faith and fortitude? Isn't he a model of purity of soul and body? Isn't he truly our Father and Lord? Father and Lord is what I have called him for many years now, and is what you call him too all over the world.

Listen, then: for me, and I suppose for you as well, that other prayer which the Holy Church gives us to say after Mass is a source of much consolation – *virginum custos et pater..*[30] Why isn't this understood by those unfortunates who don't

want to look with clean eyes upon chastity or upon the holy love of our parents? Why isn't it understood by those people who can't get it into their heads that it is possible for a weak creature to preserve his whole being, body and soul, for God? If we are weak, God will supply his power. I am very weak, but the Lord will give me all his strength.

Virginum custos et pater, sancte Ioseph, cuius fidei custodiae ipsa Innocentia Christus Iesus et Virgo virginum Maria commissa fuit...

Blessed Joseph, guardian and protector of virgins, to whose most faithful care was entrusted Innocence itself, Jesus Christ, and Mary, the Virgin of virgins... Is there a priest, a truly Christian soul, who could read this and not be deeply touched? Since all my children have a priestly soul, this consideration must surely stir them to devotion, confidence, praise, and affection for

Joseph, our Father and Lord. *Te per hoc utrumque carissimum pignus lesu et Mariam obsecro et obtestor, ut me, ab omni immunditia praeservatum, mente incontaminata, puro corde et casto corpore lesu et Mariae semper facias castissime famulari.* We implore you, through Jesus and Mary, who were yours to love, to preserve us from every defilement so that, with a clean spirit, a pure heart and a chaste body, we may always serve them chastely.

My children, together we have considered what a great miracle it is that in the Work this bond with the holy Patriarch has existed from the beginning. He is our principal Patron and also the head of our family. For we ask him to send more children to the Work, and on this day we bind ourselves with ties of love, since it is our custom to renew our

commitment to Opus Dei by placing it in the hands of Joseph and Mary.

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[1] *2 Kings 5:10.*

[2] Introit (*Ps 92[91]:12*): *The righteous flourish like the palm-tree.*

[3] *Ibid: and grow like the cedar in Lebanon.*

[4] *Ibid, 13: Planted in the house of the Lord, in the courts of our God.*

[5] Epistle (*Sir 45:1*): *Beloved by God and men, whose memory is blessed.*

[6] *Ibid, 3: The Lord glorified him in the presence of kings. He gave him commands for his people, and showed him part of his glory.*

[7] *O blessed Joseph, happy man whose privilege it was, not only to see and hear that God whom many a king had longed to see, yet saw not, longed to hear, yet heard not...*

[8] *... not only to see and hear that God whom many a king had longed to see, yet saw not, longed to hear, yet heard not; but also to carry him in your arms and kiss him, to clothe him and watch over him!*

[9] *That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.*

[10] *O God, you have conferred upon us a royal priesthood...*

[11] *We pray to you, that as blessed Joseph (was found worthy to take into his hands) your only-begotten Son, born of the Virgin Mary...*

[12] *Mt 2:13.*

[13] ... that as blessed Joseph was found worthy to take reverently into his hands and carry your only-begotten Son, born of the Virgin Mary...

[14] ... was found worthy to take reverently into his hands and carry...

[15] ... so too make us, in cleanliness of heart...

[16] And innocence of deeds.

[17] I will minister at your holy altars.

[18] ... that we may worthily receive this day the sacred body and blood of your Son, and merit an everlasting reward in the world to come.

[19] Gradual (Ps 21 [20] :3): You have met him with goodly blessings.

[20] Ibid: Thou hast set on his head a crown of precious stones.

[21] Tract (Ps 112[111]:1).

[22] *Ibid: Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments!*

[23] *Ibid., 3:Glory and wealth shall be in his house.*

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Gospel (Mt 1:18).*

[26] *Ibid., 19.*

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid., 20.*

[29] *Ibid., 21.*

[30] *guardian and protector of virgins...*

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