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Meditations: Solemnity of Saint Joseph (19 March)

Some reflections to guide our prayer for the feast of the holy Patriarch on March 19th.

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- Joseph's prayer inspires his actions
- A prayer fixed on Jesus' face
- The holy Patriarch acts with the freedom and trust that love brings

BIOGRAPHIES of great people are often forged by extraordinary events and important speeches. Moreover, their lives are often a response to challenging crises in the society around them, where their contribution proves decisive. Hence the serene and strong figure of Saint Joseph, and the great devotion to him in the Church down through the centuries, can at first surprise us. The Gospels fail to preserve any of his words for us and his deeds are usually quite ordinary, without anything dramatic about them. Nevertheless, “each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble. Saint Joseph reminds us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation.”^[1] —

Although we see no striking external actions in his life, his inner life was

rich in decisive activity. We see in him a man who knew how to respond to challenges from the silence of his prayer, and who therefore was able to act with the freedom that true love brings.

“The Gospels speak exclusively of what Joseph ‘did.’ Still, they allow us to discover in his actions – shrouded in silence as they are – an aura of deep contemplation. Joseph was in daily contact with the mystery ‘hidden from ages past,’ and which ‘dwelt’ under his roof.”^[2] Saint John Paul II reveals to us the secret hidden behind the external deeds of the holy Patriarch: his whole life was truly prayer. Saint Joseph was attentive to God’s voice hidden behind all events and persons, which enabled him to hear God speaking even in the shadowy images of dreams. Sacred Scripture tells us that he discovered, while sleeping, the vocation that would give meaning to every day in

his life: caring for Jesus and Mary. An angel visited him at night to reveal God's plan and help him carry out the will of Yahweh, which would fill his own life with joy (cf. *Mt* 1:20). But not even then do we hear Joseph speaking any words in response to the angel's message; we simply see that, from then on, all his actions show his desire to respond to the divine requirements as fully as possible.

We don't see any fissure between Saint Joseph's interior life and his external actions because he transforms his whole life into a path of prayer. Only a deeply contemplative soul like his can make God's dreams his own. As Saint Josemaría so often insisted, we need to strive to unite in our own life the divine with the human: "Be eager to seek Christ's intimacy with his Mother and with his Father, the Holy Patriarch, since then you will have

what He wants us to have: a contemplative life. Because we will be, at the same time, both on earth and in Heaven, dealing with human things in a divine way.”^[3] —

AFTER JESUS' BIRTH in Bethlehem, amid his family's true poverty, the holy Patriarch never tired of contemplating the face of God made a Child. It is easy to imagine his loving gaze on Jesus during the first night He spent on this earth. Over the years he would often remember that first divine dream which had opened up an unsuspected horizon for his life: to welcome Mary and the Child into his home. But Joseph's prayer would take shape over time, to the rhythm of Jesus' life and daily events. “For Saint Joseph, Jesus' life was a continuous discovery of his own vocation.”^[4] — His contemplative life was never an excuse for passivity. Quite the contrary. The precarious tranquility of Bethlehem

is interrupted by a new dream: God asks him to go into exile with his family to Egypt. And precisely because his life is grounded on prayer, he sets out right away. From Saint Joseph we learn that every true renewal, every new direction in our life, is born from a contemplation of Jesus that leads us to dialogue with God.

When the Holy Family returns to Nazareth, “the Son of God is hidden from men and only Mary and Joseph jealously guard his mystery and live it every day. The Word Incarnate grows as a man in the shadow of his parents, but, at the same time, they remain, in turn, hidden in Christ, in his mystery, living out their vocation.”^[5] In the eyes of the other people in their village, nothing extraordinary happened in that holy house. But for us it is an example of prayer in ordinary life. We too can live in Christ’s hidden life. The life of

Joseph and Mary unfolds in a constant dialogue with Jesus. They see our Lord growing up over the years, but they are the ones who grow in God's eyes. They take care of Jesus in their humble house in Nazareth while God protects them in the great mansion of his love.

Your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3). Our life of prayer leads us, like Saint Joseph, to always take refuge in our Lord. The Holy Patriarch was able to bear the humiliation of the manger, the harshness of his family's exile and the apparent monotony of their ordinary life, because his heart was placed in Jesus: where every human situation becomes bearable. He never saw his vocation as a list of tasks to fulfill, but as the unmerited gift of being able to always live alongside the Son of God.

THE SILENCE of Saint Joseph in the face of God's inspirations can help us to grasp the freedom with which the Patriarch responded to God's plans. At first it might seem to us that his silence and simplicity reflect a life without its own ideals or perhaps a response that is too mechanical. However, considering it more closely, we realize rather that his life was filled with the freedom of love. True prayer, when it is a sincere dialogue with God, enables us to look at the world, in some way, from his own viewpoint. Then our life takes on a new, unsuspected dimension, like that we see in Saint Joseph. who "put his faith and love into the hope of the great mission that God, also through him – a carpenter in Galilee – was beginning in the world: the redemption of mankind."^[6] —

"The logic of love is always the logic of freedom, and Joseph knew how to love with extraordinary freedom. He

never made himself the center of things. He did not think of himself, but focused instead on the lives of Mary and Jesus.”^[7] Prayer makes us truly free because it enables us to enter into the logic of self-giving. When we strive for an unbroken dialogue with God, our lives are no longer necessarily subject to our own likes and dislikes, although these do not thereby cease to exist. Neither do our own limitations overly worry us, since we know that our Lord comes to our assistance to heal us and turns them into a source of life, when we take refuge in Christ’s wounded hands and open side.

But this doesn’t mean that Saint Joseph’s life of prayer was exempt from difficulties. We know that on one occasion, on their return from Jerusalem, he and Mary lost the adolescent Jesus (cf. *Lk* 2:45). We can imagine his anxious search for his Son, with so many endearing

memories passing through his mind. But during the three days of anxious searching, he never ceased to keep the eyes of his soul “fixed on Jesus” (cf. *Heb* 12:2). His eager outer search reflected his constant inner search for his Child’s blessed face. When he finally found Him in the temple, the holy Patriarch failed to understand Jesus’ answer. But his life was already so fully handed over to God that even then Joseph allowed himself to be guided by Him. Here lies the secret of Saint Joseph’s greatness, and it is what we ask of him today on his feast day: to teach us to trust fully in God. And God will never fail us, because his dreams for us, although sometimes exceeding our understanding, are always for our good.

[1] Francis, Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, Introduction.

[2] Saint John Paul II, *Redemptoris custos*, no. 25.

[3] Saint Josemaría, Notes from his preaching, 26 May 1974.

[4] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 52.

[5] Benedict XVI, Address in the Vatican Gardens, 5 July 2010.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 42.

[7] Francis, Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, no. 7.