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The sorrows and joys of St Joseph

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In Torreciudad, a sanctuary of our Lady built in Spain under St Josemaria's stimulation, there is an old track leading up to the original shrine.

Along the track fourteen tiled pictures have been set up, in pairs, showing "The Sorrows and Joys of St Joseph". These represent the main moments in the life of St Joseph and

the Holy Family. There is an old custom in the Church of preparing for the feast of St Joseph on March 19 by dedicating the seven previous Sundays to the memory of the main joys and sorrows of St Joseph's life.

The artist Palmira Laguens explains how she designed the tiled pictures.

When I was commissioned to produce tiles depicting the Sorrows and Joys of St Joseph, with a selection of texts from Holy Scripture that each scene was to represent, I focused firstly on how to portray the central characters: the Christ Child, Our Lady and St Joseph. Besides that, the succession of scenes had to maintain continuity through the passage of time.

I tried to remember what I had sometimes heard directly from St Josemaria, and I went over his writings, in which his love and devotion for St Joseph is so evident. I

was sure that they were going to be a source of inspiration in showing the Scripture texts in pictures. There I did indeed find what seemed to me to be St Joseph's essential features. He wrote, for example:

'I don't agree with the traditional picture of St Joseph as an old man, even though it may have been prompted by a desire to emphasize the perpetual virginity of Mary. I see him as a strong young man, perhaps a few years older than our Lady, but in the prime of his life and work.'
(Christ is Passing By, 40)

'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. Scripture tells us St Joseph was a

craftsman. Some Fathers of the Church add that he was a carpenter.’ (Ibid.)

‘The Gospels give us a picture of Joseph as a remarkably sound man who was in no way frightened or shy of life. On the contrary, he faced up to problems, dealt with difficult situations and showed responsibility and initiative in whatever he was asked to do.’ (Ibid.)

To summarize: a young man in the prime of life, active, hard-working, who earned his living with his hands, and whose lot it was to take care of the Son of God made man, and Mary, the Mother of God. He was a strong character whose face showed the simplicity of his heart, the depth of his feelings, and the joys and sufferings that came with his extraordinary mission – a mission that he accepted wholeheartedly – and also his loving watchfulness and

his total identification with God's Will.

At the same time, in the different scenes it was also important to show that each of the main characters, the Christ Child, Our Lady, and St Joseph, were not figures in isolation, as though they were a chance group, but were a family – the Holy Family, the model for Christians. Therefore they were closely united by links of self-giving and love which became stronger and stronger through the difficult life they led, and the hardships that are summed up in the popular devotion of the Sorrows and Joys of St Joseph. Not only that – those very difficulties must have served to demonstrate their self-giving and love all the more clearly, so that they could serve as an example for Christian families. St Josemaria taught, 'When I think of Christian homes, I like to imagine them as being full of the light and joy

that were in the home of the holy family (...). Every Christian home should be a place of peace and serenity. In spite of the small frustrations of daily life, an atmosphere of profound and sincere affection should reign there together with a deep-rooted calm, which is the result of authentic faith that is put into practice.’ (Christ is Passing By, 22)

Once I had studied the main characters, it was easier to focus on putting the scenes together by getting inside the Gospel passages.