

THE YEAR OF SAINT JOSEPH

Pope Francis has written an Apostolic Letter about Saint Joseph, to mark the opening of a Year of Saint Joseph, which runs from 8 December 2020 to 8 December 2021. The title of the Letter is *Patris Corde*, which means "With a Father's Love". This recognises that all 4 Gospels refer to Jesus as "the son of Joseph", even though Joseph was not his biological father. For centuries, Joseph's name was hardly mentioned, because the very fact that he thought of sending Mary away seemed wrong. Everything changed 150 years ago, Blessed Pius IX named Joseph *Patron of the Catholic Church*. Some of you will have seen Pope Francis' *Meditation in the Time of Pandemic*, when he was the only person in front of St. Peter's Basilica, when he recognised the contribution being made "by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines, or on the latest television show, yet in these very days are surely shaping the decisive events of our history. Doctors, nurses, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caregivers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests, men and women religious, and so very many others". What he praised in them is not only generosity, but a willingness to work patiently spreading "not panic, but shared responsibility" and, in many cases, praying and encouraging others to pray. "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".

Catholics have traditionally held Joseph in great affection. St. Teresa of Ávila often prayed to him and encouraged others to do the same. Prayers are offered to him every Wednesday and the month of March is dedicated to him. Pope Francis is convinced that "in Joseph, Jesus saw the tender love of God". That is because Joseph doubted his own ability to do the things God asked him to do. "The evil one makes us see and condemn our frailty, whereas the Spirit brings it to light with tender love. Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us. Pointing fingers and judging others are frequently signs of an inability to accept our own weaknesses, our own frailty". Joseph was able to accept his own weaknesses and Pope Francis is sure this moulded the atmosphere in the life of the Holy Family. "Joseph teaches us that faith in God includes believing he can work even through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses. He also teaches us that we must never be afraid to let the Lord steer our course. At times, we want to be in complete control, yet God always sees the bigger picture". Joseph is a fine example, because he "accepted Mary unconditionally. He trusted in the angel's words". His life teaches us to *accept* rather than to *explain*: he was not resigned to the inevitable, but a very proactive person. His example can teach us to "set aside all anger and disappointment, and to embrace the way things are, even when they do not turn out as we wish. Not with mere resignation but with hope and courage". Joseph's approach can allow miracles to happen in our lives, and "encourages us to accept and welcome others as they are, without exception, and to show special concern for the weak, for God chooses what is weak (cf. I Corinthians 1, 27)". Pope Francis is sure God used Joseph to achieve His purpose, and he is convinced God can use us, too.

Pope Francis offers us an interesting challenge: he suggests we should ask "whether we ourselves are protecting Jesus and Mary, for they are also mysteriously entrusted to our own responsibility, care and safekeeping"; Jesus entered the world "in a state of great vulnerability" and Joseph had to defend, protect and care for Him; we are called to do the same. The child Jesus is often the "poor, needy, suffering or dying person, every stranger,

every prisoner, every infirm person" we come across. The child Jesus grew up and taught us, "As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25, 40). If we respond positively to this challenge, we are continuing Joseph's mission. The Holy Father is convinced that "being a father entails introducing children to life and reality", not being over-protective but "making them capable of deciding for themselves"; the alternative is a selfish caricature of love which "imprisons, constricts and makes for misery". The positive alternative? "When fathers refuse to live the lives of their children for them, new and unexpected vistas open up. Every child is the bearer of a unique mystery that can only be brought to light with the help of a father who respects that child's freedom". A father is a real father "when he becomes like Joseph, who always knew that his child was not his own but had merely been entrusted to his care". Genuine fatherhood has nothing to do with possession; a real father is a shadow on earth of our heavenly Father, "a shadow that follows his Son".

Pope Francis concludes his Apostolic Letter with a prayer to Saint Joseph:

*Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted his only Son;
In you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.*

*Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself a father
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.*