

Votive Mass of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Cisterciácký klášter Vyšší Brod
12 October 2016

Sir 45, 1-6
Mt 1, 18-21

SERMON

Praised be Jesus Christ! Now and for ever.

It is a source of deepest joy for me to offer the Pontifical Mass in this important, beautiful and historic Cistercian Abbey during my first visit to the Czech Republic. I thank Father Prior and all of the monks of the Abbey for their most warm hospitality, and I thank all who have prepared so well the celebration of the Pontifical Mass. I am offering the Holy Mass for the intentions of your beloved nation and of the Abbey of Vyšší Brod.

Today, as the Church has traditionally done on Wednesday of each week, we invoke, in particular, the intercession of Saint Joseph, Foster-Father of Our Savior and Husband of His Immaculate Mother. In these most troubled times in the Church and for the family, the first cell of the Church, we turn to the Protector of the Universal Church, asking his intercession, so that the confusion and error which is so diffuse in our culture and which has also entered into the very life of the Church may be clarified and corrected.

The Gospel describes Saint Joseph as "a just man."¹ From the Gospel, we learn that two virtues, justice and purity, marked the life of Saint Joseph. Saint Joseph's practice of the virtue of purity, in fact, flowed from his practice of justice, for he looked upon every person as an image of God and, therefore, in his thoughts, words and actions, he wanted to respect always the dignity of every person. He never wanted to think, speak or act in any way, which would degrade another person or would use another person as an object to satisfy his wrong desires.

The Epistle invites us to liken Saint Joseph to Moses through whom God gave us the Law, in order that we might live with one another in the pure and selfless love, which has, as its fundamental and irreplaceable quality, justice. These inspired words of the Book of Sirach help us to understand the relationship of Our Lord with Saint Joseph in the light of the relationship of Our Lord with Moses:

¹ Mt 1, 19.

[Our Lord] sanctified [Moses] through faithfulness and meekness; he chose him out of all mankind. He made him hear his voice, and led him into the thick darkness, and gave him the commandments face to face, the law of life and knowledge.²

In the Gospel account, we hear how Saint Joseph accepted with justice and purity his vocation as husband of the Virgin Mary and, therefore, foster-father of her Divine Son, conceived in her womb through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. He thought, spoke and acted according to God's will because it was just. He did not concern himself with what others might think, for he knew that only by doing God's will could he do what was right and good for his wife Mary, for himself and, therefore, for others.

Saint Joseph respected fully the virginity of Mary, his bride with whom he had exchanged marriage consent, even though they, according to the Jewish practice of marriage, had not yet begun to live together. Therefore, when he discovered that she was with Child, he thought to end quietly their marriage, in order not to subject Mary to any further humiliation. But when, in a dream, the angel of the Lord announced to him God's plan for him as Husband of Mary and Foster Father of Jesus, he responded with total obedience. The Gospel tells us:

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but he knew her not until she had borne a son, and he called his name Jesus.³

From that moment, Joseph cooperated fully with God's grace coming to him from the Divine Child conceived in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit, for Whom he was called to be the faithful guardian. The purity of Joseph's heart and the justice of his actions disposed him to cooperate fully with God's plan for our salvation, to fulfill faithfully his part in God's plan.

Dom Prosper Guéranger in his commentary on today's Gospel reminds us of the twofold nature of Saint Joseph's participation in the Mystery of Faith:

The Son of God, when about to descend upon this earth to assume our human nature, would have a Mother; this Mother could not be other than the purest of Virgins, and her divine maternity was not to impair her incomparable virginity. Until such time as the Son of Mary were recognized as the Son of God, His Mother's honour had need of a protector: some man, therefore, was to be called to the high dignity of being Mary's spouse. This privileged mortal was Joseph, the most chaste of men...

But he was not only chosen to the glory of having to protect the Mother of the Incarnate Word; he was also called to exercise an

² Sir 45, 4-5.

³ Mt 1, 24-25.

adopted paternity over the very Son of God. So long as the mysterious cloud was over the Saint of saints, men called Jesus the Son of Joseph and the carpenter's Son. When our blessed Lady found the Child Jesus in the temple, in the midst of the doctors, she thus addressed Him: "Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing"; and the holy evangelist adds that Jesus was subject to them, that is, that He was subject of Joseph as He was to Mary.⁴

In beginning the work of salvation, God the Father took care that the conception of His only-begotten Son in human flesh, while virginal as it must be, was also completely legitimate. He was conceived in the womb of Mary, Wife of Saint Joseph.

Although the Scriptures give very few details of the life of Saint Joseph, it is not difficult for us to imagine how he lovingly provided for and protected both Mary and Jesus. We see an image of the attitude and way of acting of Joseph in the account of the Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple. We also see the profound respect and love of the Divine Child for His foster-father. Not infrequently, our churches and chapels have the depiction of the death of Joseph, with the Virgin Mary and our Lord caring for him lovingly. It is a wonderful representation of the respect and love of Jesus and Mary for Joseph, and of his intimate part in the work of our salvation.

Because of the heroic justice and purity of Joseph, he has fittingly been named Patron of the Universal Church and, in a special way, of the dying. Joseph, who, with fatherly compassion and strength, provided for and protected the Holy Family, now provides for and protects the family of the Church, the family of all those who have come to life in Christ through Baptism. With the obedience to God's will, which marked the totality of his life, Saint Joseph continues to exercise just and pure love towards all in the Church, especially the dying.

What is more, as a good father, he is an example for his foster children in the Church. He is the model of the faith in God and in His promises, which is the foundation of the righteousness which Saint Paul describes in his Letter to the Romans.⁵ Saint Joseph trusted in God's promises and, therefore, was obedient to God's commandments. He teaches and helps us to trust in God and to find our joy in doing what He asks of us, even when it seems to be irksome and difficult.

We who are today's disciples of our Lord are called to live in the same way as Saint Joseph lived. Thanks to the cooperation of Saint Joseph in the work of our salvation, we enjoy the grace of salvation won for us by the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ Who was pleased to be known as "the carpenter's son."⁶

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Prosper Guéranger, *L'année liturgique*, Le Carême, 23^{ème} éd. (Tours: Maison Alfred Mame et Fils, 1925), pp. 503-504. English translation: Prosper Guéranger, *The Liturgical Year*, Lent, tr. Laurence Shepherd (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2000), pp. 421-422.

⁵ Cf. Rom 4, 16-25.

⁶ Cf. Mt 13, 55; Mk 6, 3.

Through Baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells within us. In other words, we have God's own life within us to assist us in living according to God's commandments, our only way to happiness in this life and to eternal happiness in the life to come. Saint Joseph as a devout Jew longed for the gift of salvation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is ours through the Child for whom God called him to be the foster-father.

It is not easy to be consistent and coherent in striving for excellence of character, especially in our totally secularized culture. There are so many forces in our society, which urge us to indulge ourselves and our inclinations without respect for what is just and pure. There are so many forces which attack directly what we hold most sacred: the dignity of every human life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death; the only rightful place of sexual union within the sacred bond of marriage; and the freedom to practice our religious faith in every aspect of our lives. But we know what is right and good for us and for our society and world; by God's grace, we have come to know our Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation which He alone offers us. Let us pray, through the intercession of Saint Joseph, for the grace to imitate him in seeking always what is just and pure, what is good and holy.

Let us now, with the justice and purity of the heart of Saint Joseph, and in union with the Immaculate Heart of Mary, lift up our hearts to the glorious pierced Heart of Jesus, opened to purify us of sin and to inflame us with pure and selfless love. Our hearts, resting in the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus, will find the wisdom and strength to trust in God always, and to do always what He asks of us.

Heart of Jesus, formed by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, have mercy on us.

O Mary, conceived without original sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.

Saint Joseph, Foster Father of Jesus and Husband of the Virgin Mary, pray for us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Raymond Leo Cardinal BURKE