



**C.Ss.R.**

# PIRITUALITY

ONE BODY (Eph 4,4)

UN SOLO CORPO (Ef 4,4)

UN SEUL CORPS (Eph 4,4)

UN SOLO CUERPO (Eph 4,4)

JEDNA WSPÓLNOTA (Ef 4,4)

UM SÓ CORPO (Ef 4,4)

EIN LEIB (Eph 4,4)

## ONE BODY ADVENT 4

### Biblical Testimonies for Advent

#### Meditation 4

#### St Joseph

#### **St. Joseph: To Love and Protect the Church, the extension of the Body of Christ in History**

Advent is coming to an end. This time of waiting reminds us that God "is on his way towards us human beings". For four weeks we have prepared ourselves, together with the whole Church – the people of God on their way through history - to celebrate the memory of the mystery of the Incarnation, to his glorious return at the end of time, but we also continue to learn to be open to his coming in our lives each day. For the fourth and final last meditation we propose this short reflection for both personal and community meditation so as to better prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord - and this means as we have said earlier looking at our life and wishing to synchronise it better with the Gospel - we have therefore chosen the testimony of St Joseph.

#### **1. Ahaz and Saint Joseph: Two different responses to God's call**

The book of Isaiah 7:10-14 tells the story of King Ahaz (734-728 BC), a descendant of David, whose kingdom was threatened by a coalition of invaders consisting of the kings of Damascus (Syria) and Samaria (Israel). The two rulers wanted to force Ahaz to join them and to fight with them against Assyria. Ahaz was aware of the power of Assyria, the greatest enemy of Israel in history, and did not want to take such a risk. Faced with danger, he found his political solution. He asked the Assyrians for help. A solution that would eventually prove disastrous for the country.

It is in this dramatic context of his life, in the difficulty of King Ahaz, that God intervenes. God enters into the history of the threatened king. He does so through a man, the prophet Isaiah, who invites the king to trust in God, to rely on the guidance of the Most High, who will deliver him and Israel from danger. The king therefore does not need to look to the power of Assyria to find support. God's salvation was at hand. All that was needed was to trust in God and cooperate with Him. Ahaz, however, did not trust. He chose his own way of "salvation", devised his own plan, justifying himself by not wanting to put God to the test. It was precisely in this situation that the prophet Isaiah uttered one of the most important messianic prophecies: "The Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Emmanuel" (Is 7:14).

In telling us the story of Joseph, a descendant of David, the Evangelist Matthew in 1:18-25 shows us Joseph at a difficult, even dramatic time in his life. Joseph had concrete plans for his own life. These plans had already begun to be realised, because "he was already married to Mary" (v. 18), i.e., Mary had agreed to become his wife. But here Joseph is faced with a difficult and incomprehensible situation for himself. Mary, his betrothed, is pregnant. And he knew that the child could not be his. From Matthew we learn that Joseph "was a righteous man" (Mt 1:19) – in the sense that he believed in God and followed God's commandments in his life – and that he "did not want to expose Mary to defamation". Joseph organised therefore a plan in the face of his grave dilemma.

The law specified exactly what to do in such a situation. The Torah gave Joseph two options. "If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbour's wife. So, you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). "But if out in the country a man happens to meet a young woman pledged to be married and rapes her, only the man who has done this shall die. Do nothing to the woman; she has committed no sin deserving death (Deuteronomy 22:25-26). Joseph had to make a choice. He could have demanded a trial to acquit Mary. But, as Matthew states, "did not want to expose her to defamation" (*deigmatizein* = to put on display), i.e., he did not want to make the fact public. Instead, Joseph intended to remove her in secret (Greek: *λάθρα* / *lathra* = silently, without publicity). That is, not so that no one would know of this departure, but so that there would be no formal investigation into Mary's incomprehensible pregnancy. This shows how just Joseph was.

In fact, he decides to give Mary a kind of divorce letter and leave her secretly. The decision to separate from Mary is based on the fact that Joseph does not know who the father of the child was. This plan of his means that he has decided to take the blame in order to save Mary from the punishment of stoning. Of course, the narrative of Matthew presupposes Joseph's love for Mary, his bride. He desires Mary's good, even at a time of great disappointment. "The nobility of his heart makes him subordinate to charity what he has learned by law."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Letter *Patris corde* on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the declaration of St.

Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church, 8 December 2020, no. 4, in [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap\\_20201208\\_patris-corde.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html) [accessed: 30.11.2023].

In the plans of Joseph, the ‘righteous’ man, God now enters, God intervenes – as he did in the case of King Ahaz. But this intervention of the Most High requires more trust, requires more faith. For this time God acts in a dream and not in the light of day, as in the case of Ahaz. This time God intervenes through an angel and not through a human prophet. These two details show that God’s interference in Joseph’s life required even more faith, more trust. Just as God had called Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah, he now calls Joseph through an angel: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take with you Mary, your wife. For the child that is begotten in her is of the Spirit; she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins’ (Mt 1:20-21). Joseph need not have been afraid, for it is God himself at work! When the Angel says to him: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take with you Mary, your wife. For the child that is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit” (v. 20), he reveals something to Joseph that he does not yet know. The knowledge of Mary’s virginal conception does not come from human speculation, but from God.

The angel further explained that these events are the fulfilment of the prophecy spoken by Isaiah: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son: to him shall be given the name of Emmanuel” (Mt 1:23). It is worth noting that it is the word of the angel (who represents God and speaks in the name of God) that gives Joseph courage to make his decision. Joseph stands rooted in the word of God. He accepts that God can do things humanly impossible. Joseph therefore decided to abandon his plans, he took seriously this extraordinary entrance of God into his life, he trusted the word of God: “When he awoke from sleep, Joseph did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his bride with him” (Mt 1:24). In this way, he made possible the realisation of God’s salvific proposal for himself and for all humanity.

## 2. Loving and Protecting the Church

This testimony of Joseph conveys an important truth to us: God journeys towards humanity, God comes to meet us and invites us, calls us to open ourselves to his coming. In the light of Joseph’s testimony, it is worth questioning our own “organised world”. Can God still enter it? In our human projects, does God with his plans for us, still have the possibility to enter our well organised life? How do I act? Like King Ahaz who carries out his plans, or like the righteous Joseph who “in every circumstance of his life, (...) knew how to pronounce his ‘fiat’, like Mary at the Annunciation and Jesus in Gethsemane.<sup>2</sup>

The book *What is Christianity. Almost a spiritual testament* of Benedict XVI closes with a short meditation on St Joseph. “There is a correspondence between the task entrusted to him by the angel who appeared to him in a dream and the actions of St Joseph, a correspondence that clearly characterises him,” writes the former Pope. “In the episode of the order he receives in a dream to take Mary as his bride, his response is given in a simple phrase: ‘He arose and did as he was commanded’ (Mt 1:14). The correspondence between task and action is manifested even more strongly in the episode of the flight into Egypt, in which the same words are used: “He arose and took the child and his mother”. (Mt 2:14). Both expressions are used for a third time at the news of the death of Herod and the possibility of a return to the Holy Land. They are followed, one after the other, by the words

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<sup>2</sup> *Patris corde*, no. 3.

that characterise Joseph: “he got up and took the child and his mother” (Mt 2,21):”<sup>3</sup> At the end of each story in which Joseph is the protagonist, the Gospel notes that he gets up, takes with him the child and his mother, and does what God has commanded him. “Indeed, Jesus and Mary his Mother are the most precious treasures of our faith,” admits Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter *Patris corde* on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the declaration of St Joseph as Patron Saint of the Universal Church.

### **A proposal for personal reflection:**

In the light of the testimony of Joseph – who, like us Redemptorists, “made of his life a service, a sacrifice, to the mystery of the incarnation and to the redemptive mission that is linked to it”<sup>4</sup> – I propose to you the words of Pope Francis addressed in his Apostolic Letter to the whole Church, *Patris corde*. “We must always ask ourselves whether we are protecting with all our strength Jesus and Mary, who mysteriously are entrusted to our responsibility, to our care, to our custody. (...) the Church is the extension of the Body of Christ in history, and at the same time in the motherhood of the Church is overshadowed the motherhood of Mary. Joseph, continuing to protect the Church continues to protect the Child and his mother, and we too, by loving the Church continue to love the child and his mother. (...) From Joseph we must learn the same care and responsibility: to love the child and his mother; to love the Sacraments and charity; to love the Church and the poor. Each of these realities is always the child and his mother.”<sup>5</sup>

In a catechesis on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 2013, Pope Francis recalled that the Church “is not an organisation”, but “is a work of God” that was born on the Cross “from the open side of Jesus from which flow blood and water, symbolising the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism” and is manifested at Pentecost, when “the gift of the Holy Spirit fills the hearts of the hearts of the Apostles and urges them to go out and begin the journey to proclaim the Gospel, spread the love of God”. To those who say “Christ yes, the Church no”, Francis replies: “But it is the very Church that brings us Christ and that brings us to God; the Church is the great family of the children of God.”<sup>6</sup>

- **How am I being called as a Redemptorist and as a Redemptorist community to love and protect the Church today?**
- **How can I as a Redemptorist love and protect my Redemptorist Community, which is the little/domestic church for me?**

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<sup>3</sup> BENEDETTO XVI, *Che cos'è il cristianesimo. Quasi un testamento spirituale*, Mondadori, Milano 2023, 178-

179.

<sup>4</sup> *Patris corde*, no. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Patris corde*, no. 5.

<sup>6</sup> FRANCESCO, General Audience, 29th May 2013, in [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130529\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130529_udienza-generale.html) [accesso: 29.11.2023].

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