

Pastoral letter from the Nordic bishops' conference



„When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife “ (Mt 1,24a).

Thus ends the account of Matthew the evangelist about Joseph's dream, where God explains to him what his plans for Mary are, and gives him encouragement. Joseph, to whom God has spoken through dreams, holds a discreet and hidden place in the gospels because of his humble fidelity but plays an important part in salvation history. “In Joseph, Jesus saw the tender love of God” (Patris Corde, 3). In the Tradition of the Church, Joseph has become increasingly important. Pope Francis has highlighted Joseph's role in our Christian life, not least in the liturgy, by prescribing that he is always to be mentioned in the eucharistic prayers. This year, which has been declared the year of St. Joseph, gives us the opportunity to get to know Joseph better and to ask for his help, in order to be able to follow Jesus more closely.

1. Joseph is a *man of faith and righteousness* (cf. Mt 1:19). Like Abraham, our father in faith, he is portrayed as a righteous man. He does not want to cause shame or harm to the Virgin Mary. In him the biblical ideal is realized: this person is called to live in faith and righteousness. Joseph listens to God's voice and follows God's will, even if this demands a lot of him and is difficult to understand. In this way, Joseph becomes our teacher in situations where our faith is tested. He teaches us to surrender to God even in difficult situations.

2. Joseph is a *man of prayer and silence*. We have not received a single word spoken by Joseph. On the other hand, he appears to have listened to God's instructions (cf. Mt 1:24). In obedience he fulfilled what God wanted of him. We need silence as a sacred space where we can learn to recognize the delicate yet clear voice of God. As the devout Jew he was, Joseph would have been at home in the scriptures and “chewed on” the word of God in his prayers. Surely, he must also have taught Jesus to pray. Teresa of Avila sees Joseph as our teacher in the art of prayer. If we cannot find a spiritual companion, we can always turn to him.

3. Joseph is *the protector of the family* (cf. Mt 2:13-23). In a time of threat, he takes responsibility for his small family and their safety in Egypt and then returns to Nazareth. We do not know much about daily life at home in Nazareth. It was undoubtedly a difficult and demanding life for Joseph who had to support his family. When we view the life of the holy family, it gives inspiration to our own family life. Jesus is at the center, then comes the Virgin Mary as the mother of Jesus and our mother, while Joseph stands a little more in the background. Through this discreet task of service and protection, he becomes a role model for every father. We know how important the role of the father is in providing children with a harmonious upbringing. It is therefore gratifying to see how fathers increasingly take their role seriously, take great care of their children, and enjoy spending time with them. This is heartening, especially in a time when many fathers have given up their responsibilities or are even absent.

4. Joseph is a *role model and advocate for workers*. Like most people, Joseph must support himself and his family through his work. In the biblical sense, work is especially valuable. It is

also a calling to participate in God's creation. Like Joseph, we can through our everyday and sometimes strenuous labor, work together with the Creator, and thereby give expression to the beauty of creation. Unfortunately, many workers are being robbed of their dignity and subjected to various forms of exploitation. "The laborer deserves to be paid." (1 Tim 5:18). Therefore, Joseph is needed as a special helper. He can inspire us all to work in the presence of Jesus and for Jesus' sake. In this way we can all contribute to making society better, more just and more peaceful, all to the glory of God and for the common good.

5. Joseph is *the chaste bridegroom of the Virgin Mary*. He faithfully stood by her while the eternal son of the Father, "God from God, Light from Light", matured in her womb. In our oversexualized society, Joseph provides all of us with a valuable testimony through his chastity. Chastity does not only refer to our sexual and emotional life but expresses "the summation of an attitude that is the opposite of possessiveness. Chastity is freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of one's life. Only when love is chaste, is it truly love. A possessive love ultimately becomes dangerous: it imprisons, constricts and makes for misery. God himself loved humanity with a chaste love; he left us free even to go astray and set ourselves against him. 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." (Patris Corde, 7). He is a great example to all people who wish to say: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Joseph can help us discover a family life that to a greater degree is characterized by equality. In particular, he can help men not to become entangled in patriarchalism or macho attitudes, so that they may experience the joy of love to its fullest and pass it on.

6. Joseph is *the patron saint of the Church*. Just as Joseph had to protect Jesus during his childhood and adolescence, he must protect the entire mystical body of Christ, the Church, during her earthly pilgrimage. In everyday Nazarean life, Joseph was a faithful and trustworthy helper for Jesus and Mary (cf. Mt 2:14). He also has the same task in the Church, both in quiet times and during persecution and adversity. We therefore especially ask for Joseph's intercession for the Church and Christians in countries where there is persecution.

7. Joseph is *our ideal of caregiving*. In his message of peace on January 1st of this year, Pope Francis emphasized that we must create a "culture of care" – when he spoke of building a "fraternal society". Joseph faithfully cared for his family. He is a symbol of everything we call caregiving. It is therefore no coincidence that many religious orders and spiritual communities as well as many parishes and churches are under his protection. We only need think about the Sisters of St. Joseph who helped to create a "culture of care" in our own countries. Joseph can continue to inspire us to do this.

8. Joseph is *the protector of refugees and migrants*. "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt" (Mt 2:13b). So said the angel of the Lord to Joseph. This event, the flight into Egypt, demonstrates that Joseph shares a fate with innumerable people today. This fate, the flight and migration of large groups of people, is a global challenge that no one can or should avoid. There are no easy solutions, but everyone has the duty and task to help ensure that people do not have to leave their homes, and if they still must, to relieve the distress of flight, and to give

them a new and dignified home in other countries, even if it is only temporary. Politicians have the primary responsibility, but every citizen should contribute to a friendly climate.

9. Joseph is *the hope of the dying*. In our society, loneliness and isolation often prevail, and many must die all alone. We especially entrust them to the intercession of St. Joseph, who over time has been increasingly invoked particularly to help the dying. We know how important the hour of death is, and the need to prepare for our final meeting with the Lord. For this reason, we must all set aside whatever deeply ingrained sin and egotism is found in us and place ourselves in the hands of the Lord with hope and trust. With Joseph by our side, it becomes easier to see death as “sister death”, like St. Francis said. Everyone must face grief or fear of death, be it because of uncertainty about what happens after, or because death has become a direct threat due to violence and distress. Convinced of the resurrection of Christ and our share in it, we as Christians are called to be witnesses of life, providing comfort and hope.

Joseph protected the Lord of life at the beginning of his earthly existence; he trustingly placed his own life in the service of God. May we too become protectors of life with his help, at its beginning, at its end and for the duration of our lives on this earth, where the lives of so many people are being threatened, made uncertain, and undervalued. May St. Joseph encourage us in our life with God through his prayers and example and be a helper to all people in need.

*Hail, protector of the Savior
and bridegroom of the Virgin Mary.
To you God has entrusted his Son,
in you Mary placed her trust,
with you Christ grew up to become a man.*

*O holy Joseph, be a father to us as well,
and guide us on the path of life.
Obtain grace, mercy and courage for us,
and protect us from all evil. Amen.*

Given on the feast of the Annunciation, March 25th, 2021

Bischof Czeslaw Kozon, Copenhagen, chairman.

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