

The Year of St Joseph

Chinese Catholic Community

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1. **(Slide 1)** I proposed that our talk this year be on the theme of the Year of St Joseph. On 8 December 2020, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Francis declared that the church would begin a year in memory of St Joseph. The reason for declaring this commemoration at this time is because it marks 150 years since St Joseph was declared the patron of the Catholic Church by Pope Pius IX. **(Slide 2)** The 19th March became the solemn feast day of St Joseph. Pius IX made this declaration in 1870 because he said that the church was going through troubling times. Pius saw the church under attack from external forces as well as from internal pressures. When Pope Francis announced this Year of St Joseph, he commented that Joseph was an extraordinary figure and that he had been close to the pope's own human experience. He said that his desire to speak about Joseph increased during the months of the pandemic. You'll recall that our talk this time last year looked at the pandemic and I spoke about the homily Pope Francis gave at the beginning of the pandemic. The pope recognised the pain people have suffered. He noted the vulnerability of the poorest people, those whose jobs were the first to be lost, those on the lowest incomes. He also reminded us of the sacrifice and heroism of the frontline workers during the pandemic. Part of his motive for declaring this Year of St Joseph was so that we might be encouraged to reflect on our own experience against the background of what St Joseph can teach us about a life of faith in Jesus and how this is translated into the ordinary way we live. In the end, I hope the message you take away from today is that it is not so much about doing extraordinary things but rather doing ordinary things well.
2. **(Slide 3)** To mark this year, Pope Francis wrote an apostolic letter. Its title is "With a Father's Heart". In this letter he describes St Joseph under a number of different descriptions. Each of these is an invitation for us to learn from Joseph.
3. **(Slide 4)** The first way he describes Joseph is as a "**beloved father**". This was Joseph's vocation. In fact, the vocation of everyone is to love, and to love in a family. In Joseph's case, love meant giving of himself in the service of Mary and Jesus. He used all his abilities to build the family home around love. So, Joseph is there for us as a model of family love.
4. **(Slide 5)** Another way the pope describes Joseph is as a "**tender and loving father**". The Bible doesn't tell us much about Joseph; we don't see him often. This makes it all the more important that when he does appear in the gospel, we recognise a man of faith, and we are ready to learn from him. There is a scene in the Gospel of St Luke where we are told that the child Jesus went back to his family home with Mary and Joseph and "increased in wisdom" (Lk 2:52). I think we should notice here the joy that a father gets when he sees his children grow up and gradually learn the sort of wisdom that will allow them to make good decisions in life. I think it is reasonable to imagine that the love that Joseph showed to Jesus as he was growing up was important in his development. If we think of Jesus as a child, then we must also think of Joseph and the role he played in Jesus' growing up.

5. The pope points out another important thing here. He suggests that Joseph, the tender and loving father, is a reminder of God who is a tender and loving father. In the Bible, especially the Old Testament, people come to know God by observing what happens in the life around them. For example, the prophet Hosea paints a picture of God as a father who tenderly cares for his child, Israel. This father protected his young child; he bent down and picked him up when he fell and injured himself; he taught him to walk; he instilled confidence into him by encouraging him to reach out for greater things. Then, as the prophet tells the story, the father becomes sorrowful when his child later rebels and turns away from his father. But despite this, the father does not give up on his son. Rather he shows compassion and waits for the son to return. One of the psalms captures what is going on here: “As a father has compassion on his son, the Lord has pity on those who fear him” (Ps 103:13).
6. In this reflection Pope Francis draws some lessons for us. The basic message is that if God is a tender and loving father, then we must learn to allow this tender God to encounter us in our own weakness. This is not as easy as it may sound. Our weaknesses trouble us; they usually crowd in on us so that we end up feeling overwhelmed by them. But there is another way to look at this. If we believe, as Joseph did, that our whole life is lived under the tender, loving eye of God, then when we examine our conscience, we might begin to recognise that the Holy Spirit is shining a light on our lives. When we see frailty or weakness, then let’s learn that the best way to deal with this is through tenderness. Pope Francis, in his writing and talks, often speaks of the devil, or the evil one, and he contrasts the work of the devil and the work of the Spirit. He reminds us of a reading we heard a few Sundays ago, where St Paul spoke about a thorn in the flesh that stopped him from getting too proud. Paul described this “thorn in the flesh” as a “messenger of Satan”. In the end, the word Paul heard from God was that God’s grace is sufficient, and that power is made perfect in weakness” (cf. 2 Cor 12:7-9). The pope comments, “All too often, we think that God works only through our better parts, yet most of his plans are realised in and despite our frailty. ... 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”. St Joseph teaches us this lesson. He “teaches us that faith in God includes believing that God can work even through our fears, our frailties, and our weaknesses.”
7. (Slide 6) This sort of response leads the pope to describe Joseph as a “**obedient father**”. To be obedient to God is to follow the will of God. In St Matthew’s Gospel, there are a series of incidents where we see Joseph following the will of God. The first question we probably need to ask is: How did Joseph discover the will of God? In Matthew’s Gospel this happens through the dreams of Joseph as he slept. The first dream comes just after he has heard the news that Mary is pregnant. He had worked out what he would do in this difficult situation. He would divorce her informally to save her the embarrassment of being publicly shamed. But in the dream, there is a message that tells him not to be afraid and to take Mary as his wife. We should think for a moment about how hard it would have been to follow this command. He would have been afraid because the future would have been very uncertain. Perhaps he was even unsure if he should listen to his dreams. Yet, he is obedient to this command from God. The pope comments that obedience made it possible for him to overcome his difficulties. We see that obedience involves first of all, listening to the word of God, and then following it. Obedience did not take away his freedom, but rather

opened him up to a greater freedom because, by being obedient, he was not imprisoned by his fears.

8. (Slide 7) There is a second dream. This time it occurs after the birth of Jesus and the decision of Herod to destroy all the recently born baby boys. In the dream, Joseph is advised to take the child and his mother and head to the land of Egypt. If we think about this, it was not an easy command to follow. To set out as a refugee, leaving behind all your belongings, your house, your wider family and the things that made life settled – to do this is nothing that someone takes on lightly. It is no different for Joseph. To follow this command of God was to set out on a hard and perilous journey, where he would encounter many dangers on the way. Once again, Joseph follows the revelation in the dream. He could only do this if he trusted God to guide him and his family on their way. This is a further insight into obedience: the underlying virtue is trust. You cannot be obedient to someone you don't trust. Joseph trusted God, and therefore followed God's direction to head out into an unknown land.
9. (Slide 8) Later came a third dream. This time the dream showed him that Herod had died, and it was safe to return back to the land of Israel. Finally, there is a fourth dream. There is a new danger in Joseph's home city, the new king is just as ruthless as his father. So once again the child and his mother are unsafe. Joseph is told to take the family north, to settle in the land of Galilee, and to make his home in Nazareth. These last three dreams show us that Joseph and his family were on the move for some years before they settled down in Nazareth.
10. We can look at these dreams from another perspective. Gradually the plan of God was unfolding, and Joseph was a part of its unfolding. At each step, as Joseph responded to God's revelation, God's plan was taking root in human history. We are probably used to thinking of Mary as responding to God's invitation. She did this when she responded to the angel Gabriel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done with me according to your word". We see the same thing with Joseph, as he responds to the revelation of God in the dreams. He acts as the servant of the Lord. His actions, in some sense, are more powerful than words. His actions in fact are crying out, "Let it be done to me according to your word". This is what it means to be an obedient Father.
11. It is interesting to imagine how Joseph taught the boy Jesus to be obedient in a similar way. The New Testament gives us glimpses of the obedience of Jesus. The most powerful image is the agony in the garden, where Jesus goes apart by himself to pray to his Father. He prays that he might not have to drink the cup of suffering, but goes on to say, "Yet, not what I want, but what you want". St Paul also reminds us that Jesus was obedient even to the point of death. And in the Letter to the Hebrews, we are told that Jesus "learnt obedience through what he suffered". So, this year of St Joseph can help us to appreciate the virtue of obedience in the Christian life.
12. (Slide 9) A further characteristic of Joseph is that he was "**an accepting father**". There are many dimensions to being accepting. The pope makes an important point here about the way Joseph accepted Mary. We have already noted the challenge this must have been for him. From what we know of Joseph, he was a respectful man. Pope Francis develops this point by looking at the situation of the world today. He says this: "Today, in our world where psychological, verbal and physical violence towards women is so evident, Joseph appears as the figure of a respectful and

sensitive man”. I think he is suggesting that we can hold up Joseph as a model for our society at large in the way people respect each other.

13. Another dimension of acceptance is how we deal with the things that happen in life that we don't understand. Often, we want to ask questions about why something has happened, or we don't understand the way that some people behave or respond to situations. When things happen that unsettle us, there can be a variety of responses. One response might be to be disappointed and to feel sorry for ourselves. Another response might be to get angry, especially with someone else, so that we look for someone to blame. Another way people can respond is to become trapped in the situation and maybe even lose their own sense of being a good person. St Joseph is an example of someone who accepted the events that unfolded in his life. I have already spoken about the dreams he had and how they marked out his response to things that were unsettling and challenging. But we can say more. For Joseph it was not a matter of simply saying “that's life” and just putting up with things. Joseph couldn't have done all that he did if he had not decided to act positively in the face of the difficulties he faced. We can say that he took responsibility for the situation in the sense that he owned it as part of his life.
14. Another way of talking about this is to say that all of us have a life story. We can tell it at any point in our life, whether we are young, middle aged, or elderly. As we grow, we recognise that there are various points in our life where the story might be difficult to tell. There might be things that happened that challenged us or disappointed us, or where life was just tough. Some people grow as a result of these challenging situations, but other people almost grow smaller if they don't handle them well. This is what the pope is talking about when he considers Joseph as an accepting man. Joseph didn't just accept the challenges he faced, he actually embraced them and made good decisions about what to do. He grew in maturity through these situations; he did not grow smaller and shrink. The alternative to the way he acted is to wish you had a different life with different circumstances. This approach leads to a dead end, and we can struggle to live a good and rewarding life. Joseph took responsibility for the challenges he faced and made them part of his way of living. The pope offers us this advice, “Unless we are reconciled with our own history, we will be unable to take a single step forward, for we will always remain hostage to our expectations and the disappointments that follow”. He is talking about something which is deeply spiritual, not simply about psychological well-being or mental health.
15. There is a consequence of living this way, and I want to speak briefly about it. If we become accepting of our own situation and act positively to build a good life in the reality of that situation, then this will also affect how we look at others and engage with them. As we become more accepting of our own challenges, we will become more accepting of others. We will recognise the challenges they face, and we will show concern for them. This is what builds Christian community.
16. (Slide 10) Another characteristic of Joseph which flows from this is that he is a **“creatively courageous father”**. I began to touch on this a moment ago, when I was talking about difficulties and how we face them, but there is more that can be said. In the face of difficulties, we can decide to give up and walk away; but we can also decide to stay there and face up to the situation. This requires not just courage, but also creativity. When we actively face up to the challenges that confront us, then we might discover resources and capacities that we didn't even know that we had. In other words, a difficult situation can bring out the best in us. St Joseph is a good

witness to the sort of courage that is necessary if you are going to face up to difficult situations. He is an example of someone who, when he did face challenges, discovered gifts and strength that he probably didn't know he had.

17. This is not simply about making a determined effort and saying, "I must be courageous in this situation". Of course, we can say that and need to say that. But if we look at Joseph, we recognise that his courage was also part of God's gift to him. The Christian virtue of courage is a gift from God. Joseph trusted in the Providence of God. Courage doesn't mean sitting back and saying I don't have to do anything because God will make everything right for me. Trusting in God's providence means making good use of the gifts God has given. Let me compare God's gift to seed that is planted in a garden. When it is planted, the seed is very small and almost insignificant. If we cultivate it, it will grow and produce fruit; but if we ignore it, it will die. Let me go back to those dreams Joseph had, so that I can explain what I mean. What happens in those dreams is what I have been calling God's providence. God helped Joseph see the situation he was facing and the challenge this posed for him. In the dream, Joseph learnt that he had to do something; he couldn't just weep and do nothing. Joseph trusted in God's providence. But I think he also trusted in his own capacity to make a move with the help of God. He used his own inventiveness to deal with the situation. He had trusted God's word that he should take Mary as his wife. One of the consequences of this was that at the time when she was ready to give birth, they were traveling, as were many other families, and there was nowhere for them to stay. Joseph needed to be creative to find somewhere so that the baby could be born safely. We are told that he found a stable. Do you notice here that we have a wonderful combination of God's gifts to Joseph and Joseph's use of those gifts in a creative way in that unique situation. I think the lesson we learn here is that the Christian life is not a passive life where we expect God to do everything for us. Rather, God is with us to guide us and lead us, but God also leaves us free to use our own gifts of creativity and courage to work out how to live in the concrete situation we are living in. If I have been talking about Joseph trusting God, we need also to see that God trusted Joseph.
18. (Slide 11) Another description of St Joseph is a "**working father**". In fact, there is a feast of St Joseph the Worker in the church's calendar. It occurs on 1st May every year. This feast was introduced into the church's calendar by Pope Pius XII in 1955. Pius XII was concerned about the poor conditions under which many people were being forced to work at that time. He wanted to emphasise the dignity of work, its importance for the individual but also for the society. He was concerned that some workers were being exploited by greedy employers. When Pius made this decision about St Joseph the Worker he relied on the developing Catholic social teaching. This tradition goes back to Pope Leo XIII in 1891. Successive popes have contributed to it, right up to John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis.
19. The question of work today is very different to what it was in 1955 when Pope Pius XII made his decision about the feast of St Joseph the Worker, but it is still a real question. Pope Francis summarised this when he said that "there is a renewed need to appreciate the importance of dignified work, of which St Joseph is an exemplary patron". I guess we are all aware of the variety of challenges our society faces today in relation to work. One that occurs to me and that has emerged even more clearly during the pandemic is what people call the "gig economy". One example of this is the food delivery riders. We know that some of them have been killed on the job after being hit by a car. Now, there is probably not much you and I can do about this. We

may not have even given it much thought, as long as our food arrives hot and on time. So, what does this have to do with the Year of St Joseph?

20. If we talk about work in the context of St Joseph, then it is a matter of how we think about work as part of the Christian life. This means that work becomes part of the work of salvation. In other words, all work can participate in God's work. And this will happen at various levels. In a more general sense, we can say that all work is about putting our talents and abilities at the service of others for the greater good. There are forms of work where this is very obvious, such as professions that directly offer a service to others. Other forms of work might be more isolated from direct contact with the broader public, but ultimately are for the benefit of others. There is a sense that whatever work we do, it is for the good of others.
21. At a different level, we know that work is also for the benefit of our families. It is how we keep ourselves fed and clothed and sheltered. We know the stress that is put on a family when people are out of work. We also know the stress that an individual feels when they are out of work. We recognise that it is connected to how we feel about ourselves; it is connected to our human dignity.
22. Pope Francis comments in a global sense about the time in which we live. "The crisis of our time, which is economic, social, cultural and spiritual, can serve as a summons for all of us to rediscover the value, the importance and necessity of work for bringing about a new 'normal' from which no one is excluded." I think this means two things. The first is about how we think of our own work. He is calling us to think of the spiritual value of our own work, whatever it may be. By spiritual value, he means that we recognise that in working we are participating in God's work of salvation.
23. The second thing to take from this statement concerns how we look at the work of others. It is an invitation to recognise the dignity of the people whose work serves us, no matter how insignificant it may seem. During the pandemic, I think we have come to appreciate those we call the frontline workers, whether it be nurses, shop assistants, or transport workers. But there are still people who go to work every day who encounter rudeness or exploitation, or who are just ignored. For our part, if we can just acknowledge these people when we have to deal with them, we might make a difference to them. If enough people do this, then we may change the social and cultural expectations surrounding workers. Maybe it might be as simple as being gracious to the food delivery rider. In other words, recognise St Joseph in that person.
24. (Slide 12) This afternoon we have uncovered very many dimensions of this Year of St Joseph. We have discovered him as a man who is a good example of how to live the Christian life. It is true that our own circumstances are very different from his, but the characteristics he displayed are true for every age and every generation. Pope Francis summed him up this way: "In a way, we are all like Joseph: a shadow of the heavenly Father, who 'makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust' (Mt 5:45). And a shadow that follows his Son."

(Slide 13) QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What lessons can you learn from St Joseph for your own life?
- Reflect on Joseph's dreams. What did God ask? How was Joseph able to respond? What is the main lesson you learn from the Bible account of Joseph's dreams?
- What might our world learn about work from St Joseph?
- What quality of Joseph do you most admire and would **like** to imitate?