

Joseph should be the patron saint of shy backroom players who say little but do a lot



AS WE ENTER MAY, THE MONTH OF MARY, WE OFFER A REFLECTION ON HER SPOUSE, JOSEPH, IN THIS YEAR OF ST JOSEPH

“ St Joseph, whose feast day is on Friday, has never had it so good, or, at least, he’s never had such a friend as in Pope Francis. The Pope announced that from 8 December 2020 the Church would have a special Year of St Joseph. It would honour “the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence, who nonetheless played an incomparable role in the history of salvation”. In being tender, open to the demands of faith, obedient, creatively courageous and humble, Pope Francis says St Joseph is a model for all of us.

Devotion to St Joseph is a comparatively late development in Christian history. We know by the ninth century local churches had commemorations in honour of him as the husband of Mary, but this didn’t become a feast day in Western Churches until the twelfth century. Only then did devotion to St Joseph take off. Pius IX proclaimed St Joseph “Patron of the Universal Church” in 1870. Almost a century later, John XXIII added Joseph’s name to the first Eucharistic Prayer; and in 2013, Pope Francis extended that directive to Eucharistic Prayers II, III and IV.

Christian art hasn’t been kind to him, usually depicting him as 103 not out, presuming that old men would have no sexual interest in young women. Those artists need to meet some of the old men I know. There is nothing in the gospel texts to indicate that Mary or Joseph were anything other than the marriageable age according to Jewish custom at the time: around 13 for girls; 18 for young men.

There are only five episodes involving Joseph in the gospels: the Annunciation; the Nativity; the presentation of the child Jesus in the Temple; as a refugee to Egypt; and the loss and discovery of the boy Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem. One can see why the earliest Church may have been slow to make a fuss of him. He is not recorded as ever saying anything in the New Testament – not a word. He should be the patron saint of shy, hard-working backroom players who say little but do a lot.

Joseph is a dreamer: that’s how God communicates with him. In the Scriptures, his namesake Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob, is the famous dreamer and interpreter of dreams in the Old Testament. King Nebuchadnezzar, the prophet Daniel and King Solomon are just three others whose dreams were to have a dramatic impact on the destiny of Israel. There are plenty of people in the New Testament who

dream dreams and see visions too, culminating in the Book of Revelation.

In the gospels, Joseph has a quartet of dreams: when he is told not to fear taking the pregnant Mary as his wife; when he is warned to flee to Egypt to escape Herod’s plan to kill Jesus; when he is given the all-clear to return to Israel; and finally, when he is told not to settle in Judaea but to go to Galilee.

Today we often dismiss belief in dreams as a fad of the new age. This is a mistake. God speaks to us however he needs to. If God has given us an unconscious and subconscious life, of which dreams are a sign, then God has a purpose for this gift, and it can be used for good. Long before Carl Jung, dreams were understood to be a gateway to our inner life and the mystical world, with St Joseph as their champion. If we refuse to take our dreams seriously, if we decide that God cannot or does not talk to us through our subconscious, then we will never realise their potential.

Even though the flight into Egypt is a theological story, it portrays Joseph’s transformation from being a dreamer to being one of history’s most famous refugees, fleeing a murderous dictator and saving the Saviour of the world.

Just as Matthew draws parallels between the dreams of the Joseph of Genesis with the dreams of Joseph of Galilee, we can see the parallels in our own lives too. Like the Scriptures, dreams need careful interpretation and discernment, but Joseph, the silent partner within the Holy Family, is testament to how a few words and great actions can save ourselves, our family and even the world.

When Pope Francis announced the Year of St Joseph, he also gave us a new prayer:

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.



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