

Feast of the Holy Family + 31 December 2023 + Sir 3 + Col 3 + Lk 2:22-40

Today's feast of the Holy Family offers us a unique opportunity to meditate on the life of someone who probably doesn't get enough credit: St. Joseph. In particular, I'd like to focus on St. Joseph as protector of Jesus and Mary, and as such he is also fittingly the patron and guardian of the Universal Church. So this is also an opportunity for us to speak about some very difficult topics that are devastating threats to the Church and to family life today.

Now, the Scriptures do not say a lot about St. Joseph, but what it does say speaks volumes. First, we see that he was a man of humble obedience. Joseph is told time after time by God what he is to do, and he just does it; he walks by faith. Perhaps for this reason, when we are first introduced to Joseph in Matthew's Gospel, he is simply described as a *righteous man*. All of us should aspire to be esteemed as "righteous" in the sight of God. Indeed, there is no higher praise for a Christian. So just how did Joseph live as a righteous man?

Well, in the first example, he obeyed the Law of God regarding his marriage to Mary. This might make us a bit uncomfortable, but we have to remember that Mary and Joseph were real people. Now yes, they were Saints, but they weren't angels! Even though they were already betrothed, because Joseph honored God *and* Mary, they did not come together before they were married. In fact, Joseph did not have relations with his wife Mary at any point in his life because of God's special plan for her. I'm sure that was not easy for Joseph. But just as the Archangel Gabriel told Mary that *with God nothing will be impossible* (Lk 1:37), chastity is indeed possible for those who seek it. God does not give us laws for living which are impossible to keep. They may be difficult; but everything is possible by grace.

In our day, chastity is no longer esteemed as a virtue by much of society; quite the opposite actually. Many see it as impossible, repressive, old-fashioned. The Letter to the Hebrews states unequivocally, *Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous* (13:4). Rebellion against the law of God regarding marriage and family life is so common today, to the point of immorality even being celebrated by much of our popular culture. And yet everyone knows that our society is falling apart: crime, violence in schools, increasing poverty, you name it. But few seem to be willing to connect the dots that all of us know: so goes the family, so goes society.

Even more, pornography is devastating to both men and women, as well as marriages and families. We cannot ignore it and sweep it under the rug. Jesus warns us in St. Matthew's Gospel: *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.* Of course, Jesus is

speaking in hyperbole here—he doesn't mean to literally pluck out your eye. If spoken today, He might say: if your tv, internet connection, or smartphone is causing you to sin, filter it, put it out in the open, or just get rid of it! I know a wise old priest who used to tell people who were exposed to explicit images at a young age and continued to struggle: *it's not your fault, but it is your problem*. That is, you have to do something. If you try to ignore the problem, justify it, or downplay it, you will lose the battle. Even the secular media is starting to admit the damage that the widespread availability of explicit images is having on people: on their relationships, on their mental health, and even on their physical health.

Now, when we speak of the “law of God,” we are not just talking about arbitrary, cold, impersonal “rules.” God’s “laws” could also be called the “internal logic of creation.” Meaning, if it is a “sin,” it’s only because it is harmful to us. The Father loves us so much that He has revealed the way to authentic human flourishing: that is, His laws. But the hard part is that sin is often a “twisting” of a good thing. In the realm of sins against chastity, it is a misuse of the goodness of the marital embrace. It is an act of violence: taking to oneself what does not belong to me: be it by look or by action. Only marriage, lived in a faithful and fruitful way, protects the dignity of the human person in all his or her bodily vulnerability.

If any of this is a struggle for you, please, do not despair! Go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Talk to someone you trust. Get an accountability buddy or join a group. Read Scripture and pray the Rosary daily. Put down the phone and get some exercise. Talk to the Lord about your anger, frustration, loneliness, and temptations. Do not allow the devil to keep you locked in shame! But don't give up. There is hope. You are not hopelessly damaged goods. Remember, *with God nothing will be impossible!* There are many helpful resources available today to help those who struggle with this temptation or addiction.

Another time St. Joseph stands out as a model for us is was when God warned him in a dream that King Herod was going to try to kill baby Jesus. The angel said “get out of here”, and Joseph took his family to safety immediately! This is why, as a parish staff, we discerned that we needed to do something more to protect our families and children. Even today, the devil wants to tear apart the family. As hopefully you know by now, on Monday, January 15 at 6:30pm, we will be having a presentation on how to protect young eyes from the dangers out there today in the realm of technology. Unless your family has no cell phones, no internet, and no tv, and you never associate with people who do have these, this applies to you! This evening will also be helpful for single adults and grandparents. It will be a judgment-free zone, and I'm hoping for a full activity center.

There is no doubt that the topics I have touched on today are very difficult, and there is so much more to say about them. And I hate to dampen our Christmas joy. But the peace of that first Christmas was short-lived for the Holy Family. In other words, there is a reason

why Jesus Christ came to earth—it was a life or death situation, for us. Jesus came to free us from slavery to temptations, addictions, and from all sin, so that we could live new lives of freedom and joy and peace in Him. But if it were not for St. Joseph's obedience and protection, Jesus might not have even made it out of Bethlehem alive! And so we look to his example and ask for his intercession, so that we too may be righteous in the sight of God, and a blessing and a strong guardian to all those whom God has placed in our care.