



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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[Multimedia]

Catechesis on Saint Joseph - 6. *Saint Joseph, Jesus' foster father*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will reflect on Saint Joseph as the father of Jesus. The evangelists Matthew and Luke present him as the foster father of Jesus, and not as his biological father. Matthew specifies this, avoiding the formula “the father of”, used in the genealogy for all the ancestors of Jesus; instead, he defines Joseph as the “husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (1:16). Luke, on the other hand, affirms it by saying that he was Jesus’ “supposed” father (3:23), that is, he appeared as His father,

To understand the supposed or legal paternity of Joseph, it is necessary to bear in mind that in ancient times in the East the institution of adoption was very common, more so than today. Think of the common case in Israel of the “levirate”, as formulated in Deuteronomy: “If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband’s brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel” (25:5-6). In other words, the parent of this child is the brother-in-law, but the legal father remains the deceased, who gives the newborn child all hereditary rights. The purpose of this law was twofold: to ensure the descendants of the deceased and the preservation of the estate.

As the official father of Jesus, Joseph exercises the right to impose a name on his son, legally recognising him. Legally he is the father, but not generatively; he did not beget Him.

In ancient times, the name was the compendium of a person's identity. To change one's name meant changing oneself, as in the case of Abraham, whose name God changed to "Abraham", which means "father of many", "for", says the Book of Genesis, he will be "the father of a multitude of nations" (17:5). The same goes for Jacob, who would be called "Israel", which means he who has "striven with God", because he fought with God to compel Him to give him the blessing (cf. *Gen* 32:28; 35:10).

But above all, naming someone or something meant asserting one's authority over what was named, as Adam did when he conferred a name on all the animals (cf. *Gen* 2:19-20).

Joseph already knows that a name had already been prepared for Mary's son, by God — Jesus' name is given to him by his *true* father, God — The name "Jesus", which means "the Lord saves"; as the Angel explains, "He will save his people from their sins" (*Mt* 1:21). This particular aspect of Joseph now enables us to reflect on fatherhood and motherhood. And this, I believe, is very important: to think about fatherhood today. Because we live in an age of notorious orphanhood. It is curious: our civilization is somewhat orphan, and this orphanhood can be felt. May Saint Joseph, help us understand how to resolve this sense of orphanhood that is so harmful to us today.

To bring a child into the world is not enough to say that one is also their father or mother. "Fathers are not born, but made. A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person" (Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*). I think particularly of all those who are open to welcoming life by way of adoption, which is such a generous and beautiful, good attitude. Joseph shows us that this type of bond is not secondary; it is not second best. This kind of choice is among the highest forms of love, and of fatherhood and motherhood. How many children in the world are waiting for someone to take care of them! And how many married couples want to be fathers and mothers but are unable to do so for biological reasons; or, although they already have children, they want to share their family's affection with those who do not have it. We should not be afraid to choose the path of adoption, to take the "risk" of welcoming. And today, even with orphanhood, there is a certain selfishness. The other day, I spoke about the demographic winter that exists nowadays: people do not want to have children, or just one and no more. And many couples do not have children because they do not want to, or they have just one because they do not want any more, but they have two dogs, two cats.... Yes, dogs and cats take the place of children. Yes, it is funny, I understand, but it is the reality. And this denial of fatherhood or motherhood diminishes us, it takes away our humanity. And in this way civilization becomes more aged and without humanity, because it loses the richness of fatherhood and motherhood. And our homeland suffers as it does not have children,

and, as someone said somewhat humorously, “and now that there are no children, who will pay the taxes for my pension? Who will take care of me?”. He laughed, but it is the truth. I ask of Saint Joseph the grace to awaken consciences and to think about this: about having children.

Fatherhood and motherhood are the fullness of the life of a person. Think about this. It is true, there is the spiritual fatherhood of those who consecrate themselves to God, and spiritual motherhood; but those who live in the world and get married, have to think about having children, of giving life, because they will be the ones to shut their eyes, who will think about the future. And also, if you cannot have children, think about adoption. It is a risk, yes: having a child is always a risk, either naturally or by adoption. But it is riskier not to have them. It is riskier to deny fatherhood or to deny motherhood, be it real or spiritual. A man or a woman who do not voluntarily develop a sense of fatherhood or motherhood are lacking something fundamental, something important. Think about this, please.

I hope that the institutions will always be prepared to help with adoptions, by seriously monitoring but also simplifying the necessary procedures so that the dream of so many children who need a family, and of so many couples who wish to give themselves in love, can come true. Some time ago I heard the testimony of a person, a doctor — important in his profession — who did not have children, and along with his wife, he decided to adopt one. And when the time came, they were offered a child, and they were told, “But we do not know how this child’s health will progress. Perhaps he may have an illness”. And he said — he had seen him — he said, “If you had asked me about this before coming, perhaps I would have said no. But I have seen him: I will take him with me”. This is the longing to be an adoptive father, to be an adoptive mother too. Do not be afraid of this.

I pray that no one may feel deprived of the bond of paternal love. And may those who are afflicted with orphanhood, go forward without this very unpleasant feeling. May Saint Joseph protect, and give his help to orphans; and may he intercede for couples who wish to have a child. Let us pray for this together:

Saint Joseph,
 you who loved Jesus with fatherly love,
 be close to the many children who have no family
 and who long for a dad and mom.
 Support the couples who are unable to have children,
 help them to discover, through this suffering, a greater plan.
 Make sure that no one lacks a home, a bond,
 a person to take care of him or her;
 and heal the selfishness of those who close themselves off from life,
 that they may open their hearts to love.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors. In the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, may each of you, and your families, cherish the joy of this Christmas season, and so draw near in prayer to the Saviour who has come to dwell among us. May God bless you!

Lastly as usual my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *the sick*, to *young people* and to *newlyweds*. Tomorrow we will celebrate the Solemnity of Epiphany. May you know, like the Magi how to seek Christ, light of the world, with an open spirit.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on Saint Joseph, we now consider Joseph's dignity as the foster-father of Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary. As Mary's husband and Jesus' legal father, Joseph had all the rights of a father, including that of naming their child. Yet Joseph had learned from the angel that, in God's plan, Mary's Son was to be named Jesus, which means "the Lord saves". Joseph's docility to God's will and his fatherly care for the child Jesus can teach us much about the authentic meaning of parenthood. To be a mother or father is not simply a matter of biology; more profoundly, it entails caring for the life of a family. In this sense, one of the highest forms of parenthood is to take on the responsibility of becoming adoptive parents, prepared to welcome an orphaned or abandoned child as part of one's own family. Let us pray that through Joseph's intercession, fathers of families will be given the grace to respond to their noble vocation, and that the many children in our world who long for a secure and loving home will find a welcome on the part of good and generous families.
