

Landry: St. Joseph a role model as protector, provider and foster father



Very few experiences that have impacted me as much as that of becoming a first-time parent. It's an experience filled with memorable moments: I vividly remember the moment we realized we were expecting a child, the first kicks, and holding my daughter for the first time.

I also remember arriving home from the hospital while feeling overwhelmed completely unsure of what we'd gotten ourselves into, and how that was replaced with small joys as we watched our child discover the world around her. It was – and is – a tremendous experience that has taught me a great deal about what it means to call, know, and trust in God as “Father.”

Each year, as we prepare for and celebrate the Christmas season, I find myself contemplating what St. Joseph might have thought and felt in his own experience of becoming a first-time dad. To say that Joseph's experience was much different than mine is a bit of an understatement. Where the discovery of our pregnancy was filled with joy and anticipation, Joseph would have had a different wave of emotions upon learning of Mary's pregnancy which he had been uninvolved. The nervous excitement leading up to the delivery of the child would have instead been worry for his wife and child during their journey to Bethlehem – and concern about where they would be staying. Those early months of discovery and wonder likely had some of the same joys ... but also great fear as they fled to Egypt.

Joseph's experience of fatherhood is a much different story than the one I've lived. But the way in which he embraced all of it has long made him one of my favorite saints. Most of the religious art we see portrays St. Joseph as a much older man. Apparently, this artistic choice was made to emphasize Mary's perpetual virginity. A number of years ago I was reading the writings of Archbishop Fulton Sheen, who made a strong argument why this might not be the case:

"The Church will not ordain a man to the priesthood who has not his vital powers. She wants men who have something to tame, rather than those who are tame because they have no energy to be wild. It should be no different with God ... Joseph was probably a young man, strong, virile, athletic, handsome, chaste, and disciplined."

In other words, Joseph wasn't chaste simply because he was old; as he grew to understand his calling as husband to Mary and foster father to Jesus, he accepted the weight and responsibility to guard and protect many things – including the virginity of Mary. For this reason, as a young man, I looked up to St. Joseph as I sought to understand my own responsibility to guard and protect many things, including the purity of those women God put into my life while I was single. Joseph remains a wonderful example as I consider the call to chastity that exists within marriage.

In recent days, the Church has contemplated Joseph's total willingness to do whatever is necessary to protect his family. Over the Christmas season, we hear of Joseph leading his family on difficult journeys: he and Mary traveling for the census immediately before the birth of Christ, traveling to and from Egypt in order to protect Jesus from King Herod, and ultimately settling in Nazareth.

Most of us who are married with children would hopefully do no less in order to protect and provide for the needs of our families. But what I find particularly notable about these journeys is that Joseph undertook them because of something God had told him in a dream. This is something I've struggled to understand over the years, as my own dreams make so little sense, but Joseph managed to comprehend that God was speaking to him *repeatedly* through his dreams.

He understood and obeyed when he was assured that Mary's child was from the Holy Spirit, when instructed to leave for Egypt and to return again, and when told where to settle with his family upon their return. We can suppose from this that St. Joseph must have been a man of profound prayer – having developed in himself such an intimate relationship with God that he had no trouble recognizing God's voice.

It's for this reason that St. Josemaria Escriva refers to him as "a teacher of the interior life." This is reinforced by the fact that not a single word of Joseph's is recorded in Scripture: his chief concern was listening to and

obeying the voice of God. St. John Paul II wrote that ***“The Gospels speak exclusively of what Joseph ‘did.’ Still, they allow us to discover in his “actions” – shrouded in silence as they are – an aura of deep contemplation. Joseph was in daily contact with the mystery “hidden from ages past,” and which “dwelt” under his roof.”***

As we near the end of the Christmas season, my thoughts often return to Joseph as I compare my own experiences of fatherhood with his. Despite the differences in our experiences of being a dad, I find myself trying to imitate Joseph in the ways in which I am called to chastity, to look out for the needs of my family, and to develop a deep interior life. If I, in my limited experiences, have discovered many things about God the Father by being a father myself ... I can only imagine what Joseph learned about God through his experience of protecting, providing for, and raising Jesus.

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