



ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

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RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

17 March 2016

“St. Joseph Be Our Guide”

The title of tonight's conference is “St. Joseph be our guide,” and I want to begin tonight with two reflection questions in advance as we contemplate the person of Joseph and our own vocations:

- Reflect on the humility, docility, and openness of St. Joseph who so radically changed his plans and gave permission to God to totally reorient his life: after Mary's miraculous pregnancy; the appearance of the angel in dreams; no room at the inn; flight into Egypt; and then their return to labor in the hiddenness of Nazareth.
- Now think of the times in our own lives that God has invited us to change course. St. Joseph shows us the way to respond with the same docility, humility and openness. Through his intercession and presence guiding us, he will help us be saved from thinking ill of our shortcomings, strengthen us in our deficiencies, and find the way to assume our calls to serve in confidence as fruitful spiritual fathers. St. Joseph trusted that he was in the hands of God even when he did not understand – what does God want me to learn from him this Lenten Season?

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Now before the Irish get all bent out of shape as we celebrate the St. Patrick's Day today, it is important to also reflect on the mission of St. Patrick especially in light of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Patrick certainly went to peripheries and lived his call to manifest Mercy as he returned to bring the Gospel to those who enslaved him: the Irish! Just kidding, there is much to delve into under a separate conference regarding Pastoral Formation and the life of Patrick - we'll save that one for next March (someone please remind me!).

Tonight however is more foundational, humanly foundational, as we reflect on the call of the man, Joseph, and ask him to be our guide. Saint John Paul II considered the human dimension to be the “*necessary foundation*” (PDV 43) for priestly formation. Following the Thomistic axiom, “*grace builds on nature,*” Pope John Paul II set the course affecting all seminary formation for the future. A man can only truly be open to formation if he knows who he is. He must be free interiorly, and seminary formation in both the internal and external forum is meant to help lead each seminarian on this path: “*Freedom, therefore, is essential to vocation, a freedom which when it gives a positive response appears as a deep personal adherence, as a loving gift, or rather as a gift given back to the Giver who is God who calls*” (PDV 36). Remember that freedom is not doing what I want but *the ability to choose* what is truly good for me, according to God's plan. We must freely chose to bind ourselves to God!

So let's turn to the Patron of the Universal Church as a role model for us and look at three facets of his life to help ground us in our own vocation: St. Joseph as a Christian gentleman, as model of service to the Holy Family, and as an ecclesial man (a fourth is given as an addendum).

**1) Christian Gentleman:** "When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took his wife into his home" (Mt. 1:24).

First and foremost, St. Joseph was a man of incredible faith and trust in the Father's will. Imagine entering into the unknown with Mary and moving forward in the confidence that God had a plan despite how ridiculous it would seem to his friends and family. To believe the words of the angel, to trust in God's plan, to embark into the unknown, that is an impressive and exemplary role model for us who have been called to do the same. To believe that God has called *us* to a similar and unique vocation of chastity in our own Christian journey, to trust in His providence for our needs when we cannot see the path before us, and to embrace our vocational mystery confident that God is with us - this is the way of allowing St. Joseph to be our guide.

St. Joseph was not only a believer, but he must have been a gentleman of strong moral character. Our own moral character and the ontological character received in Baptism, Confirmation, and eventually Ordination must be lived in harmony within us - otherwise we run the risk of forgetting our primary calling of first and foremost being followers of Jesus. To be a Christian gentleman is to allow the Lord to smooth our rough edges. To recognize that our strength is in acknowledging our weakness, and our greatness is in littleness. In humility, the Christian gentleman knows how to show deference and respect to his elders, parents, superiors, professors, pastors, and bishops - both in addressing them and in speaking about them. Let's not fail to mention some simple acts of chivalry: opening doors for others, especially ladies, manners at table, returning messages promptly, responding to RSVP's, arriving on time to appointments, and anticipating others needs through acts of kindness. The Christian gentleman recognizes the dignity of others, understands healthy boundaries, modesty in dress, simplicity of life, and doesn't try to draw attention to himself, but to Christ. He shows respect and courtesy to all people and his natural grace and friendliness allow him to be a "bridge and not an obstacle" (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 43). As the first Christian gentleman, Joseph is that "just man" of whom the scriptures speak who desires the right ordering of his life and society ("just" - δίκαιος meaning to order one's life in the light of the Word of God) - this is the way of allowing St. Joseph to be our guide.

**2) Model of service to the Holy Family:** "Behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel'" (Mt. 2:19-20).

There are no recorded words spoken by Joseph in the sacred scriptures. He was a man of contemplation and action; God spoke and he acted. Joseph knew that his vocation was bigger than himself and so he lived in quiet service to the Holy Family. Now obviously we cannot be quiet when our task is to preach (especially if you have a big mouth like me!), but we must be men of quiet contemplation if we are to truly be of greater service and live in relationship with Jesus and Mary. Finding silence in our lives in the refuge of prayer is essential for both our sanctity *and* our sanity. Learning to listen to the Father speak to us and give us guidance is the stance that St. Joseph lived in. As Blessed Teresa of Calcutta was so fond of saying, "In the silence of the heart, God speaks." Both Mother Teresa and St. Joseph model for us abandonment to Divine Providence even in the face of discouraging results. Mother Teresa reminds us that such quiet prayer leads us to greater service: "The fruit of Silence is prayer. The fruit of Prayer is

faith. The fruit of Faith is love. The fruit of Love is service. The fruit of Service is peace.” The servant of the Lord learns to live in the humility and docility of living in relationship with God in the present moment. The school of silent prayer with the Holy Family teaches us to serve the Lord in the here and now, *hic et nunc!* Living in the present moment and remaining grounded in daily relationship with Jesus and Mary - this is the way of allowing St. Joseph to be our guide (e.g. “horse running to the stables” - seminary is the *hic et nunc*).

Joseph embraced Mary as his own spouse despite the cost to his reputation and the sacrifices that it must have entailed. Many times you have heard me speak of the fact that we are not bachelors, but rather men in a committed and loving relationship with the Bride of Christ, the Church. Thus we continually serve her in love, remaining faithful to our commitment for life and thus bear abundant fruit. Think of the fruitfulness of St. Joseph as husband of Mary and foster father to Jesus. Though he lived in perfect chastity and Jesus was not his biological child, he nonetheless devoted himself wholeheartedly to the Holy Family. Benedict XVI stated it well: “[St. Joseph] took Mary into his home. He welcomed the mystery that was in Mary and the mystery that was Mary herself. He loved her with great respect, which is the mark of all authentic love. Joseph teaches us that it is possible to love without possessing” ([18 March 2009](#)). To love without possessing, this is the chaste celibate loving that St. Joseph embodies for each of us. Certainly there are moments, even seemingly overwhelming moments, when we long to be held, to encounter warmth and affection. These are moments and opportunities to put our faith, hope, and love to the test. Do you love me God? Will you give me the strength to be firm in my resolve? If we turn to Jesus and Mary and desire to live in their home, in relationship with them, we will be given the grace to persevere in chaste celibacy (we want you to thrive and not just survive). These moments of honest struggle are not a mere matter of grinning and bearing it, but of genuine surrender of our sexual drive to be ever more united to the Holy Family and the family that we love and serve in our parishes. The priest, not possessing a family of his own, embraces his spouse with his whole heart - this is the way of allowing St. Joseph to be our guide.

Jesus was known to be the carpenter’s son (cf. Mt. 13:55; Mk. 6:3). St. Joseph served the Holy Family as father, protector, and provider. Flowing from his intimate union with Mary, is St. Joseph’s vocation as a spiritual father, or foster father, of Jesus. Pope Benedict said: “He is not the biological father of Jesus, whose Father is God alone, and yet he lives his fatherhood fully and completely. To be a father means above all to be at the service of life and growth. Saint Joseph, in this sense, gave proof of great devotion. For the sake of Christ he experienced persecution, exile and the poverty which this entails. He had to settle far from his native town. His only reward was to be with Christ” (ibid.). Don’t be afraid of the natural desires to marry and have children that arise in your hearts from time to time. If in fact the Lord has called you to the priesthood, he will meet the longings of your heart as both spouse and father, to not just one family, but to the family of faith. “Be at the service of life and growth” - this is the fatherhood of Joseph.

Joseph is known as the “Guardian of the Redeemer” as St. John Paul II wrote so beautifully in 1989 (cf. [Redemptoris Custos](#)). As such he was the provider, altruistically caring for his family as do so many selfless parents. When we think of Joseph, we envision the carpenter (*teckton*) who was not averse to the difficulties of labor. There is a certain virility that we can imagine as we strive to follow the manly example of Joseph. We must not be afraid to roll up our sleeves and engage in the hard work entrusted to us. We know him under the title of “St. Joseph the Worker” and reflect on the dignity of work. One of the things we want to avoid is either being a

workaholic or having the reputation of being lazy. What does a work day look like for us? Talk in formation advising about this reality. Think about the hours you put in when you are working in the parish. Are we putting in 8-9 hours a day of availability to the parish? Daily prayer is not work, it our primary relationship with God, so looking at the length of an average “work day” can serve as a guide and keep us honest. Our people with two jobs and three children playing sports are busy, we’re not! Now there are times when it is necessarily more, as it is for an attorney before trial, a CPA in tax season or sanitary management after holidays. Seek balance and communicate your whereabouts to the office staff and you will win their hearts as a man committed to the parish. We must overcome any softness or distracting overly effeminate affect as part of our Christian formation into mature manhood. While at the same time avoiding the flip side, which is to simply see manliness in external ruggedness or an overly machismo image. Our Pope Emeritus noted: “In reality, we grow in affective maturity when our hearts adhere to God. Christ needs priests who are mature, virile, capable of cultivating an authentic spiritual paternity. For this to happen, priests need to be honest with themselves, open with their spiritual director and trusting in divine mercy” ([“Immerse Yourselves in the Love of the Savior,” ORE, 31 May 2006](#)). An alumnus told me this week: “I love what I do and feel sorry for the guys that view priesthood as work, they just don’t get it.” We must be true fathers who are present to their families and serving them with love, not just “nice guys” who show up from time to time - this is the way of allowing St. Joseph to be our guide.

**3) Ecclesial Man:** “Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary into your home” (Mt. 1:20).

As the Patron of the Universal Church, St. Joseph models for us a love that is able to build a home, a community of love. He was not just a carpenter, but a builder of an *ekklesia*. Likewise, we are to be such builders of communion within the Church. We embrace the teachings of the Church as ecclesial men who think with the Church, *sentire cum Ecclesia* (e.g. Oath of Fidelity). We embrace the Church as she is, not as we want her to be. In obedience, we follow our bishops, flawed as they may be, because we trust that the Holy Spirit works through them and the Church (cf. [The Smallest Spark](#), John Wright’s book, page 60). This makes very real what we pray every Sunday: “I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” We believe in the one Church founded by Jesus Christ Himself and we follow.

Our ecclesiology is one of communion and our liturgies are celebrated according to the mind of the Church and are not inventions of our own making. We are *members* of the Church and not lords over the faithful. Through our stewardship of time, talent, treasure we too are called to be active parishioners to the parish (or seminary) to which we belong. Thus, I am no longer my own, it is not about my preferences, but about being one with the whole Church.

Pope Francis reminded a group of seminarians just last month: “You are preparing yourselves to follow the impulse of the Spirit, to be the ‘future of the Church’ according to God’s heart; not according to the preferences of each one or the fashions of the moment, but as the proclamation of the Gospel requires. To prepare oneself well one must work in depth, but above all one must undergo an interior conversion, which daily roots the ministry in Jesus’ first call, and revives it in a personal relation with Him” ([Address to the Address to Pontifical Lombard Seminary, 25 January 2016](#)). An interior conversion: ministry is not about me and my tastes, but about Christ and His people! It is no longer *my* time, I am no longer a *private* person, but my life is Christ’s (cf. Gal. 2:19-20). Isn’t that exactly the model of St. Joseph who lived radically oriented to the love service of his Family? As Pope Francis reflected upon at his own installation Mass three years ago: “How does Joseph exercise his role as protector? Discreetly, humbly and silently, but

with an unfailing presence and utter fidelity, even when he finds it hard to understand” ([19 March 2013](#)). An ecclesial man is able to die to himself and likewise live in the service of his family - this is the way of allowing St. Joseph to be our guide.

Brothers even in our fallen humanity, we must strive to be ever more *homo redemptus* - which is to be ever more configured to Christ. Hence the emphasis of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* on human formation:

“It is important that the priest should mold his human personality in such a way that it becomes a *bridge and not an obstacle* for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of humanity. [...] Future priests should therefore cultivate a series of human qualities, not only out of proper and due growth and realization of self, but also with a view to the ministry. These qualities are needed for them to be balanced people, strong and free, capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibilities. They need to be educated to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially, to be balanced in judgment and behavior” (*PDV* 43)

Our lives, striving for balance, should echo forth a healthy normalcy. But as Pope Francis recently reflected, we are to also be different and not just a “regular Joe” (pardon the pun St. Joseph!): “A temptation appears on the way that must be rejected: that of ‘*normality*,’ of a Pastor for whom a ‘normal’ life is enough. Thus this priest begins to be contented with some attention received, he judges the ministry on the basis of his successes and he abandons himself to research of what pleases him, becoming tepid and without a real interest in others. Instead, for us ‘normality’ is pastoral holiness, the gift of life. If a priest chooses to be only a normal person, he will be a mediocre priest or worse” (25 January 2016). I am very proud and grateful of how truly “normal” this community is - I regularly receive comments from visiting clergy and laity who reflect on the fact of how normal, healthy, balanced, and wholesome you are - what a grace!

St. Joseph was among the most normal of men, but by that we mean holiness which is to be the true norm of our lives. Holiness, pastoral holiness is the call of every priest – a life in deep relationship with Christ and His people so that we too can become Guardians of the Redeemer, true Christian gentlemen, at the service of the Holy Family, and men, who through love, build up the Church – St. Joseph be our guide!

### Addendum

**4) Patron saint of a happy death:** “The souls of the just are in the hands of God” (Wis. 3:1). Last but not least, it is always good to remember the “last things.” *Tempus fugit, memento mori.* We are reminded of this reality daily as we visit hospitals, nursing homes, and counsel grieving families, but our own mortality can fade from our consciousness. Heaven is our homeland and we should pray for a happy death; that like St. Joseph, we be surrounded by Jesus and Mary at that most important moment of our lives. We can be assured that even though we do not have our own family, we will not be alone. How many hundreds of thousands of times have we asked Mary to be with us “now and at the hour of our death.” Thus no matter what else, we will be surrounded by Jesus, Mary and Joseph, not to mention the myriads of angels. Think right now of *Fr. Tom Uzhunnalil, SDB*. This 56 years old Salesian priest decided to remain in the country to

sustain the Missionaries of Charity and the Catholic faithful present in Yemen after his church was burned to the ground. He was abducted by the killers of the four MC nuns and their 12 co-workers in Aden, Yemen. Let us pause and say a Hail Mary for him right now that he know of the Holy Family's presence at his side even now.

My dear dad always had a devotion to Joseph and regularly prayed for a happy death, it never made sense to me, and in fact seemed kind of morbid, until I saw him on his deathbed. Many graces flowed in those difficult last days of his life and I can attest that it was the fruit of his lifelong devotion to St. Joseph, patron of a happy death. Let's pray for the grace of that moment for ourselves too!

Eternity is the very reason for our vocation. Our relationship with Christ keeps us fixed on this reality – at times some seminarians and priests get so enamored with the trappings of the Church that we forget the essence, which is Christ. Pope Francis recently stressed to seminarians: “Entrusted to you during these years is the mission to train yourselves in this dialogue of life: knowledge of the various disciplines that you study is not an end in itself, but is *concretized* in the colloquy of prayer and in a real encounter with persons. It does no good to be formed ‘in watertight compartments’; prayer, education and pastoral care are bearer stones of one building: they must always be solidly united to support one another, well cemented between them, so that the priests of today and tomorrow are *spiritual men and merciful pastors*, interiorly unified by the love of the Lord and able to spread the joy of the Gospel in the simplicity of life” (25 January 2016). Living in constant relationship with the Holy Family reminds us of our true homeland in heaven - this is the way of allowing St. Joseph to be our guide.