

WALKING *with* SAINT JOSEPH



30 Days of Reflections and Prayers
with Pope Francis

INTRODUCTION

Those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation.

In response to the continuing global pandemic, when worship is virtual, personal contact is limited, and we're all learning new ways of maintaining relationships, Pope Francis has focused on St. Joseph as a model and guide for us on this journey.

Why Joseph? Because, even though he never speaks in the Scriptures, his role is so significant that no saint aside from Mary, his spouse, is mentioned more often in the Church today. Yet he exists in the shadows—much like the frontline workers in our hospitals, grocery stores, post offices, and everywhere that essential personnel are keeping the needs of our daily lives met. This quiet man, who responded to God's voice coming to him in dreams, who fulfilled the role of earthly father to Jesus, is an excellent person to ponder in these troubling days.

May these thirty reflections on Pope Francis's words about St. Joseph open our eyes and hearts to this great guide.

THE OLD AND THE NEW

*Descendant of David, spouse
of Mary, foster father of Jesus...*

Joseph never speaks in the Scriptures, but he is a man of reflection and action. More than this, as a descendant of David and husband of Mary, Joseph bridges the Old and New Testaments. Pope Francis says that it is often the quiet folks doing their jobs patiently and well—those we don't stop to consider when shelves are stocked, mail is delivered, streets are plowed, and children are cared for—who perform the most significant acts. Each caregiver, driver, teacher, or parent-stepping-in is a hero.

PONDER

Who have I failed to notice
in the course of the day?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise,
thank you for the gift of all those who help
in whatever way, each and every day.*

GOD'S RAW MATERIAL

*Even through Joseph's fears,
God's will and plan were at work.*

Joseph is perhaps our best reminder of how God works. Whenever we feel we're inadequate to do God's will, Pope Francis says, we must remember that it is through our very imperfections and weaknesses that God can produce the most fruit. Joseph feared to take Mary as his wife; he was afraid to flee to Egypt. And it's clear that he was equally fearful of returning home when Herod's threat was no more. Yet in every situation he trusted God's guidance and did not let fear overcome him. As Pope Francis reminds us, "we must never be afraid to let the Lord steer our course."

PONDER

Have I ever completely given myself
over to God's will, without questioning
or second-guessing?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, give me
the courage I need to follow you.*

DARING TO TRUST

*It was through dreams that God spoke to Joseph,
which was a time-honored way for God
to communicate to ancient peoples.*

When Mary told Joseph she was pregnant, he was understandably disturbed and decided to put her aside quietly rather than expose her to public ridicule and punishment. But then the angel appeared to him in a dream and told him it was God's will that he take Mary as his wife. When he awoke, Joseph immediately followed God's plan. This unquestioning obedience, Pope Francis tells us, is a hallmark of how we should follow God's prompting. We may not be visited in a dream, but we certainly encounter God in the people we meet each day who need our help and acceptance.

PONDER

Who needs my help today?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, open my
eyes today to see you in everyone.*

THE COURAGE TO CHANGE

*Regardless of the hardship involved,
Joseph did not hesitate to obey when told
to take Mary and Jesus away.*

Most of us know the Serenity Prayer, asking for the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change what we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. When Joseph was told, in a second dream, to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt, he again did not hesitate, “regardless of the hardship involved,” as Pope Francis reminds us. In our daily lives we are often presented with hard decisions to make. How we respond makes all the difference. We should never be afraid to ask God for wisdom and help.

PONDER

Do I call on God in times of tough decisions?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise,
help me to see opportunity hidden in challenge
and to do your will joyfully.*

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ON THE ROAD AGAIN...

Once again, Joseph promptly obeyed.

So many people during the pandemic have lost their jobs, and so many others have had their life disrupted and reduced to a family bubble and masked trips to the grocery store. Joseph, too, knew disruption and uncertainty. When the danger to Jesus had passed, Joseph was told to go back to Israel with his family, and, Pope Francis tells us, he obeyed immediately. It couldn't have been easy, yet Joseph trusted that what God was asking him to do was the right thing. How can we learn patience and resolve in our own lives? Perhaps imitating Joseph is a good way to start.

PONDER

How can I reach out to someone who has been let go?

What can I offer to help them?

PRAY

God of wonder and surprise, help me develop the patience and courage to follow your path.

WELCOME THE STRANGER

*We need to set aside all anger and disappointment
and to embrace the way things are, even when
they do not turn out as we wish.*

When it was time to return from Egypt, Joseph was again warned in a dream that it would not be safe for his family in Judea, so he took them to Nazareth in Galilee. There he settled with his family. We hear the story of the Holy Family over and over, Pope Francis reminds us, in the stories of migrants and refugees constantly on the move to escape oppressive conditions and abusive rulers. To be sure, Joseph must not have wanted to settle in yet another strange place, yet his faith and trust in God led him to do just that. Are we that trusting?

PONDER

**Do I know anyone who is homeless or in hiding
from abusive conditions? How can I help?**

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, open my eyes to see you
in the stranger and to be always welcoming.*

SAYING “YES!”

*In every situation, Joseph declared his own “fiat,”
like Mary did at the Annunciation and Jesus did
in the Garden of Gethsemane.*

How often, do you suppose, have doctors and nurses, physical therapists and home health aides, grocery clerks and postal workers wished they could stay safely at home during the pandemic? How often have our religious leaders wished for a full-size, in-person congregation? How often have small business and restaurant owners and theater performers wanted this time of dryness to be over? Yet each one has said “yes” to going on through another day, as Joseph did. Pope Francis urges us not to lose heart—in fulfilling his role in salvation history, Joseph shows us the way to take our part as well. So be it. Yes.

PONDER

When have I said “yes” when it was difficult?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, fill me with hope
and joy so that all can see you through me.*

FOLLOWING THE RULES

*During the hidden years in Nazareth,
Jesus learned at the school of Joseph
to do the Father's will.*

There is so much we do not know about the years when Jesus was growing up. We don't know when Joseph died. What we can guess, though, is that Joseph was in every way Jesus' earthly dad, teaching him his craft, instructing him in faith, and raising him as someone who would have the same trust and desire to obey the Father's will that Joseph did. Pope Francis intimates that Joseph taught primarily by example. What examples do we find today of those who do God's will? Who models God to us? What can Joseph teach us?

PONDER

Have I ever really paid attention to those around me who seem to be very close to God?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me to seek
you in others, and to share your light
with everyone I meet.*

MINISTERS OF SALVATION

Joseph cooperated in the fullness of time in the great mystery of salvation and is truly a minister of salvation.

Pope Francis tells us that Joseph was “called by God to serve the person and mission of Jesus directly through the exercise of his fatherhood.” Not all of us are fathers or mothers, but there is inevitably someone in our lives who looks to us for example and guidance. We don’t have to be geniuses or miracle workers—we just have to be ourselves, performing simple acts of kindness, generosity, and compassion. And if that should yield the title of “minister of salvation,” how fortunate we would be! All we need to do is play the part God calls us to play in this world.

PONDER

Have I considered myself equipped to help others?

PRAY

God of wonder and surprise, remind me always that you are with me every minute, helping me to make good decisions and offer good example.

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW

*The world today needs fathers,
not authoritarian tyrants.*

Parents need to show authority but not be authoritarian. They need to teach discipline but not be tyrannical about it. They need to demonstrate gentle power through love, not wield a domineering hand. Who can model this for us better today, Pope Francis asks, than Joseph? His life was one of self-gift, pouring himself out for the welfare of others, sacrificing self-gain for others' good. It's easy to confuse that role today, with images the media provide. Let us search for good examples and *be* good examples of what a loving role model looks like, so that our children will grow up to carry that message.

PONDER

How might I model unconditional
love in my life?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me to
demonstrate your loving goodness always.*

WITHOUT REASON OR RHYME...

*Joseph traces a spiritual path for us that
is not one that explains, but accepts.*

“If I only understood *why* this was happening...” “*Why* should this happen to me?” Why, why, why? We are creatures who crave reasons for things. We want the security of knowing that whatever it is we are about to undertake has met all the criteria of research we can muster. Unfortunately, as Pope Francis reminds us, life doesn’t work that way. And in Joseph we find our model for pure and plain acceptance of God’s will for us. Do we truly believe that God knows best? Too often we want to stay in the driver’s seat. But surrendering to God opens up so many life-changing opportunities!

PONDER

Who can help me discern God’s will for me?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me not to question,
but to say yes with all my heart.*

ACCEPTANCE IS AN ACTIVE THING

*Joseph is courageously and firmly proactive,
not passively resigned.*

Joseph's obedience to God's will is a very active thing. He firmly believes that what God is telling him to do is the right thing. Do we ever have that certainty about decisions we're called to make? Do we call on God to guide us when we face tough choices? And if it seems that what God is asking is unreasonable, do we follow anyway, actively living our faith and trust in the one who has promised to be with us always? Pope Francis says this is what Joseph did. This is what our frontline workers have done. And this is what we are all to do.

PONDER

How can I better follow God's will?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, give me Joseph's courage
and insight so that I may follow you better.*

THE BETTER WAY

We should never think that believing means finding facile and comforting solutions. The faith Christ taught us is what we see in Saint Joseph. He did not look for shortcuts.

Life frequently throws us curves, and that's putting it mildly. Especially in these days of devastating loss, it can be hard to believe. But, says Pope Francis, faith is not just about being comforted. It is about believing in the midst of doubt, of carrying on when everything seems useless. Again we turn to Joseph, who didn't look for shortcuts. The things God asked of him were arduous and difficult, yet he embraced them without question. Life choices hit us when we least expect them—following Joseph's example could be an excellent way to bear them.

PONDER

When have I invited God's support in what I do?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me
to rely on you as my best guide.*

WHOM DO WE CHOOSE?

*Joseph's attitude encourages us to accept
and welcome others as they are, without exception,
and to show special concern for the weak.*

It is clear in Scripture that God chooses the weak and cares about the poor. And God calls us to do the same. Saint Joseph shows us the way, says Pope Francis. Joseph knew the struggles of refugees. He felt the ups and downs of the marketplace that every worker feels. And as a parent, he knew the moments of pride and the moments of panic and disappointment every parent feels. Just as Mary does, Joseph understands our weaknesses and struggles, and he welcomes us. Are we able to do the same for others?

PONDER

Is there anyone I have neglected
to include in my welcome?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, open my eyes to
the gifts of all I meet, no matter their circumstance,
and help me to include them in my family.*

CREATIVE COURAGE

*When difficulties face us, we can either give up
and walk away, or we can engage them.*

*At times, difficulties bring out resources
we did not even think we had.*

Joseph must have had extraordinary courage to do all that he did. He accepted Mary into his home, he accepted the role of earthly father to Jesus, and he moved his family again and again against all reason but at the prompting of the Spirit. He faced all of these difficulties with what Pope Francis calls “creative courage”—the ability to find resources within ourselves that we didn’t know we had. Can Joseph teach us how to develop this?

PONDER

When have I needed to be courageous?
How difficult was it, and did I come out the other
side better for the experience?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, make my courage
match my desire to serve you.*

GOD ACTS THROUGH US

God acts through events and people.

Pope Francis goes so far as to call Joseph the “miracle” by which Jesus and Mary were saved. He says that Joseph was the one chosen to guide the history of redemption. That’s a pretty weighty responsibility to take on for someone who never speaks in the Scriptures! What does that say to us? We may not do phenomenal, world-changing things, but we can smile at someone, thank someone, and simply do our jobs and live our lives with courage, compassion, love, forgiveness, and generosity.

PONDER

What one thing can I do today
to brighten someone’s life?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, strengthen me
to be aware of all the ways I can show
your goodness to others in everything I do.*

PROBLEMS INTO POSSIBILITIES

*God always finds a way to carry out
the divine saving plan, regardless of all the
arrogance and violence of worldly powers.*

Joseph's creative courage led him to work out solutions to problems that seemed insurmountable. God used Joseph, as he uses all of us, to fulfill the plan of salvation. Each of us plays a unique and indispensable part in that plan. Pope Francis reminds us that we all have the power to turn problems into possibilities if we trust in divine providence, as Joseph did. God is always with us, so we have nothing to fear.

PONDER

Do I trust that God will help me through difficulties?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, fill me with your light
and love, so that all may come to know you.*

WHAT ABOUT WHEN GOD SEEMS ABSENT?

*If at times God seems not to help us, this means
that we are being trusted to plan, to be creative,
and to find solutions ourselves.*

There are dark times, Pope Francis reminds us, when God seems to have left us adrift. Joseph must have felt that way more than once, when he had to uproot his life again and again. But God trusts us more than we trust ourselves and has given us what we need to engage our own sense of creative courage to meet problems head on. Of course we should trust in God, but we should also have enough self-confidence to realize that God would never leave us without resources. Like Joseph, we have what it takes.

PONDER

When have I felt abandoned by God?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me to overcome
my self-doubt so that I may give you glory.*

PROTECTOR OF THE UNFORTUNATE

*Every poor, needy, suffering, or dying person,
every stranger, every prisoner, every sick person
is “the child” whom Joseph continues to protect.*

It doesn't take long to look around and find those who are less fortunate than we are. Especially in these days of job loss, economic uncertainty, and food insecurity, people in need are everywhere. Pope Francis says that Joseph's role as father and protector has made him the perfect model for watching over the needy and suffering in our midst. Who is in our neighborhood, in our parish, at our child's school, or at our workplace who may be struggling? How can we help?

PONDER

How can I contribute to the good of others?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me always to seek you
in the least and the lost and to bring your light to them.*

JOSEPH THE WORKER

*Jesus learned from Joseph the value, dignity,
and joy of what it means to eat bread that is
the fruit of one's own labor.*

Joseph was not only a model father, Pope Francis reminds us. He also showed by his work as a carpenter how to be a model worker. As a father, Joseph was indispensable in teaching Jesus how to live; as a diligent and honest worker, he was indispensable in teaching Jesus how to make an honest living and about the dignity of a job well done, one that provides for a family's needs. Too often today, people need to work two or more jobs just to make ends meet. How might Joseph's example guide us to champion workers' dignity?

PONDER

Do I know anyone who needs help
in spite of working more than one job?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me to recognize
everyone I meet as my brother or sister.*

PARTICIPATING IN THE WORK OF SALVATION

*How can we envision human dignity
without working to ensure that everyone
is able to earn a decent living?*

When we consider Joseph as a worker, it is crucial to think of how important work is to one's personal dignity. And work, Pope Francis reminds us, means making a living wage. These days, jobs are scarce, the applications for unemployment insurance are mind-boggling, and for those who have work, often the guiding force is survival, not individual fulfillment. Nonetheless, what we do to make a living can be part of the work of salvation. No matter how menial our job may seem, how can we cast it in the light of furthering God's plan?

PONDER

How can I find personal dignity in my job?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, make me enthusiastic
for my work so that I may serve you well.*

REVIEWING OUR PRIORITIES

The crisis of our time calls us to rediscover the value, the importance, and the necessity of work to bring about a new “normal” from which no one is excluded.

Joseph was a carpenter, a craft that was probably dependent on good financial times to be profitable for him. Pope Francis says this establishes him as our guide for how to persevere in uncertain economic times. We may be asked to reconsider our priorities in order to provide for our family, to use that “creative courage” in ways we never imagined in the days when jobs were secure and long-lasting. In these times, how can our “new normal” include everyone?

PONDER

How can I foster goodness in my community?

PRAY

God of wonder and surprise, help me see where what I do for a living may help to spread your message of dignity and total equality.

THE ROLE OF RESPONSIBILITY

*Whenever we accept responsibility
for the life of another, in some way
we become a father to that person.*

Even the sections of his letter where Pope Francis talks about Joseph as worker are cast in the light of providing for one's family. Here, we see the personal dimension of being a parent, a guardian. It's not enough just to bring a life into the world. It's what happens after birth, in assuming responsibility for the upbringing of children, that defines the role. Joseph embraced his fatherhood, in easy times and rough times. Parenting is often a daunting task, but it is also a beautiful way to show and live God's love for us.

PONDER

Do I accept my responsibilities with joy?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me to accept my
responsibilities with an eye to the greater good.*

SETTING BOUNDARIES TO SET THEM FREE

Introducing children to life and reality means not holding them back or being overprotective but helping them become capable of deciding for themselves.

The wise parent, Pope Francis says, helps children to learn to make their own decisions, to begin to develop the creative courage that will set them free in the world, filled with their own self-confidence. This is achieved by teaching children about life and reality—primarily through example, as Joseph did. There is no greater gift a parent can give than to not hover or be possessive but give a child the wings to fly free. Easy to say, hard to do—but we have Joseph to guide us.

PONDER

Am I good at letting go?

PRAY

God of wonder and peace, you know where I cling to things I should relinquish. Help me to do this.

THE FREEDOM OF CHASTE LOVE

Chastity is freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of one's life. Joseph knew how to love with extraordinary freedom. He did not think of himself but focused instead on the lives of Mary and Jesus.

“Chastity” and “chaste” love, as Pope Francis uses the words here, are the opposite of selfish, possessive, overbearing love. Joseph, in making his life all about the well-being of Mary and Jesus, shows us what that looks like. This even applies to the freedom to let our adult children follow their own path. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, a chaste love allows us to truly accept our children as they are. As Pope Francis says, “The logic of love is always the logic of freedom.”

PONDER

Do I truly understand unconditional love?

PRAY

God of wonder and surprise, help me to be accepting and loving with everyone.

BEYOND SELF-SACRIFICE TO SELF-GIFT

*In Joseph, we never see frustration
but only trust. His patient silence
was the prelude to concrete
expressions of trust.*

In his own quiet way, Joseph is a man of action. When God asks him to do something, he doesn't argue or bargain or refuse. That kind of dedicated response is what Pope Francis means by "self-gift." Are we as quick to respond enthusiastically to God's call? Given our imperfect human nature, it seems more likely that most of us would try to find ways to get around the summons. But here is where our God of wonder and surprise steps in, reminding us, as the saying goes, that God doesn't choose the qualified but qualifies the chosen.

PONDER

Have I ever seen a moment in my life as a call from God?

PRAY

God of wonder and surprise, surprise me!

ACCEPTING WHAT IS

Joseph set aside his own ideas in order to accept the course of events and to embrace them.

Not many people think this time of pandemic is easy or fun. There has been so much sickness and death and loss. The same was true for Joseph, who must have had ideas about how his life was going to look. Yet he put it all aside to follow God's will, to, as Pope Francis puts it, "not be a hostage to his expectations and the disappointments that follow." Sometimes all we can do is accept, and Joseph is a wonderful model of how to be accepting. Sometimes things don't go as we planned. We have a choice—to reject it all in anger and frustration, or to see how this, too, can help us grow in love and bring us closer to God.

PONDER

When I look back, am I able to see the gifts
in the disappointments I've faced?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, help me to accept
what I cannot change and to grow in love.*

LIVING AS A GIFT TO OTHERS

Whatever our vocation, our gift of self will not come to fulfillment if it stops at sacrifice.

We've all known people who give and give and give of themselves, yet seem frustrated, defeated, and sad. And we've all known people who are always there when needed with a smile on their face, glad to help, and leaving us feeling joyful. What's the difference? Pope Francis says it's going beyond self-sacrifice to self-gift. If we see what we're doing as a duty and nothing more, it can fill us with resentment—nothing would be enough. But if we use every opportunity as a chance to give of ourselves in love and to help build God's kingdom, that sacrifice becomes a true gift. That's the example Joseph gives us.

PONDER

Am I joyful and joy-filled in my acts of service?

PRAY

God of wonder and surprise, make me a gift to you and for you in all that I do.

REJOICE IN BECOMING “USELESS”

*When a father refuses to live the lives
of his children for them, he becomes like Joseph,
who always knew that his child was not his own
but had merely been entrusted to his care.*

After bringing up a child to be prudent but independent, it's time to step back and let the child enjoy that independence. Joseph is such an important model here, Pope Francis says. He stepped in to raise Jesus and teach him how to be human. But the time came for him to let Jesus go and make his own way. We can't live our children's lives for them. While we'll always be there with advice and counsel, it's good to finally be “useless.”

PONDER

Have I thanked my parents for raising me to be independent? If they failed, have I forgiven them?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, when it's time
to let someone I'm mentoring go, let me rejoice.*

POINTING THE WAY

*In a way, we are all like Joseph:
a shadow of the heavenly Father.*

Joseph is a man in the shadows, like so many of us, living and working each day. But he is also a sign pointing the way to God, our eternal Father. By his example, Jesus grew into manhood. By our example, our children grow into adults who are prepared to face the world on its terms, filled (we hope!) with the faith and trust in God that Joseph demonstrated throughout his life. The next time you see one of these “silent” or “unseen” workers—in a hospital, driving a truck, handing you your takeout order, bagging your groceries—think of the selfless example they are providing. And consider what you, too, can do to give witness to the God who sustains us all!

PONDER

Who will I notice today that I haven't before?

PRAY

*God of wonder and surprise, thank you for your grace
and goodness! May I always give you praise!*

The quotes from Pope Francis were chosen
by Deborah McCann, who also wrote the reflections
and the “Ponder” and “Pray” pieces.

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One Montauk Avenue, New London, CT 06320;

860-437-3012 or 800-321-0411;

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