

COUPLES FOR CHRIST 40TH ANNIVERSARY

Webinar

“St. Joseph: Patron of the Universal Church”

June 24, 2021

Address by His Eminence Cardinal Kevin Farrell

Your Excellencies, Reverend Fathers, all couples and members of *Couples for Christ*,

I would like to greet all those who are online following this webinar for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the foundation of your association. *Couples for Christ* is the result of a charism that the Holy Spirit has sparked to help married couples and their families. It is therefore providential that its anniversary takes place during a "Special Year of the family" that the Holy Father has promoted to enhance the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, five years after its publication. This is the same year for celebrating the figure of St. Joseph, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the declaration with which Blessed Pope Pius IX declared him "Patron Saint of the Catholic Church".

The theme of the speech you have asked to make is precisely “St. Joseph: Patron Saint of the universal Church”. I gladly accepted this request because I believe that today it is necessary to reflect upon fatherhood and in doing so, the figure of St. Joseph is of great inspiration. His spiritual richness is being discovered by the Church more and more with the passing of time. I was also asked that my speech be introspective and a source of spiritual inspiration (“introspective, insightful and inspiring”). I will try to respect this indication! So, mine will not be an academic lesson, but rather a meditation. Since there are both laymen and clerics among the participants, I would like to immediately specify that what I will say in reference to the figure of St. Joseph applies both to the fatherhood of married men and to the spiritual fatherhood of priests.

1. The role of authority

Today the world is in dire need of fathers! We know well that in many modern societies, especially in Western ones, the figure of the father has lost much importance, due to a series of cultural changes that have intensified especially since the 1960s. During those years, firstly in the reflection of intellectuals and then in popular culture, the figure of the father was affected by the suspicion that spread towards authority in general, considered as an "enemy" of personal

freedom and an "obstacle" to the full expression of one's own individuality. People believed that authority (and therefore the father) was only a source of prohibitions and brainwashing, and that therefore, it prevented a person from living one's life as seen fit and from making one's own choices independently. For this reason, today we find ourselves immersed in a mentality where authority (and therefore also that of the father) seems to automatically mean something negative and antagonistic to personal happiness!

We know this is not true. There are many things to be said to challenge this cultural trend which has gained ground in many circles and which has led fathers and many other figures of authority - in society and also in the Church - to downsize to the point of almost completely renouncing their own role and their "mission". I will limit myself only to making you reflect on the fact that the word "authority" comes from the Latin *augere* which means "to make grow". This alone makes one understand that authority is not the enemy of the person and his freedom, but it is precisely what makes him grow!

First of all, authority plays the indispensable role of "guide" that every person needs in order to be introduced to the adventure of life. Authority, in fact, makes us understand that the world is not indistinct chaos, rather a reality full of meaning. It also reassures us above all that in discovering the meaning of the world (and of our life!) we are not alone, but we are in the company of reliable people. Furthermore, truly authoritative people show us the goals towards which we should aspire, but leave us space and time so that we reach them by ourselves, without imposing themselves and without replacing us. For this reason, authority is an aid to freedom: if no one shows us a path, a direction or a sense of life, freedom has no purpose, it becomes an end in itself and is lost. A person, free but with no meaning in life, in fact, ends up wondering: I am free to do what? What do I do with the freedom I claim? Therefore, not only are authority and freedom not in conflict with each other, but they are closely linked, and one cannot exist without the other: freedom without authority remains empty or becomes libertinism, authority without freedom becomes authoritarianism.

From these few expressions it is immediately clear that a father's authority, if understood correctly, is not an imposition but a "gift" that is given to the children, so that they do not remain left to themselves. A father's authority, in fact, is at the "service" of the child's development so that they discover the meaning of life, and so that they can fully develop their human nature, thus becoming truly free. This is a father's authentic role. A father is the one who supports, guides and authoritatively accompanies his child's development, placing himself at the child's service so that he is able to realize the life project that he has in his heart. This

project is unique, distinct and different for each child. In St. Joseph we can precisely see the model of true paternal authority: he puts himself unreservedly at the service of Jesus, helps him to grow in "wisdom and age" [Lk 2:52], he accompanies him to the full maturity of his "vocation" and then, at the very beginning of his public ministry, he steps aside, letting Jesus carry out, freely and in complete autonomy, the mission that God the Father has entrusted to him.

The Church has received the light of Revelation which makes us recognize who God is and who man is. Therefore, not only is the Church an expert on faith, but also an expert on humanity. The Church, therefore, has the task of helping all of society to rediscover the beauty and importance of the role of the father. Pope Francis, in one of the catechesis he dedicated to the family, said, in fact: «The Church, our mother, is committed to supporting with all her strength the good and generous presence of fathers in families, for they are the irreplaceable guardians and mediators of faith in goodness, of faith in justice and in God's protection, like St Joseph» (*General audience*, February 4, 2015).

2. St. Joseph, Patron Saint of the Church

So, let's move on and reflect more closely on the figure of St. Joseph. And let's start with his relationship with the universal Church of which he is patron. The Holy Father, Francis, writes in the Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*, dedicated to the figure of St. Joseph: «Saint Joseph could not be other than the Guardian of the Church, for the Church is the continuation of the Body of Christ in history, even as Mary's motherhood is reflected in the motherhood of the Church» (*Patris Corde* n. 5).

In these words, we find two important affirmations about the Church. The first is: **the Church**, says the Pope, is "**the extension of Christ in history**". Here the deeper nature of the Church is described; it is not simply a sociological or cultural entity, but, in its essence, it is the body of Christ, it is Christ himself who continues to be present in the midst of men, in every historical period. Therefore, those who love Christ, can only but love the Church as well, because the Church is one with him, it is his "extension": Christ has reached all of us through his Church, we have come to know Christ through the Church. The second important affirmation is: **Mary's motherhood is found** in a certain way **in the motherhood of the Church**. As Mary generated Christ in the flesh, so has the Mother Church generated all Christians in the spirit, awakening faith in them, making them children of God through the gift of the Holy Spirit and nourishing the divine in them with the sacraments. Therefore, the Church is not only "the extension of Christ" but also "a reflection of Mary's motherhood".

This is why Joseph is Patron of the Church, because just as he had the task of safeguarding Jesus and his mother during his earthly life, so now he continues to safeguard the Church, in which Jesus and his Mother are present, alive and working. In fact, the Pope says: «In his continued protection of the Church, Joseph continues to protect *the child and his mother*, and we too, by our love for the Church, continue to love *the child and his mother*», and he adds: «We should always consider whether we ourselves are protecting Jesus and Mary, for they are also mysteriously entrusted to our own responsibility, care and safekeeping» (*Ibid.*). This question by the Pope should make us reflect. If, in fact, St. Joseph continues to protect the Church from heaven, nevertheless, even Christians who have a fatherly role, are called to share with St. Joseph the responsibility of being "guardians" of the Church, that is, of preserving her being "mother" and to protect Christ in the hearts of the people who have been entrusted to them.

For this reason, we can say that even fathers of families, in a certain sense, have been entrusted with Jesus and Mary, so that they "protect" the presence of Christ in the hearts of their children and also "protect" the motherhood of the Church, supporting her work of evangelization, so that she continues to generate men and women to the faith. In the same way, pastors, bishops and priests, must "protect" Christ in the hearts of the faithful who are entrusted to their ministry, and with their words and actions they must place themselves at the service of the Church's motherhood, so that many people may find true life in it. Therefore, every married man is called to be like Saint Joseph, towards his children and towards the mother Church, and every ordained minister is called to be like Saint Joseph, towards his spiritual children and towards the Church, their bride.

3. St. Joseph, a model of fatherhood

In order to understand more concretely how this task must be carried out, let us now reflect on some characteristics of fatherhood that the figure of St. Joseph helps us to discover.

a) The first observation can be made on the father... starting with the mother! In St. Joseph we see the paradox of a father who is almost never called "father": he is never called that in the Gospels of Matthew and John, not only does Mark never call him father but he does not mention Joseph at all; Luke the evangelist calls him "father" only once (Lk 2:33), and emphasizes that he was "thought" so by the people (Lk 3:23; 4:22). It is interesting to note, however, that **Mary calls him father**: «Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety» (Lk 2:48), she says in the episode when they find Jesus in the Temple. Therefore, Mary was

not afraid to call Joseph "father". Although he was not the biological father, in the eyes of his mother he played the role of a true father for Jesus. And it is nice to note that, in the episode quoted, Mary does not speak in the first person, she does not say "I was worried", but speaks in the plural and names Joseph before herself: "your father and I were worried". This makes us understand that Mary, in public, recognized the role of father in front of her son and in front of others, showing her respect towards him. Here we find a first fundamental indication: a father receives legitimacy in front of his children, above all starting from the respect that the mother shows towards him. Children, in fact, have a more visceral bond with the mother and are naturally "attached" and "oriented" towards her, so it must be the mother who directs the love of the children and their respect not only towards herself but also towards the father. From this it naturally follows that a mother should never diminish the role of the father in front of her children and in front of others!

b) A second observation stems from the fact that Joseph was a "putative" father for Jesus, or if you like, that Jesus was an "adopted son" for Joseph. If we think about it, this situation is common to every father. Being a mother, in fact, is natural: it is nature itself that creates a physical, psychological and emotional bond between mother and child through conception, gestation, childbirth, breastfeeding, etc. Being a father, on the other hand, (and this also applies to biological fathers!) is not the result of a physical, natural bond, but it is the result of a free choice. It is the result of embracing a mission, of a paternal duty that must not be taken for granted. The father, that is, after the birth of the child, must "take in" the destiny of the child, he must "take upon himself" his life, his maturity, his becoming an adult. If this choice does not exist, a man risks being a "parent" but without ever becoming a "father"! Therefore, a child, "naturally" belongs to the mother who carries him in her womb, while he "becomes" the son of the father only if the father assumes the educational responsibility towards the child. In this sense I said that **every father, like St. Joseph, must "adopt" his son**, because sooner or later, if he truly wants to be a father, he must accept taking to heart the life of the child and the development of his identity.

This can all be applied to married men, who cannot remain distant and relegate everything to mothers, rather they must take to heart not only the physical but also the spiritual well-being of their children. And this also applies to spiritual fathers, the pastors of the Church, because they too cannot remain distant from people, and limit themselves to the role of "religious officials", rather they must assume a true paternity towards the faithful, they must take charge their needs, their spiritual growth, the well-being of their souls. When a priest is sent to a

parish, or is asked to follow a group, he must become the "father" of those people that Providence has assigned to him, and he must make them advance along their path "taking them upon his shoulders". Only in this way will his ministry become fruitful.

All this is exactly what **St. Joseph** did. He "took charge" of the son entrusted to him and first of all **taught** him **practical living**. It was he who taught Jesus to read and write (Lk 4:17ff; Jn 8:6-8), who taught him the trade of a carpenter (Mt 13:55), who taught him the simplest things in life, such as starting a charcoal fire and cooking (Jn 21: 9).

But **Joseph also "took to heart" the religious education of Jesus**: he had him circumcised (Lk 2:21); presented him to the Temple (Lk 2:22-24), every year he took him with him to Jerusalem for Passover (Lk 2:41), he had the twelve-year-old Jesus celebrate something similar to what is now the *bar mitzvah* rite ("son of the precept"), that is, the moment when a boy becomes a full member of the Jewish community and for him the personal commitment begins to observe the precepts of the Torah. This rite, in the form in which it is celebrated today, requires that the boy publicly proclaim the Torah for the first time, that his father impose the veil of prayer (*tallit*) on him, and entrusts him with the scroll of Scripture, and encourages him with a solemn formula to respect their religious commitments. It is moving to think that St. Joseph did all this with Jesus and taught him love for the Holy Scripture, respect for the precepts of the law, assiduity in liturgical prayer and personal prayer.

c) The importance of the role of St. Joseph, and of every father, also appears in another detail that we find in the Gospel: it is the command that the angel pronounces to Joseph, telling him: "She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins "(Mt 1:21). So Mary gives birth to the child but it is Joseph who must "give" him his name. We know that "**giving a name**" in the Bible is something extraordinarily important, because it means giving a mission, and therefore giving an identity to a person ("Abraham" received his name from God, as "Peter" received his name from Jesus, and these names were linked to a mission that was entrusted to them). Joseph receives the task of giving the child the name of "Jesus" which means "God saves". Yet "savior" is even the prerogative that in the Old Testament is exclusive to God: "I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your SAVIOR" we find written in the book of the prophet Isaiah (Is 43:3). Thus, Joseph becomes the instrument through which Jesus receives his identity and his mission from God: Jesus, as the God of the fathers in the Old Testament, will be the Savior. And Joseph has the

extraordinary task of educating Jesus, no less, than to have God's mission, that is, to save men!

All this makes us understand how important the role of fathers is in helping their children to discover the mission that God has entrusted to them and to find in this mission the deep root of their identity. Without fathers there is the risk that children grow up without identity or that they find their identity not in the vocation and mission that God entrusts to them, but in the cultural models that the world offers, which are often empty and false.

d) Another important aspect is the **link between fatherhood and tradition**. In one of his dreams, Joseph is told: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home" (Mt 1:20). The angel calls Joseph "son of David", but we know that in public life, even Jesus is called "son of David" by the crowd. Joseph, therefore, is the only one in the entire New Testament who bears the same name as Jesus: he too is "son of David". No one else. One of the reasons why Joseph was chosen is precisely the fact that he was a descendant of David, and therefore in charge of conferring onto Jesus the Davidic descent, according to what was foretold by the prophets regarding the Messiah, who would be a "descendant of David". But for Jesus becoming a descendant of David meant, not only being able to be recognized as the Messiah, but also being inserted into the history of the people of Israel, as is well-emphasized in Matthew's genealogy.

This too is an important role of the father. The father is he who transmits cultural traditions, local customs, even the dialect and popular proverbs, and in doing so, introduces the son into the history of a people. Without fathers, on the other hand, children risk being "uprooted", without a past behind them to refer to; they do not feel they belong to a tradition, to a people, they do not feel they are the heirs of a history rich in values and experiences which is entrusted to them by their fathers and which they must continue and enrich.

This is also an important task for spiritual fathers. Even pastors, in fact, must introduce all Christians into the history of a people, that is, in the living tradition of the Church; they must transmit to them the very rich spiritual patrimony of the people of God. Because one is not a Christian "alone", but always part of a people, and no one creates his experience of faith by himself, but is included into spiritual and liturgical tradition of prayer that the Holy Spirit, with his gifts, has helped to shape over the centuries. If there are no fathers, therefore, this rootedness in the history - both cultural and religious - of a people is lacking, and the personal identity of the child weakens.

e) Like every father, moreover, Joseph has the task of acting as a **model for his son**. First of all, because every child, in order to mature as a person, needs a figure worthy of esteem, reliable and authoritative with whom to identify himself. And also because human fatherhood for every human being is the "way" to divine fatherhood. This means that, ordinarily, we come to recognize the fatherhood of God, starting from human models, because we transfer the experience of the earthly fathers that we have had to God. This is why it is very important that all children have positive experiences of their earthly fathers, because in this way it will be easier for them to get to know the "Heavenly Father", who is the culmination of every Christian journey. We can certainly say that Joseph was for Jesus a clear reflection of divine fatherhood and an exemplary model of a father. This is obvious under many aspects. I would like to mention a few.

Joseph is a **role model as husband, father, worker**, and man who reconciles the contemplative dimension with action, of the sanctification of daily life (cf. *Patris Corde* 6 and *Redemptoris Custos* 24).

Joseph, for Jesus, is a **role model of obedience to God's will** (cf. *Patris Corde* 6). When God manifests himself to him in a dream and communicates His will to him, Joseph readily obeys, without putting "his" personal plans first. Many times in the Gospel we hear Jesus say: "I have come to do the will of my Father" (e.g. in Jn 6: 38-40). We can believe that Jesus saw this attitude perfectly embodied in Joseph, his "earthly" father.

Joseph, for Jesus, is a **model of humility and meekness and acceptance of the bitterness of life** (cf. *Patris Corde* 4): without resentment he accepted the rumors about Mary that surely will have circulated in the small villages of Galilee, he humbly accepted the terrible reception in Bethlehem in the days of childbirth, he had to suffer the persecution of Herod, he meekly accepted the life of exile in Egypt, far from his homeland. Therefore, even when Jesus says: "Learn from me that I am meek and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29), we can believe that this is an attitude that he saw perfectly embodied in Joseph.

Joseph was a **model of loving welcome** for Jesus: he welcomed this son who was not his, not in a formal and detached way, but with affection, dedication and tenderness and he did the same for Mary (cf. *Patris Corde* 2). We also find this trait of his earthly father in Jesus. He lovingly welcomed his disciples, the poor, sinners and all the people who flocked to him and for this he exclaimed with sorrow at the rejection of many: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how many times I yearned to gather

your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling!" (Mt 23:37).

Joseph is a **model of faithful fulfillment of his mission**, never backing down, to the end. He knew that he had received from God the task of "taking the child and his mother with him" and with perseverance and tenacity he carries out this task, totally dedicating himself to the protection and care of Jesus and Mary, without hesitation and without regrets for a life that could have been different. We can therefore think that even Jesus' unreserved dedication to his mission to establish the Kingdom of God is a trait of the personality and character of Saint Joseph that he got from him, so much to the point that he feels "consumed" by the desire to carry out the mission, as we can see in many passages of the Gospel, for example when he says: "There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!" (Lk 12:50).

We have emphasized the fact that the exemplary qualities we see in Joseph are also found in Jesus, because every son learns from his father and in a certain sense imitates him. These traits of the character and personality of Saint Joseph are of great importance for every father. It would be nice if all fathers - both family fathers and spiritual fathers - were models for the children of loving spouses, of workers who sanctify daily life with work, of obedience to God's will, of strength in trials, of acceptance and tenderness and of the faithful fulfillment of one's mission.

f) Another reflection: Joseph is a **man free from any form of possessive love**. We can see that the angel addresses him saying: "Rise, take the child and his mother, ... Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." (Mt 2:13, 14; the same in Mt 2:20). The angel calls Jesus "the child" not "your son". Joseph has no possession over this child, he is not "his". He educates, loves, accepts what he did not generate, keeping in some way a distance.

This is very important for every father. Even a biological father cannot "take possession over" his children, he cannot expect, for example, that his children fulfill their aspirations at all costs (I would like my son to be an engineer, a doctor, a lawyer!). This is true both for the father and for the mother: basically every child is a life that God has "entrusted" to the parents, but whom they do not own. Each person, in fact, ultimately belongs to God. We can also apply this to ordained ministers: bishops and priests often find themselves having to accept what they did not "generate" themselves, to take charge of something that God has achieved before them and without them and that is entrusted to their care and safekeeping. A parish priest, for example, is assigned to a new parish and finds groups or charitable initiatives or forms of prayer or a particular type of apostolate that he

did not initiate. Well, like Joseph, he is called to welcome an endeavor that is not his own, but in which he is called to recognize God's intervention and therefore to welcome the people involved in this work as "his" children, and to have for them the same love and the same care as if they were "born" from him.

So a father, whether biological or spiritual, does not consider his children as a personal possession, he does not take possession over their lives, he does not want to put himself at the center of their affections, their interests at all costs, but he knows how to love, support and guide them and at the same time he knows how to "keep at a distance"!

g) One last reflection useful for our time. Joseph is **the hidden man**. In the story of the visit of the Wise men it is said that: "entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage." (Mt 2:11). The Wise men do not even notice the presence of Joseph! Joseph was a fundamental figure for Jesus, for Mary and for the entire history of salvation, yet, already during his earthly life, it is as if he had remained invisible. Nobody notices him! Nobody appreciates his qualities! Not a single word he uttered is recorded in the Gospels! Only some of the humblest people seem to notice him. In the Gospel of Luke, in fact, it is said that the shepherds "found Mary and Joseph, and the infant" (Lk 2:16). To the more important people, to his fellow countrymen of Bethlehem, he hardly exists, only the poor notice his presence. Joseph's entire mission takes place in this silence, in the shadows. Everything Joseph does, he does out of obedience to God, not to be praised by anyone. And he doesn't complain about this silence! He does what God told him to do and is content with God's secret complacency and the approval of his conscience. He doesn't go looking for anything else.

All of this is extremely important to us in the culture in which we are immersed. Being hidden, in Joseph we see the character of a true father and a true man! Today, however, it seems that everyone desperately needs to appear, to be seen, to receive applause. Everything you do, even the most trivial thing, seems to appear on Facebook right away! If something doesn't appear on social media, it's like it doesn't exist! It seems that if someone doesn't get enough likes, they don't count as a person! St. Joseph is truly the most effective antidote to this sick form of narcissism. A true father does good and sacrifices himself because this is what the good of his children requires and what God asks him to do, and he remains faithful to his mission as a husband and father all his life, even if no one will ever notice him and no one will ever notice all the good he has done!

Conclusion

Dear friends, we know that St. Joseph, as Patron Saint of the Universal Church, plays a direct role of intercession and protection towards the Church, always threatened by so many dangers, both internal and external, and always threatened by the insidious attacks of the devil, enemy of all the works of God and above all of His most beautiful work, which is the Church. In my speech, however, I preferred to focus on another aspect that also belongs to the role of St. Joseph as Patron Saint of the Church, namely the fact that St. Joseph helps and protects the Church by inspiring and guiding all those who, like him, God calls to be "fathers". The Church - spouse of Christ and mother to believers - is in fact in dire need of fathers within her, who are a clear reflection of the fatherhood of God and who protect the faith of the little ones entrusted to them.

At the end of my speech, therefore, I invite all the "fathers" who are participating in this Congress to meditate often on the figure of Saint Joseph and to make it known to all the members of your association, also through specific catechesis. *Couples for Christ* was born from the desire to help married couples and their families, and I think that today, precisely in view of this end, it is very important to strengthen the father figure and the specific mission that each father has within marriage and in relation to children. Saint Joseph is the model to look to and to be inspired by in order to grow every day towards an ever more generous, strong, humble and holy fatherhood.

However, I would like to add, that everyone - even women and young people who are not yet fathers - is invited to look to this extraordinary saint. This is what Pope Francis invited us to do, saying: " Each of us can discover in Joseph - the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence - an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble. Saint Joseph reminds us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation." (*Patris Corde*, intro.).

I thank you for your listening and convey to you my warmest congratulations on the 40th anniversary of *Couples for Christ*.

May the Lord, through St. Joseph's intercession, help and bless all of your families.