

Saint Josemaria and the Role of Saint Joseph in Christian Life

by Lucas F. Mateo-Seco

University of Navarra

1. Introduction

Devotion to Saint Joseph was deeply rooted in Saint Josemaría's soul from a very early age. Recalling how in 1934 he had entrusted to the Holy Patriarch his efforts to obtain permission for the tabernacle in the first center of Opus Dei in Madrid, he remarked in 1971: "I already had deep in my soul the devotion to Saint Joseph that I have passed on to you."¹ And he strove to keep this devotion alive and ardent right to the end of his life, seeing it undergo an impetuous growth in his final years.²

In the three points dedicated to Saint Joseph in his early work, *The Way*, we already see some of the theological reasons for his strong devotion. In no. 559, he writes: "Saint Joseph, father of Christ, is also your father and lord. Ask him to help you."³ The strength with which he calls Saint Joseph the *father of Christ* here is significant.

In a later text, a homily given on March 19, 1963, dedicated completely to Saint Joseph,⁴ he explains the sense in which he speaks of this fatherhood, following the well-known words of Saint Augustine in his *Sermon 51*, 20: "Our Lord was not born of the seed of Joseph. Yet of the piety and charity of Joseph a son was born to him, of the Virgin Mary, and this was the Son of God."⁵ Saint Joseph's fatherhood towards Jesus is not a fatherhood according to the flesh, but a real and unique fatherhood that arose from his true marriage to the Virgin Mary and from his unique mission.

In the homily just cited, Saint Josemaría said: "for many years now, I have liked to address him affectionately as 'our father and lord.'"⁶ And he explains: "Saint Joseph really is a father and lord. He protects those who revere him and accompanies them on their journey through this life—just as he protected and accompanied Jesus when he was

¹ Notes from his preaching, March 19, 1971 (AGP, P09, p. 136).

² See Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, Scepter, New York 2005, pp. 525 ff. On the presence of Saint Joseph in the teachings of Saint Josemaría, see, among others, the following works: Laurentino M. de la Herrán, "La devoción a San José en la vida y enseñanzas de Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer, fundador del Opus Dei (1902-1975)," *Estudios josefinos*, 34 (1980), pp. 147-189; Ignacy Soler, "San José en los escritos y en la vida de San Josemaría. Hacia una teología de la vida ordinaria," *Estudios josefinos*, 59 (2005), pp. 259-284. See also José Benigno Freire Pérez, *Para amar más a San José*, Promesa, San José de Costa Rica 2007, pp. 55-61; Martín Ibarra Benlloch, "La capilla de la Sagrada Familia," *Scripta de Maria*, II/4 (2007), pp. 351-364; Joaquin Ferrer, *San José nuestro Padre y Señor*, Arca de la Alianza, Madrid 2007.

³ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 559.

⁴ See the homily *In Joseph's Workshop*, in *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 39-56. From here on cited as: *In Joseph's Workshop*.

⁵ Saint Augustine, *Sermon 51*, 20: PL 38, 351; BAC 95, p. 40. See *In Joseph's Workshop*, no. 55.

⁶ *In Joseph's Workshop*, no. 39.

growing up.”⁷ In the critical-historical edition of *The Way*, Pedro Rodriguez suggests that Saint Josemaría may have taken the expression “father and lord” from Saint Teresa of Avila, who had such a great influence on devotion to Saint Joseph, not only among the Carmelites but also throughout the whole Church.⁸

In *The Way*, the consequences of this fatherhood are shown especially in Saint Joseph’s influence on the “interior life.” We read in no. 560: “Saint Joseph, our father and lord, is a teacher of the interior life. Place yourself under his patronage and you’ll feel the effectiveness of his power.” And in no. 561: “Speaking of Saint Joseph in the book of her life, Saint Teresa says: ‘Whoever fails to find a Master to teach him how to pray, should choose this glorious Saint, and he will not go astray.’ This advice comes from an experienced soul. Follow it.” The reason Saint Josemaría gives for these two counsels is Saint Joseph’s close and continuous contact with Jesus and Mary throughout his years at their side.

The three points cited from *The Way* place Saint Josemaría’s approach to Saint Joseph within two essential coordinates: the truth of his fatherhood towards Jesus and the Holy Patriarch’s influence on the history of salvation. These points testify to a mature theological conviction of the importance of Saint Joseph right from the earliest texts, reflected in the clear and firm way he calls Saint Joseph the *father of Jesus* with no vacillation whatsoever.⁹

2. A solid prior tradition

With the sober and precise language that characterized him, Saint Josemaría forms part of a solid ecclesial tradition of theological reflection and devotion to the Holy Patriarch. His rich and solid reflections on Saint Joseph go hand in hand with a refined piety inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the awareness of treading on solid theological ground.¹⁰

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ As Saint Teresa said: “I begin in the name of the Lord, taking for my help his glorious Mother, whose habit I wear, although unworthily, and also my glorious father and lord, Saint Joseph, in whose house I am” (Saint Teresa, *Foundations*, Foreword, 6). See *The Way, Critical-Historical edition prepared by Pedro Rodriguez*, Scepter, London – New York 2009, p. 730, especially note 29.

⁹ On the various qualifications given to Saint Joseph’s fatherhood throughout the centuries (legal, putative, foster, adoptive, etc.), see Bonifacio Llamera *Teología de San José*, BAC, Madrid 1953, pp. 73-114. Llamera offers two very useful conclusions: “The denominations legal father, putative father, foster father, adoptive father, virginal father, and vicarious father of the heavenly Father express only partial and incomplete aspects of Saint Joseph’s fatherhood” (p. 94). And also the following conclusion, which explains why all of these “fatherhoods” seem incomplete to him: “The fatherhood of Saint Joseph is new, unique and singular, of an order superior to that of natural paternity and human adoptive paternity” (p. 102). Following Saint Augustine we can say that Saint Joseph’s fatherhood in regard to Jesus is unique, singular and of a superior order, just as his marriage to our Lady is unique, singular and of a superior order.

¹⁰ Besides the numerous allusions to Saint Joseph made by Saint Josemaría during his life, there are four extensive texts dedicated to Saint Joseph from which it is easy to draw out an almost complete theology of the Holy Patriarch: the homily “*In Joseph’s Workshop*,” March 19, 1963, in *Christ Is Passing By*, Scepter, London - New York 1974, nos. 39-56; *La escuela de José*, notes taken from his preaching, March 19, 1958 (AGP, P18, pp. 79-88); *San José, nuestro Padre y Señor*, notes taken from his preaching, March 19, 1968 (AGP, P09, pp. 93-103); *De la familia de José*, notes taken from his preaching, March 19, 1971 (AGP, P09,

In 1870 Pope Pius IX, in the Decree *Quemadmodum Deus* (December 8, 1870), declared Saint Joseph Patron of the Universal Church, and on August 15, 1889, Leo XIII published his Encyclical *Quamquam pluries* dedicated to the Holy Patriarch. In this Encyclical, Leo XIII clarifies with great theological force the reasons why Saint Joseph can be considered the Patron of the Universal Church.

The first reason the Pope mentions is that Saint Joseph is the spouse of our Lady, and therefore the *father* of Jesus, the good—*bonum prolis*—of this marriage. For the Pontiff, the truth of the marriage between our Lady and Saint Joseph is accepted without any doubt and leads directly to the truth of Saint Joseph’s fatherhood over Jesus. Both realities—marriage and fatherhood—form two essential features of Saint Joseph’s divine vocation. He was called to carry out these two tasks desired in themselves by God, in their proper value. In this vocation we find the reason for the other graces received by Saint Joseph, the ultimate reason for “his dignity, his holiness, his glory.”¹¹

For Leo XIII, Saint Joseph’s marriage to our Lady is the key to understanding his exalted gifts, since the truth and perfection of this marriage “demands” the participation in its *goods* and, specifically, in the *good of the offspring*, although engendered virginally. The Pope calls this marriage “the most intimate of all unions, which from its essence imparts a community of gifts between those that by it are joined together,” and says that Saint Joseph had been given to our Lady not only as “her life’s companion, the witness of her maidenhood, the protector of her honor,” but also as *participant* in her “sublime dignity.” He is, then, “the legitimate and natural guardian of the Holy Family.”¹²

Leo XIII continues here a line of thought already expressed by Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine, which found one of its clearest formulations in Saint Thomas Aquinas: between the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph there was a true and perfect marriage. Given our Lady’s perpetual virginity, some ancient writers found a certain difficulty in considering this union as a true marriage.¹³ These vacillations dissipated in favor of the authenticity of the marriage, among other reasons, because of the clear position taken by Saint Ambrose¹⁴ and by Saint Augustine.¹⁵ However, authors as important as Saint Bernard (+1153) still showed great caution in affirming the marriage between Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin, or failed to view it as a key element in the theology of Saint Joseph.¹⁶ The

pp. 133-141).

¹¹ Leo XIII, Encyclical *Quamquam pluries* August 15, 1889), no. 3.

¹² “For marriage is the most intimate of all unions, which from its essence imparts a community of gifts between those that by it are joined together. Thus in giving Joseph the Blessed Virgin as spouse, God appointed him to be not only her life’s companion, the witness of her maidenhood, the protector of her honor, but also, by virtue of the conjugal tie, a participant in her sublime dignity” (*Ibid.*)

¹³ See Guy-Marie Bertrand, “Joseph (saint). II. *Patristique et haut moyen âge*,” *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, VIII, Beauchesne, Paris 1974, 1304.

¹⁴ “*Nec te moveat quod frequenter Scriptura conjugem dicit: non enim virginitatis ereptio, sed conjugii testificatio, nuptiarum celebratio declaratur*” (*In Lucam*, 2, 5: SC 45, p. 74).

¹⁵ Saint Augustine even affirms that “this marriage is so much the more real the more chaste it is” (*Sermon* 51, 10, 13 and 16: PL 38, 342, 344-346, 348; BAC 95, 39-40). The Latin expressions used by Saint Augustine in Sermon 51 are of great beauty and clarity: “*Quare pater? Quia tanto firmiter pater, quanto castius pater . . . Non ergo de semine Joseph Dominus, quamvis hoc putaretur: et tamen pietati et charitati Joseph natus est de Maria virgine filius, idemque Filius Dei.*”

¹⁶ See Saint Bernard, “Homily on the *missus est*,” II, 15: “*Nec vir ergo matris, nec filii pater exstitit, quamvis*

position of Saint Thomas Aquinas (+1274) offers no room for doubt: the union between Joseph and Mary was a true and perfect marriage, because it entailed the spousal union between their spirits.¹⁷

Nor should we forget that viewing the union between Joseph and Mary as a true marriage accords with the language used in the New Testament, which does not hesitate to call Mary the wife of Joseph. The New Testament also allows no ambiguity regarding our Lady's virginity, even in places where she is called Joseph's wife (see, for example, *Mt* 1:16-25); nor does it hesitate to call Joseph the father of Jesus, or to show him acting as such (see, for example, *Lk* 2:21-49).

3. Saint Joseph in the teachings of Saint Josemaría

From his earliest writings, Saint Josemaría describes Saint Joseph as a young man, perhaps a bit older than our Lady, but imbued with vigor and strength: "The Holy Patriarch was not an old man, but a young, strong, upright man, a great lover of loyalty, a man with fortitude. Holy Scripture defines him with a single word: *just* (see *Mt* 1:20-21). Joseph was a just man, a man filled with all the virtues, as was fitting for the one who was to be God's protector on earth."¹⁸

Underlying these words is the conviction that God, on giving a vocation, gives the graces suitable to the one who receives it, and therefore he adorned Saint Joseph with all the gifts of nature and grace that made him a suitable spouse of our Lady and head of the

certa . . . et necessaria dispensatione utrumque ad tempus appellatus sit et putatus" (in *Opera*, vol. 4, edited by Jean Leclercq and Henri Rochais, Rome 1966, p. 33). What is stressed here is not the truth of the marriage, but the fact that Saint Joseph was called 'vir' and 'pater' temporally, *ad tempus*. The Spanish translation of Díez Ramos underlines the small importance that the marriage between Joseph and Mary receives in this homily: "He was not, then, the husband of the mother nor the father of the son, although (as has been said), for a necessary reason and by the action and permission of God, he was called and reputed for some time to be both one and the other" (BAC 110, 203). The low importance given by Saint Bernard to the marriage between the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph does not prevent him from giving a warm description of the holiness of Joseph, comparing him with Joseph, the son of Jacob: "Remember also that great patriarch, sold at another time into Egypt, and you will recognize that he not only bears the same name, but also his chastity, his innocence and his grace. . . . The first Joseph, remaining loyal to his master, would not consent to the bad intention of his mistress (see *Gen* 39 :12); this Joseph, recognizing his Lady as a virgin, the Mother of his Lord, watched over her most faithfully, preserving himself in all chastity" (*Ibid.*, 16: BAC 110, 204).

¹⁷ "The form of matrimony consists in a certain inseparable union of souls, by which husband and wife are pledged by a bond of mutual affection that cannot be sundered. And the end of matrimony is the begetting and upbringing of children; the first of which is attained by conjugal intercourse; the second by the other duties of husband and wife, by which they help one another in rearing their offspring . . . As to the first perfection, the marriage of the Virgin Mother of God and of Joseph was absolutely true, because both consented to the nuptial bond . . . But as to the second perfection which is attained by the marriage act, if this be referred to carnal intercourse, by which children are begotten, that marriage was not consummated . . . Nevertheless, this marriage had the second perfection, as to the upbringing of the child" (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, III, q. 29, a. 2, c.).

¹⁸ *La escuela de José*, p. 80. And in another place he says: "The Gospels give us a picture of Joseph as a remarkably sound man who was in no way frightened or shy of life. On the contrary, he faced up to problems, dealt with difficult situations and showed responsibility and initiative in whatever he was asked to do" (*In Joseph's Workshop*, no. 40).

Holy Family.

Saint Josemaría's emphasis on the youthfulness of Joseph finds support in three fundamental reasons: in reading Sacred Scripture with common sense (which presents his espousal to our Lady as something normal, and the marriage of a young girl with an old man would not have been viewed as normal); in the communion of spirits proper to marriage (the love existing between them); and above all in the conviction that holy purity is not a question of age, but rather stems from love.

"I don't agree with the traditional picture of St Joseph as an old man, even though it may have been prompted by a desire to emphasize the perpetual virginity of Mary. I see him as a strong young man, perhaps a few years older than our Lady, but in the prime of his life and work. You don't have to wait to be old or lifeless to practice the virtue of chastity. Purity comes from love; and the strength and joy of youth are no obstacle for noble love. Joseph had a young heart and a young body when he married Mary, when he learned of the mystery of her divine motherhood, when he lived in her company, respecting the integrity God wished to give the world as one more sign that he had come to share the life of his creatures."¹⁹

For Saint Josemaría it was "unacceptable" to present Joseph as an old man for the purpose of silencing the "evil thinkers."²⁰ And it was equally unacceptable to doubt the truth of his marriage to our Lady, as well as to fail to take into consideration the love that existed between them.

The love between Saint Joseph and our Lady

Bishop Javier Echevarría is a valuable witness to how Saint Josemaría contemplated the relationship between Mary and Joseph, passing on his words addressed to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico in 1970: "A family made up of an upright, hard-working young man; and a woman, hardly more than a girl: with a betrothal full of clean love, they find in their lives the fruit of God's love for mankind. In her humility she says nothing. What a lesson for all of us, so ready as we are to boast about our achievements! He reacts with the refinement of an upright man—what a hard moment it must have been when he discovered that his wife, so holy, was expecting a child. And as he did not wish to stain her reputation; he remained silent, while thinking how to resolve things, until God's light came to him, which he was no doubt asking for from the first moment. And without hesitation he accepts heaven's plans."²¹

The authenticity of marriage brings with it the reality of conjugal love, the eagerness to

¹⁹ In *Joseph's Workshop*, no. 40. We find the same idea in *De la familia de José*, p. 134, and in *San José, nuestro Padre y Señor*, pp. 95-96.

²⁰ To better "guarantee" our Lady's virginity some apocryphal writers spoke of a previous marriage and presented Joseph as of an advanced age. This view has had a powerful influence on Christian art (see Guy-Marie Bertrand, in "*Joseph (saint). II. Patristique et haut moyen âge*," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, VIII, cit., 1302-1303). Saint Josemaría, in his "realism" and simplicity, found the imagination of those apocryphal writers unacceptable. The approach of Saint Josemaría is very similar to that of Saint Jerome in his *Adv. Helvidium*, 19 (PL 23, 203): it is necessary to hold soberly to the data offered in the New Testament.

²¹ Saint Josemaría, *Notes from his personal prayer before Our Lady of Guadalupe*, May 21, 1970; cited in Bishop Javier Echevarría, *Letter*, December 1, 1996 (AGP, P17, vol. 4, pp. 230-231).

spend life together and mutual self-giving; therefore it is only natural to view these features as very much a part of the marriage between Joseph and Mary. God added to that love the fruit of our Lady's womb: the Eternal Son made man, who chose to be born into a human family.

As we have seen, Saint Josemaría takes it for granted that the marriage between Joseph and Mary is a true marriage. This leads him to reflect on the love existing between the two spouses: "Saint Joseph must have been young when he married our Lady, a woman who had just emerged from adolescence. Being young, he was pure, clean, and very chaste. And he was so precisely because of his love. Only by filling our heart with love can we be sure that it will not rebel and go off the track, but will remain faithful to the most pure love of God."²²

For Saint Josemaría, love is the key to every person's life, as it was in the life of Joseph. There we find the reason for his fortitude, his fidelity, his chastity. "Can you imagine the reaction of Saint Joseph, who loved our Lady so much and knew her spotless integrity? How much he would have suffered on seeing that she was expecting a child! Only the revelation of God through an Angel calmed him. He had sought a prudent solution: to not dishonor her, to leave without saying anything. But what sorrow, since he loved her with his whole soul. And imagine his joy when he knew that the fruit of her womb was the work of the Holy Spirit!"²³

Although he doesn't focus on the reason for Joseph's inner turmoil, Saint Josemaría suggests that it consisted in his "not seeing," rather than in doubting the virtue of his spouse. He didn't know what to do. "Joseph was a just man, a man filled with every virtue, as was proper to the one who was to be the protector of God on earth. At first he was troubled, when he discovered that his Immaculate Spouse was with child. He saw God's hand in that fact, but he didn't know how he should behave. In his uprightness, in order not to defame her, he thought of secretly taking leave of her."²⁴

Joseph's pain seems to be concentrated in the need to abandon his spouse. Saint Josemaría holds soberly to the New Testament text, reading it with faith and common sense. According to the text, the reason for Joseph's concern is clear: his ignorance of what was happening, which the angel's message dispelled. Joseph's love and knowledge of Mary led him to think that in this event, which he did not understand, God was involved. Saint Josemaría suggests here what numerous exegetes have said: that Joseph's doubt was not about the virtue of our Lady, but about how he should react, realizing that something divine was involved.²⁵

Saint Josemaría never doubted the existence of an authentic conjugal love between the

²² *De la familia de José*, p.134.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁴ *La Escuela de José*, p. 80.

²⁵ After citing *Mt* 1:20, Pierre Grelot remarks: "The invitation not to fear to take Mary as his wife was also the revelation of his own vocation: Joseph, the just man, received from God a calling at the level of his holiness. . . . In taking to himself the mother of the child and making her his wife, Joseph was at the same time making himself responsible for the mother and the child before God and before men; it is special role in the plan of salvation. His real paternity is pointed to by the fact that he was to give the child his name, the 'word of recognition' of a father for his child" (P. Grelot, "Joseph (Saint). I." *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, VIII, cit., 1297-1298).

two.²⁶ Moreover Joseph's chastity is protected by that love, founded on faith: "His faith nurtured his love of God, who was fulfilling the promises made to Abraham, Jacob and Moses, and his affection for Mary his wife, and her Son. This faith, hope and love would further the great mission which God was beginning in the world through, among others, a carpenter in Galilee: the redemption of man."²⁷

The fatherhood of Joseph

Saint Josemaría never wavered on how to express the fatherhood of Saint Joseph. From his earliest writings right to the end of his life, he called him the father of Jesus without any qualification. We can view his thought regarding the theology of Saint Joseph as inscribed within the coordinates of two Fathers of the Church: Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Augustine. From Saint John Chrysostom he cites a text that places on God's lips these words: "Do not think that, since the conception of Christ was the work of the Holy Spirit, you are apart from this divine work. For even though it is true that you had no part in the generation, and that the Virgin remains intact; nevertheless, all that is related to fatherhood without adversely affecting the dignity of her virginity, I give all of this to you, just as I ask you to give him his name."²⁸ From Saint Augustine, Saint Josemaría cites, as we have seen, *Sermon 51*.²⁹

The exercise of fatherhood towards Jesus is an essential part of a "mission" that filled Joseph's entire life: "He had a divine mission: he lived with a dedicated soul; he dedicated himself entirely to the concerns of Jesus, sanctifying his ordinary life."³⁰ Here lies one of the main attractions that the Holy Patriarch exerted over Saint Josemaría: his total dedication to Jesus in "sanctifying ordinary life," that is, in the exercise of the duties proper to his office and as a good father of a Jewish family of his epoch.

Saint Josemaría in *Christ Is Passing By* offers a long description of the paternal-filial relationship that existed between Saint Joseph and our Lord. It is a beautiful page, sober and pious, filled with attention to details: "The life of Jesus was, for Saint Joseph, a recurring discovery of his own vocation. We recalled earlier those first years full of contrasting circumstances: glorification and flight, the majesty of the wise men and the poverty of the manger, the song of the angels and the silence of mankind. When the moment comes to present the child in the temple, Joseph, who carries the modest offering of a pair of doves, sees how Simeon and Anna proclaim Jesus as the Messiah: 'His father and mother listened with wonder' (*Lk* 2:33) says Saint Luke. Later, when the child stays behind in Jerusalem, unknown to Mary and Joseph, and they find him again after three days' search, the same evangelist tells us, 'They were astonished' (*Lk* 2:48). Joseph is

²⁶ "But Joseph, her spouse, being, as he was, just, and not wanting to defame her . . . No, he could not do this in conscience. He suffered. He knew that his spouse was immaculate, that she was a spotless soul, but he could not understand the marvel that had been worked in her. Therefore *voluit occulte dimittere eam* (*Mt* 1:19), he resolved to send her away quietly. He hesitated, not knowing what to do, but the problem was solved in the most pure way" (*San José, nuestro Padre y Señor*, p. 101).

²⁷ *In Joseph's Workshop*, no. 42

²⁸ Saint John Chrysostom, *In Mat.*, *Hom.* 4, 6: BAC 141, 70. See *La escuela de José*, pp. 80-81.

²⁹ See *In Joseph's Workshop*, no. 55.

³⁰ *La escuela de José*, p. 81.

surprised and astonished. God gradually reveals his plans to him, and he tries to understand them . . . Saint Joseph, more than anyone else before or since, learned from Jesus to be alert to recognize God’s wonders, to have his mind and heart awake.”³¹

Here we have the interior life of Saint Joseph described as an authentic pilgrimage of faith, in a certain sense very similar to our Lady’s. Both of them, Mary and Joseph, discover God’s will little by little, and transform their first self-giving into a fidelity that mutually strengthens them. At the same time, in the exercise of his fatherhood, Joseph transmits to Jesus his profession as an artisan, his way of working and viewing the world: “But if Joseph learned from Jesus to live in a divine way, I would be bold enough to say that, humanly speaking, there was much he taught God’s Son . . . Joseph loved Jesus as a father loves his son and showed his love by giving him the best he had. Joseph, caring for the child as he had been commanded, made Jesus a craftsman, transmitting his own professional skill to him. So the neighbors of Nazareth will call Jesus both *faber* and *fabri filius* (*Mk* 6:3; *Mt* 13:55): the craftsman and the son of the craftsman. Jesus worked in Joseph’s workshop and by Joseph’s side. What must Joseph have been, how grace must have worked through him, that he should be able to fulfill this task of the human upbringing of the Son of God! For Jesus must have resembled Joseph: in his way of working, in the features of his character, in his way of speaking. Jesus’ realism, his eye for detail, the way he sat at table and broke bread, his preference for using everyday situations to give doctrine—all this reflects his childhood and the influence of Joseph.”³²

Here is a paradox that Saint Josemaría is very aware of. The One who is Wisdom Incarnate “learns” from a man the most basic things, including the skills of carpentry. Manifested in this paradox is the “sublime mystery” of the Incarnation and the truth of Joseph’s fatherhood. From his Mother, our Lord learned to speak and to walk; in the home presided over by Saint Joseph, he learned lessons of industrious and upright work. Mutual affection made Joseph and Jesus similar to each other in many things: “It’s not possible to ignore this sublime mystery: Jesus who is man, who speaks with the accent of a particular district of Israel, who resembles a carpenter called Joseph, is the Son of God. And who can teach God anything? But he is also truly man and lives a normal life: first, as a child, then as a boy helping in Joseph’s workshop, finally as a grown man in the prime of life. ‘Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace before God and men’ (*Lk* 2:52).”³³

Saint Joseph, teacher of interior life in work

Saint Joseph taught Jesus the lessons that every good Jewish father taught his son: lessons of a clean life and self-sacrifice, of human virtues, and of well-finished work offered to God; lessons of a temperate, just and upright life. Saint Joseph also teaches us who form a single Body with Christ. “In human life, Joseph was Jesus’ teacher in their daily contact, full of refined affection, glad to deny himself to take better care of Jesus. Isn’t that reason enough for us to consider this just man, this holy patriarch, in whom the faith of the Old Covenant comes to full fruition, as a master of interior life? Interior life is nothing but continual and direct conversation with Christ, so as to become one with him.

³¹ *In Joseph’s Workshop*, no. 54.

³² *Ibid.*, no. 55.

³³ *Ibid.*

And Joseph can tell us many things about Jesus. Therefore, never neglect devotion to him—*Ite ad Ioseph*: “Go to Joseph”—as Christian tradition puts it in the words of the Old Testament (*Gen 41:55*).³⁴

Two characteristics in Saint Joseph’s life powerfully attracted Saint Josemaría: his life of contemplation and his life of work. This shouldn’t surprise us, since both features are essential to the spirit of Opus Dei. On the feast of the Epiphany in 1956 he said: “And a last thought for that just man, our father and lord Saint Joseph, who apparently has a very minor role in the Epiphany—as usual. I can imagine him recollected in prayer, lovingly protecting the Son of God made man who has been entrusted to his paternal care. With the marvelous refinement of one who does not live for himself, the holy patriarch spends himself in silent prayer and effective service. We have talked today about practicing a life of prayer and concern for apostolate. Who could be a better teacher for us than Saint Joseph? If you want my advice, which I have never tired of repeating these many years, *Ite ad Ioseph*: ‘Go to Joseph’ (*Gen 41:55*). He will show us definite ways, both human and divine, to approach Jesus. And soon you will dare, as he did, ‘to take up in his arms, kiss, clothe and look after’ this child God who has been born unto us.”³⁵

The quotation in the previous sentence is taken from the prayer to Saint Joseph in preparation for Holy Mass found in the Roman Missal.³⁶ This prayer holds up for us the example of Saint Joseph contemplating Jesus, and is for us a good lesson on how closely we should contemplate Christ’s life.

Saint Josemaría was enamored of Joseph’s life of work, and he considered him a teacher of interior life *in that life of intense and humble work*. “For he teaches us to know Jesus and share our life with him, and to realize that we are part of God’s family. Joseph “can teach us these lessons, because he is an ordinary man, a family man, a worker who earned his living by manual labor—all of which has great significance and is a source of happiness for us.”³⁷ The figure of Saint Joseph also speaks to us of the need to be always apostolic, for he knew how to turn his work into an opportunity to “make Jesus known.”

Most of the homily entitled *In Joseph’s Workshop* is dedicated to this topic. The spirit of Opus Dei “hinges upon ordinary work, *professional work* carried out in the midst of the world. God’s calling gives us a mission: it invites us to share in the unique task of the Church, to bear witness to Christ before our fellow men and so draw all things towards God.”³⁸ The figure of Saint Joseph stands out as the one who gave to work its proper dimension in the history of salvation.

It is here, in the offering to God of one’s own work, that Christians exercise the priesthood received in baptism. Commenting on the prayer to Saint Joseph we just cited, he said: “*Deus qui dedisti nobis regale sacerdotium*. The priesthood is royal for all Christians . . . We all have a priestly soul. *Praesta, quaesumus ut, sicut beatus Ioseph unigenitum Filium tuum, natum ex Maria Virgine . . . suis manibus reverenter tractare*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 56.

³⁵ Homily “*The Epiphany of our Lord*,” January 6, 1956, in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 38.

³⁶ “*O felicem virum, beatum Ioseph, cui datum est Deum, quem multi reges voluerunt videre et non viderunt, audire et non audierunt, non solum videre et audire, sed portare, deosculari, vestire et custodire!*”

³⁷ *In Joseph’s Workshop*, no. 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 45.

meruit et portare . . . ita nos facias cum cordis munditia. That is the way he wants us to be: clean of heart. *Et operis innocentia*—the innocence of deeds is rectitude of intention—*tuis sanctis altaribus deservire.* To serve him not only at the Altar, but in the whole world, which is an altar for us. All the works of men are done as if on an altar, and each one of you, in that union of contemplative souls that is your day, says in some way ‘his Mass,’ which lasts twenty-four hours, in expectation of the Mass to follow that will last another twenty-four hours, and so on until the end of our life.”³⁹

It is proper to the priest to sanctify. The sanctification of work takes place as an exercise of the priesthood of the faithful, “for all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (*I Pet 2:5*). Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist.”⁴⁰

Among the expressions of devotion to Saint Joseph one stands out, by which Saint Josemaria joins a rich earlier tradition: the comparison of the Holy Patriarch to Joseph, the son of Jacob, who provided bread to the inhabitants of Egypt and to the children of Israel. This comparison is strengthened by a fact that deeply touched his heart: “seeking bread” is the role of the father of a family (we belong to Joseph’s family), and the bread of which he speaks is the Holy Eucharist. His most ardent words on this topic are found in evoking the events surrounding the obtaining of permission to reserve our Lord in the tabernacle of Opus Dei’s first student residence.

Here is how he recalled this event: “In 1934, if I am not mistaken, we began the first student residence . . . We had to have our Lord with us in the tabernacle. Now it is an easy matter to set up a tabernacle, but then it was very difficult . . . I began to ask Saint Joseph for the first tabernacle. And so did my children I then had at my side. While we prayed for this intention, I tried to find the necessary items: vestments, tabernacle. . . . We had no money. When I could get twenty-five pesetas together, which then was a fair amount of money, it had to go to meet some other more pressing need. I did manage to get some nuns, whom I love very much, to give me a tabernacle. I got the vestments somewhere else, and finally the good bishop of Madrid gave us permission to have the Blessed Sacrament with us. Then, as a sign of gratitude, I had a small chain made for the tabernacle key with a little medal of Saint Joseph which had inscribed on the back the words *Ite ad Ioseph!* So Saint Joseph is truly our father and lord because he has given us bread, the Eucharistic bread, like a good father. Didn’t I just say that we belong to his family?”⁴¹

Saint Joseph, provider of bread for the Holy Family, is also a provider of bread for the Church. From heaven, he continues to exercise his fatherhood over those who form in Christ a single Mystical Body. With the passing of the years, this reality became ever more alive in Saint Josemaría’s heart. As Bishop Alvaro del Portillo recalled about a trip to several South American countries in 1974: “During that trip our founder began to speak of the mysterious presence—‘ineffable,’ he called it—of Mary and Joseph beside all the

³⁹ San José, *San José, nuestro Padre y Señor*, pp. 97-98.

⁴⁰ Vatican II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 34.

⁴¹ *De la familia de José*, p. 137.

tabernacles of the world. He reasoned in this way: if the Blessed Virgin Mary never in this life separated herself from her Son, then it's only logical that she should have continued to stay by his side even after he decided to remain in that 'prison of love' that is the tabernacle: to adore him, to love him, to pray for us. And he applied the same reasoning to Saint Joseph. He had always stood by Jesus and by his own spouse: he had had the good fortune to die accompanied by them—what a marvelous death! . . . In sum, our founder truly brought Saint Joseph into everything.”⁴²

In conclusion, Saint Josemaría's piety towards Saint Joseph and his theological vision of the Holy Patriarch's mission are based on his meditation on Sacred Scripture, on the holy Fathers of the Church, especially Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Augustine, and on the theology of Saint Joseph found in the earlier Pontifical magisterium, especially in that of Leo XIII.

Marian theology is usually structured around our Lady's true motherhood (Mary is the mother of Christ and of all mankind). Analogously, in the theological vision of Saint Joseph found in the teachings of Saint Josemaría, everything is structured around three main axes: the truth of his marriage to our Lady, the truth of his fatherhood towards Jesus, and his mission as Guardian of the Holy Family, and then of the entire Church. Within these coordinates, we see him striving throughout his life for an ever deeper appreciation of the role of Saint Joseph in our Christian life, as seen in the testimony just cited from the soon to be Blessed Alvaro del Portillo.

⁴² Alvaro del Portillo, *Immersed in God*, Scepter, Princeton, 1996, p. 131.