

The Catholic Parish of St Mary, Leek

We are celebrating the Year of St Joseph



ST JOSEPH,
PATRON OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH,
PRAY FOR US!

“With a father’s heart: that is how Joseph loved Jesus”. This is Pope Francis’s inspiring opening to the Apostolic Letter dated 8 December, 2020, marking the beginning of the Year of St Joseph, marking the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of St Joseph as the “Patron of the Catholic Church” by Blessed Pius IX on 8 December, 1870.

In this delightful Apostolic Letter on St Joseph, Pope Francis offers his personal reflections on the Patron of the Catholic Church.

In several inspirational reflections grounded in the experience of the current coronavirus pandemic during which the Pope says has increased his wish to reflect on St Joseph because during these extraordinary days, we have all experienced how “our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked ... [people who understand] that no one is saved alone.”

Pope Francis hopes that during this Year of St Joseph, each believer can discover again the Patron of the Catholic Church, “the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence, an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble. St Joseph reminds us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation.”

The Pope’s clear aim with the Apostolic Letter is to increase our love for this great saint, to encourage us to implore his intercession, and imitate his virtues and his zeal.

The Apostolic Letter, “With a father’s heart” truly comes from the heart of the father of the Church, Pope Francis, and he reflects on several images of St Joseph, the father.



A beloved father

Pope Francis’s reflection begins by stating, “the greatness of St Joseph is that he was the spouse of Mary and the father of Jesus. In this way, he placed himself, “at the service of the entire plan of salvation.”

St Joseph concretely expressed his fatherhood “by making his life a sacred service to the mystery of the incarnation and its redemptive purpose.”

Thanks to his role, says the Pope, in salvation history, St Joseph has always been venerated as a father by the Christian people. In our own church this is the case, there are: 3 stained glass windows, 2 statues and 4 stone carvings honouring this Patron of the Church.

A tender and loving father

Pope Francis points us to St Joseph watching Jesus grow every day while Jesus saw in Joseph the tender love of God.

The Pope reminds with his own tender shepherd’s heart that “tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us. Pointing fingers and judging others are frequently signs of an inability to accept our weakness, our own frailty. Only tender love will save us ... that is why it is so important to encounter God’s mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where we experience his truth and tenderness.”

Pope Francis encourages all believers facing uncertainty, “Joseph ... teaches us that faith in God includes believing that we can work through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses.”



An obedient father

Pope Francis turns his attention to St Joseph's obedience. He reminds us that "God revealed his saving plan to Joseph by using dreams which were considered by Bible and ancient people as a way for God to make his will known."

In two dreams, the Pope explains, God communicated his will to St Joseph. In the first, an angel helps Joseph to overcome the dilemma he had for Mary's pregnancy. We are told that Joseph's response to the angel's message was immediate, "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." In the second dream, the angel warns Joseph of the threat made against the baby Jesus, and again Joseph did not hesitate to obey, regardless of the hardship which would undoubtedly be involved.



The Pope states that all this makes clear that "St Joseph was called by God to serve the person and the mission of Jesus directly through the exercise of his fatherhood."

An accepting father

Pope Francis encourages us with his personal insight, "the spiritual path that Joseph traces for us is not one that explains, but accepts. Only as a result of this acceptance, this reconciliation can we begin to glimpse a broader history, a deeper meaning." The Pope continues, in our own lives, "acceptance and welcome can be an expression of the Holy Spirit's gift of fortitude. Only the Lord can give us the strength needed to accept life as it is, with all its contradictions, frustrations and disappointments."

Pope Francis's pastoral encouragement continues, "We should never think that believing means finding facile and comforting solutions. The faith Christ taught us is what we see in St Joseph. He did not look for shortcuts, but confronted reality with open eyes and accepted personal responsibility for it." The Pope inspires believers to adopt St Joseph's attitude to "accept and welcome others as they are, without exception, and show special concern for the weak."

A creatively courageous father



Pope Francis observes that creative courage emerges in the way we deal with difficulties: we either give up or somehow engage with the difficulty.

The Pope reminds that in the Christmas Gospels, God chooses to act through events and people including St Joseph to guide the beginnings of the history of salvation. Because of St Joseph, God saved the child Jesus and Mary first by making the stable a welcoming home for Jesus and then escaping from the threat of Herod. These scenes together with others proclaim to us that God always finds a way to save us.

The Pope calls on believers to consider how we can, in our own way, protect Jesus and Mary. Both God and Our Lady trusted St Joseph who both protected and provided for Jesus and Mary. It is these qualities which make St Joseph the Guardian of the Church.

St Joseph is also the special patron of the most vulnerable in society and a consequence is that the Church is to show concern for the weakest in our midst.

A working father

Pope Francis reminds us, in the Church's first encyclical on social issues from the nineteenth century, St Joseph's relation to the world of work was emphasised. In our work, we participate in the work of salvation, the building of the Kingdom of God, we develop our skills and talents; we build up and contribute to society, our work nurtures our homes and families. Human work is collaborating with God. Pope Francis calls on all people to a renewed concern for those who have been made redundant due to the pandemic.

A father in the shadows

In this final reflection, the Pope draws on the Polish novel, The Shadow of a Father, which retells the life of St Joseph by using the image of a shadow to define his life: Joseph was the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father.

The Pope observes that fathers are not born, they are made; made by taking up responsibility to care for a child and whenever a man accepts this awesome responsibility for the life of another, that is when he becomes a father for that person.

The Pope then admits that both the world and the Church need such father figures: a parents to children and as pastors to God's people. He says that both children and parishioners seem to be orphans, lacking fathers.



As a spiritual and pastoral father, the Pope then says that being a father means introducing children to life and reality, not preventing them from attaining their potential, but enabling children to be capable to decide for themselves, enjoying freedom and exploring new possibilities. The Pope suggests that this may be the reason why St Joseph is known as the “most chaste”. This title is not due to affection, but an attitude which is opposite of being possessive. Chastity is freedom; freedom from possessiveness. Chaste love is true love in contrast to possessive love which is imprisons.

He concludes his insightful and gently paternal Apostolic Letter by offering the most challenging observations thus far: first, he says that the world needs fathers not tyrants who domineer. Then, he notes that all vocations are born of a gift of oneself; sacrifice is not enough. If this were the case and all vocations were limited to sacrifice, all vocations, either lay or religious, would lose their beauty and joy and risk being an expression of unhappiness, sadness and frustration.

In conclusion, Pope Francis says that every exercise of fatherhood is far from an act of possession, but rather it is a “sign” pointing to God's fatherhood. When we are fathers like this, we are fathers like St Joseph, “a shadow of the heavenly Father ... And a shadow that follows his Son.”

Celebrating the Year of St Joseph

By instigating this Year of St Joseph and by his reflections on the Patron of the Universal Church, Pope Francis is calling on every member of the Church to reflect deeply on the mission and nature of the Church.

In his appreciation for St Joseph, the Pope reflects on seven qualities found in the father of Jesus. These seven qualities, Pope Francis wants us to put at the heart of the Church: a community of persons believing that they are the beloved and valued children of God; a Church which is tender and loving towards all who enter through its doors; a Church obedient to God's word every day; a Church where everyone is approved and made to feel at home; a courageous Church, protecting the things of God; a Church of workers, collaborating together and with God; and, a Church which supports its children as an encouraging parent who goes to great lengths so each person can reach their God given potential.

In the popular piety of the Church, Wednesday has long been the day of each week devoted to St Joseph.

During the Year of St Joseph, let us pray Pope Francis's prayer to St Joseph, asking for the grace of graces: our conversion.

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

To you God entrusted his only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man.

Blessed Joseph, to us too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life.

Obtain for us grace, mercy and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen.

St Joseph, Pray for us.