February reflections for the Year of St. Joseph: 
Joseph and marriage

St. Joseph shows us the importance of family

As a seminarian preparing for priesthood, I frequently imagine the homilies I would deliver for certain readings. I think about preaching the Eucharist while going through John 6. Or how I’d preach Acts during Easter. Or even the mysterious Book of Revelation! One of the readings that I am most excited to preach is the first chapter of the New Testament: the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew begins with a long genealogy. Some of these names are immediately recognizable. Many others are strange, often unheard of and especially difficult to pronounce! And yet it ends with a familiar family, the Holy Family: Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

I’m excited to preach this reading because it shows the importance of the family. Typically, a book or talk begins with something that captures the audience’s attention. Matthew uses a genealogy. To us this might seem very strange, but Matthew knew his audience and the big role that ancestry and family played in Jewish life. The importance of the family is also reaffirmed through the Incarnation, when the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, not as an already-formed 30-year-old man, but as a child in a family. Likewise, the Church teaches that “the family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life.” (CCC 2207)

The importance of the family calls forth responsibility, and no one felt this responsibility quite like Joseph, established as guardian of a perfect spouse and the Son of God. When Joseph discovers that Mary is with child, he resolves to send her away quietly. There are many different ways to interpret this, but certain doctors of the Church, such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas, held that it was not because he was suspicious of any wrongdoing on Mary’s part, or that he was confused, but because he knew exactly what was happening and believed himself to be unworthy of it. Joseph accepts his mission as spouse and foster-father only after he is commissioned by the angel. Having accepted this role, he carries it out fearlessly and courageously. Despite being unworthy to carry out this important work, he had been called to it by God and placed his trust entirely in the Lord.

Despite the trials that this great responsibility brought, there were also many blessings in raising the Son of God. Through the experience of his human family, Christ learned certain human skills and grew in human virtues. The Divine Carpenter, creator of the universe, learned the human trade of carpentry from his human father. I can’t imagine the great joy that Joseph had as he taught Jesus the things that he himself was passionate about! It is through Jesus’ obedience to Mary and Joseph that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature.” (Lk 2:52)

In a world that often holds a diminished view of the family’s importance, it is imperative that we recapture this ancient view of the dignity of family life. Recapturing this view is what will help lead to the sanctity of the spouses and children. And it is the witness of true Christian families that can lead to the sanctification of the world. During this Year of St. Joseph, let us look to Joseph, the patron of families and of the universal Church, as our model, to help us live out the dignity that comes with being a family.
Putting on a clinic

The Litany of St. Joseph attributes many titles to the foster father of Jesus. Many spring directly from his marriage to Our Blessed Mother and can help anyone, but especially married couples, live the Christian life more fully.

Spouse of the Mother of God. My husband loves me in numerous ways, but he loves me best by doing all he can to support my relationship with God. He ensures that I have time to pray, he initiates our couple prayer and he continues to work at his own relationship with the Lord. Our vocations are our paths to salvation.

For married couples, each spouse’s primary goal is to help the other on his or her heavenly journey. In a mysterious way, even St. Joseph accompanied his wife Mary. St. John Paul II writes: “Joseph is the first to share in the faith of the Mother of God and in doing so he supports his spouse in the faith of the divine annunciation.” (Guardian of the Redeemer, 5)

Chaste guardian of the Virgin. All people, even married people, are called to chastity throughout their lives. While unmarried persons live chastity in abstinence, married couples live chastity in the sexual act. Chastity in this act requires a total gift of self to the other.

No one has lived this self-gift like the Holy Family. Joseph, as husband, held nothing back from his bride. That complete gift of self flows from God’s gift of self. St. Joseph knew of God’s eternal gift to him and so was able to love in the same self-giving manner. This is how chastity is practiced in marriage, or in any relationship: only a total gift of self to the other can imitate God’s divine love.

Mirror of patience and head of the Holy Family. Last spring’s unprecedented quarantine may have exposed our virtues and vices in a new light. As Pope Francis told engaged couples, “Living together is an art. It’s a patient art, it’s a beautiful art, it’s fascinating.” Living side-by-side with a spouse for months without the usual distractions of work, errands, or even visiting friends required a beautiful and fascinating patience! St. Joseph exudes patience as husband to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and we should take solace in his example, especially if we’ve seen more vice than virtue in our homes.

The Litany of St. Joseph also reminds us of St. Joseph’s headship. Spouses who live lives of virtue within marriage set these virtues up as guideposts for the entire family. How beautiful, then, must have been the day-to-day marriage of Mary and Joseph. As head of the Holy Family, St. Joseph was an example to his wife of holiness and virtue.

Glory of home life and pillar of families. The messy lives of our families become glorious when love of each other and other priorities are rightly ordered. In The Virgin Mary and the Theology of the Body, Gloria Falcao Dodd notes that the Holy Family’s work is an expression of its love and encourages all modern families to follow that example by “subordinating work to the service of the family.” (64) St. Joseph certainly used his work to serve his family, not vice versa. In our modern world, we can provide for our families through numerous avenues. However, the temptation can arise to spend more time and effort at a workplace than at home. St. Joseph shows us by example that it is not only possible for us to rightly order family and work, but it is necessary.

Thankfully, God has given us St. Joseph as a friend and intercessor. Let us ask him to accompany us on our journey of faith, teach us to make a perfect and full gift of ourselves to others, and help us follow his example of virtue in all things, especially in our marriages and families. St. Joseph, husband of Mary, pray for us! ¶

REFLECT AND PARTICIPATE

As the Diocese of Lafayette celebrates the Year of St. Joseph, reflecting upon the virtues of adoration, obedience, and service, several events have also been planned in which all are invited to actively participate. Events scheduled for the month of February include:

• Feb. 6: Opportunity to gain Year of St. Joseph Indulgence (any St. Joseph Church)
• Feb. 11 (6:00 p.m.): Parish Mission (St. Joseph Church, Centerville)
• Feb. 19: Opportunity to gain Year of St. Joseph Indulgence (any St. Joseph Church)
• Additional information about the Year of St. Joseph may be found at diolaf.org/stjoseph.