April reflections for the Year of St. Joseph: 

Joseph and fatherhood

St. Joseph still lives in men today

“He’s no lily, he’s a man!”

These words of Father Frey, the founder of the Community of Jesus Crucified, have been handed down to me through his spiritual children. Five times a day I stand in front of a large statue of St. Joseph holding the baby Jesus and a staff with three bloomed lilies and two on the way (Isaiah 41:13) Every Lent we slide the six-foot staff out of St. Joseph’s hand to cover him in purple.

During this time, I miss him. I feel like I have lost him, and then I understand: “He’s no lily, he’s a man.” Even during Lent when his statue is covered, St. Joseph is here! St. Joseph still lives in men today.

St. Joseph’s Trust. To reflect on St. Joseph would be of little use had I not encountered him and his ways through the men of today. During the Fete Dieu du Teche boat procession in 2019, the waters were high and the boat carrying the Blessed Sacrament was large, larger than years before. By all statistics, the Eucharist should not have made it under Pont Breaux in Breaux Bridge. As I listened to a modern-day St. Joseph recount the story of this miracle, I couldn’t help but see the joy on St. Joseph’s face after he carried his wife and child through the desert, and they made it! Jesus passed through unharmed. St. Joseph trusts the Father. Men of today still trust the Father.

St. Joseph’s Timing. In his retirement at Consolata Nursing Home, Father Frey described himself as a St. Joseph figure, here to make sure that we do not go off track. Once again, I think of the track of Egypt, the darkness of the night. Like St. Joseph we are called out of the Temple to bring Jesus to the world in what seems to be COVID 2021. In this darkness, we must provide for others as St. Joseph did, in a way that only a father can and should do, not just physically but intellectually and spiritually as well. How did St. Joseph lead Mary in praying the psalms? Just the sound of his voice must have increased her hope. What story did he recite to Jesus? What stars did they follow? Because God allowed this trial, did they discover how to survive on “living water” in the desert? (John 4:13-15) To keep everything on track, perhaps all St. Joseph could do was make sure Mary knew that he was there! No matter what, St. Joseph was there. Men of today can ask themselves, “Were you there?”

St. Joseph’s Tears. St. Joseph still trusts, his timing is right on, and what mystery this father contains in his tears! What mystery all fathers hold in their tears! I remember my first “Come to Jesus” talk with my daddy. I was 16 and lost, and he was worried and sad. It was the first time I saw Dad cry. He shed those same tears when I was 24. I told him that I thought God was calling me to be a sister—Dad cried. The tears of sorrow he shed eight years prior were the same tears of joy he bore on that December day. Did St. Joseph cry when he saw Mary pregnant? Were his tears of sorrow tears of joy when Jesus was born on that December Day?

What mystery a father holds in his tears? Joy and sorrow through all the years. How can this be? Tears so precious I rarely see, they show what he has accepted for me.

May God Bless us today with His abundant life because of what St. Joseph accepted for us. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights.” (James 1:17)
St. Joseph’s gift of fatherhood

I’ve always thought of my grandfather as a superhero. He was always larger than life, ready for every new challenge his life of farming brought him. Since his passing in 2019, I’ve been reflecting a lot on the impact he’s had on me as a man.

I most often remember the times and ways in which he lived and served my maw-maw. I never remember a time he wasn’t serving her: getting her a glass of water with crushed ice, cooking for her, getting her a blanket. But recently, I’ve been reflecting more and more on how he lived and loved her once she passed. It was kind of a mysterious and wonderful thing—it seemed that the love my paw-paw had for my grandmother only grew and blossomed after her death.

As Catholics in the Diocese of Lafayette, we have the great privilege of being in a double “Year of St. Joseph,” one promulgated by Bishop Deshotel and one by Pope Francis. It’s fitting that in this rather tumultuous time, the Church has given us Joseph as a refuge and model. Joseph certainly had his share of tumult and trials. Shortly after being told that his fiancé is pregnant, he is told to marry her. He has to travel to Bethlehem for the census, and his wife gives birth to our Savior in a cave, and then he has to evacuate his new family to Egypt.

I think that often Joseph’s humility can tempt us to overlook him as a champion of courage or fatherhood. But it is perhaps the hiddenness of St. Joseph’s life of virtue that makes him all the more powerful an intercessor and guide in this difficult time.

In addition to his practice of the virtues, Joseph is an emboldening example of the call to fatherhood lived virginaly. While the critique may arise that St. Joseph’s virginity somehow mitigates or lessens his relationship with Mary or with Jesus, I think it rather deepens the profundity of Joseph’s relationship with the two most perfect people to live. We are told in the Gospel of Matthew that after being visited by the angel, Joseph took Mary as his wife but remained a virgin. We often refer to Joseph as “the most chaste spouse” of the Blessed Virgin Mary and it is this courageous sacrifice of Joseph that perhaps allowed him to enter more deeply into the mystery of the Incarnation and the mystery of his adopted son.

In a rather mysterious way, Joseph’s life closely imitated Christ’s: like Christ, Joseph was called to a virginal fatherhood lived entirely at the service of others. St. Joseph spent his fatherhood in humble obedience to God who had literally come to dwell with him.

For me, Joseph is an emboldening image that virginal fatherhood is not only possible but joyfully so, that this desire to “be fruitful and multiply” can be perfected in Joseph’s adoration of the incarnate God in the manger. In Pope Francis’s Apostolic letter, With the Heart of the Father, released at the start of the Year of St. Joseph, he writes that Joseph was like Christ in two key ways: he was entirely at the service of the plan of salvation, and he loved Mary unconditionally. Like Jesus, Joseph laid down his entire life to accomplish what the Father had intended: that the whole world be reconciled to him. Like Jesus, Joseph loved the Blessed Virgin Mary with a pure, chaste and unconditional heart.

It is perhaps Joseph’s calling to virginal fatherhood, to a radical living out of this beautiful vocation that allowed him to imitate Christ so fully.

It is easy to become discouraged with the images and examples of unheroic and selfish fatherhood, of fatherhood that is in no way a gift. St. Joseph stands as a stark sign of contradiction to this false fatherhood. To a world that often only sees fatherhood as a biological reality, Joseph shines as an example of fatherhood, not given in biology, but rather given in total surrender to God’s plan of salvation.