I pray that each one of you will have a most blessed and merry Christmas. May St. Joseph be your guide to the Christ child of Bethlehem, and may you rejoice in the joy of his birth as our Savior. –Bishop John T. Folda

Walking towards Christmas with St. Joseph

For the past twelve months, the Church has been celebrating a Year of St. Joseph, a time of renewed devotion to the foster father of Jesus who is also the Patron of the Universal Church. In fact, this Year of St. Joseph concluded on Dec. 8, but the graces of this special year will continue if we remain close to this holy man, the protector of the Holy Family. There is no better time to keep him in mind than in these days before Christmas.

In an old family Bible, there is an image of St. Joseph that once caught my attention. Joseph is alone, leaning over his workbench. He is surrounded by his work and holding a tool in his hand, but he looks distracted. He has been asked to do something completely unexpected, and he wonders what this will all mean. Of course, we know what distracts him: he has learned that Mary is with child, but not just any child. This child will be God’s own Son, and the angel of the Lord has revealed to Joseph that God wishes him to take Mary and the child Jesus into his home. Who wouldn’t be distracted? But, as we all know, Joseph accepted God’s invitation. He was reassured by God and given the grace to do what was needed. He accepts, he obeys, and he says, “Yes, I will do what you ask.”

Joseph was a man of silence, or at least that is how we know him. He says not a word in Sacred Scripture, and you might even say that he is mute, awestruck before the mystery of God’s plan. Even though he was a carpenter, Joseph comes across as being contemplative, a quiet participant in the drama of salvation that was unfolding before him. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary pondered all these events in her heart, but can there be any doubt that Joseph was also pondering, reflecting, wondering, and praising? Several times during this holy year, I’ve mentioned that my favorite image of Joseph shows him standing over the crib with the infant Jesus, gazing in wonder at the miracle of the Christ child. He was probably wondering what this child would become, and what he would do. I suspect he was filled with determination to be a good father, to protect this beloved Son of God, and to cherish his mother, Mary.

Joseph was also a man of compassion and courage. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a “righteous man,” which is certainly true, but we can safely say that he was also a man of compassion. According to the law, he had every right to dismiss Mary from their betrothal when she was found with child. But he wanted no harm to come to her, and at the message of the angel he took Mary into his home as his wife. It took courage to go against the conventions of the time and to allow his own world to be turned upside down. He provided a place for Mary when it came time for her to deliver her child, and I imagine he was more than a little nervous at the prospect of Mary giving birth in a stable. Joseph’s courage was also evident in the efforts he made to protect Mary and Jesus from harm when their lives were in danger. A lesser man might have turned away and run, but Joseph took them in his care and kept them safe. He slipped by the agents of King Herod and took his little family into exile in Egypt. None of this could have been easy, but Joseph’s compassion and courage made it possible for him to put his trust in God and keep going.

So, what does Joseph have to teach us as we approach the celebration of our Lord’s birth? He teaches us first that this is a season of faith and trust. Like Mary, he put himself into the hands of God and allowed God to take the lead. He also teaches us the value of silence and prayerful listening. We’re entering a busy time of year, with lots of holiday activity and festivity. But we all need a little stillness in our lives so we can hear the voice of God speaking to us, as he spoke to Joseph. This should be a time for prayer and meditation on the place of Jesus in our lives. Even if the world is consumed by a material and secular celebration of Christmas, we should keep our eyes on the One who is the “reason for the season.” Joseph gazed with love on the child Jesus lying in the manger, and he invites us to do the same. He also teaches us that we are all called to compassion and courage. There are many who have no reason to celebrate, or nothing to celebrate with. So, we should do what we can to help the weak, the poor, the
hurting, and the lost. The compassion and courage of Joseph urge us to persevere even when the easier way looks more attractive.

As the Year of St. Joseph comes to a conclusion, this great man still invites us to draw close to Jesus. He still walks with us on our way to Bethlehem, and he still accompanies us on the daily journey of our lives. Keep in mind that besides Mary, no one was closer to Jesus than Joseph. We can’t go wrong by asking his help in our daily prayers. If he was the protector and foster father of the Holy Family, I’m sure that he’s protecting our family of faith as well.

Dear readers, I pray that each one of you will have a most blessed and merry Christmas. May St. Joseph be your guide to the Christ child of Bethlehem, and may you rejoice in the joy of his birth as our Savior.