

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Lent is drawing to a close very quickly and we are focused on the final moments of Jesus' life on earth. During the last two weeks of Lent, which are traditionally referred to as Passiontide and Holy Week, we hear the Gospel passages of Jesus' final dialog with those who will not accept the truth that He brings from the Father. As part of His rejection and betrayal by the religious authorities and His own apostle, He willingly surrenders His life in faithfulness to His Father's will for our salvation. In many of our churches, signs of the Resurrection (statues and other images) are covered to remind us of the sorrow that comes with the betrayal and death of the Savior. We fast from the signs of the Resurrection and meditate on Jesus' last act of surrender and our own eventual passing as well.

During the Year of St. Joseph, we are considering the moments of his life and mission as head of the Holy Family. Like many times in the Scriptures, St. Joseph is silent during Jesus' suffering and death. In fact, St. Joseph is completely missing in any account of Jesus' suffering, death, and Resurrection. Mary is present. Others are present. St. Joseph is gone. Our tradition reminds us that St. Joseph died some time between the finding of Jesus as a child in the Temple at age 12 and the time when Jesus began His public ministry at the age of 30. Those "hidden" years in the life of St. Joseph, outside of special visions given to some Saints and mystics about his life during those years, remain an unrevealed mystery.

St. Joseph's absence from Holy Week can show us much of how God works our salvation through death itself. St. Joseph was the head of the Holy Family. The head of a family is charged to be the first to step out into uncharted territory, to make the path clear and safe for other family members to travel, and to show an example of how to make the journey. It was appropriate that St. Joseph be the first to leave this world so that he could show Jesus, by example, on a human level, how to surrender Himself to the Father in death. St. Joseph had always courageously surrendered himself to the Father's will in every decision he made for himself or for the good of his wife and family. In order to pass through one's passion and death, every person must do so with faith, courage, and perseverance in God's grace. St. Joseph persevered through his suffering and death and modeled the virtues of faith, hope, and trust in the salvation promised to him by his own foster-Son. St. Joseph also shows us that if we have faith and stay together as a family through our sufferings, we should not fear sickness, suffering, or death, because our Father in heaven is guiding our family together through this world of suffering to a place where we can be together in joy forever. The tranquility of St. Joseph in his own death certainly helped Jesus and Mary to later persevere through the pain of the Cross.

St. Joseph not only showed Jesus and Mary how to persevere through suffering and death, but he also shows us how to do the same. In our tradition, St. Joseph is Patron of the Dying because he lived his life with Jesus and Mary and he died being united in the love of Jesus and Mary. He shows us, that if we want to be with Jesus and Mary in heaven, we need to spiritually "walk" with them throughout our lives. He served their needs during his life. We may ask ourselves if we are following and serving Jesus with every bit of strength we have and, if so, are we also doing what Mary asked of us at Cana, "Do whatever He tells you." How we live our life is how we will die. The Father's will is for us to die in a spiritual union of faith and love with Jesus and Mary so that our living relationship with them pulls us through to eternal life. St. Joseph went through death in trust that he would soon be reunited in a new resurrected life at the completion of Holy Week.

The foster-father of Jesus was not inactive, however, during Holy Week. Our tradition tells us that St. Joseph went to join the Holy Souls in the place of the dead (sometimes referred to in the Creed as hell, or in theological language as limbo). Limbo is an appropriate term for the waiting that souls had to endure not knowing exactly when their deliverance to heavenly life would happen. St. Joseph brought them the good news that his foster-Son was coming very soon to cleanse them of their sins, to deliver them from their situation, and to lead them to eternal life. It would not be long before Jesus would "descend to the dead" to deliver them. After Mary, St. Joseph is the most just and righteous human being who has ever lived. It is believed that he inherited Original Sin but that he was personally righteous in every moral choice during his life. He therefore also had to await salvation through Jesus' death and Resurrection with other righteous souls who had lived from the beginning of time in the place of the dead. St. Joseph as Protector and Patron of the universal Catholic Church was already fulfilling that role by ministering to "The Church Suffering" present and waiting in the place of the dead. One might imagine that when Jesus "descended into hell" that he would have delivered his foster-father first when He arrived there to honor him for his faithful care and example during his life on earth.

In Catholic art, the death of St. Joseph is often portrayed as a close and sacred moment in the life of the Holy Family. Jesus and Mary are seen standing by the bedside of St. Joseph keeping vigil with him for his departure. Just as the Hebrew patriarchs and people stood to eat the Passover meal before their departure

from Egypt toward the Promised Land, Mary and Jesus stood in constant prayer asking the Father to help St. Joseph persevere in faith and trust until he would arrive in the Promised Land of Heaven. St. Joseph, Jesus, and Mary teach us and our loved ones how to make our pilgrimage through death to eternal life!

It is good to ask St. Joseph to pray for us that we will have a peaceful and happy death. We might also spiritually assist others who are dying by making sure that a priest brings Jesus in the Sacraments (In particular, the "last rites" of Confession, Anointing of the Sick, and Viaticum" which is the Last Holy Communion) to those who are terminally ill or dying. We might also pray the Rosary and the Litany of St. Joseph in the presence of the dying as they are making their way to eternity. In this way, we will be with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in life, death, and heavenly glory.

One of the most beloved hymns to St. Joseph asks for this kind of spiritual assistance from St. Joseph at the time of our own passing. This hymn is thought to have been composed by the Sisters of Notre Dame (de Namur) of Liverpool, England. The first known appearance of the hymn was found in "Convent Hymns and Music" in 1891. It teaches us to prepare for death by living life with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and to take their attitude about life and death. Properly understood, this hymn teaches us St. Joseph's Holy Week wisdom about life, suffering, and death:

Dear St. Joseph, pure and gentle,
Guardian of the Savior child,
Treading with the virgin mother,
Egypt's deserts rough and wild.

Chorus:

Hail, St. Joseph, spouse of Mary,
Blessed above all saints on high,
When the death-shades round us gather,
Teach, oh, teach us how to die.

He who rested on thy bosom
Is by countless saints adored;
Prostrate angels in His presence
Sing hosannas to their Lord.

Now to thee no gift refusing,
Jesus stoops to hear thy prayer;
Then, dear saint, from thy fair dwelling,
Give to us a father's care.
Dear St. Joseph, kind and loving,
Stretch to us a helping hand;
Guide us through life's toils and sorrows
Safely to the distant land.

In the strife of life be near us,
And in death, oh, hover nigh,
Let our souls on thy sweet bosom
To their home of gladness fly.

Thou hast known a pilgrim's sorrows,
But thy day of toil is o'er;
Help us while we journey onward
Lead us to the peaceful shore.

Hail St. Joseph, just and holy,
Loving children breathe thy name;
Here below, through toil and danger,
Love and care from thee we claim.

May St. Joseph help us and our families to make our passage with Jesus and Mary through our own suffering and death to the shores of the promised Land of Heaven!

In Christ's Glorious Passion,
Fr. Derda, Fr. Steve, Deacon Russ, Deacon Ed

