



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Catechesis on Saint Joseph: 8. *Saint Joseph, father in tenderness*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, I would like to explore the figure of Saint Joseph as a *father in tenderness*.

In the Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* (8 December 2020), I had the opportunity to reflect on this aspect of tenderness, an aspect of Saint Joseph's personality. In fact, although the Gospels do not give us any details about how he exercised his paternity, we can be sure that his being a "just" man was also reflected in the education he gave Jesus. "Joseph saw Jesus grow daily 'in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour'" (*Lk 2:52*): so the Gospel says. "As the Lord had done with Israel, so Joseph did with Jesus: he taught him to walk, taking him by the hand; he was for him like a father who raises an infant to his cheeks, bending down to him and feeding him (cf. *Hos 11:3-4*)" (*Patris Corde*, 2). This definition in the Bible which shows God's relationship with the people of Israel is beautiful. And we think that there was this same relationship between Saint Joseph and Jesus.

The Gospels attest that Jesus always used the word "father" to speak of God and his love. Many parables have the figure of a father as their protagonist (Cf. *Mt 15:13; 21:28-30; 22:2; Lk 15:11-32; n. 5,19-23; 6,32-40; 14,2; 15,1.8*). Among the most well known is certainly the one of *the merciful Father*, recounted by Luke the Evangelist (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*). This parable emphasizes not

only the experience of sin and forgiveness, but also the way in which forgiveness reaches the person who has done wrong. The text says: “While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (v. 20). The son was expecting a punishment, a justice that at most could have given him the place of one of the servants, but he finds himself wrapped in his father’s embrace. Tenderness is something greater than the logic of the world. It is an unexpected way of doing justice. This is why we must never forget that God is not frightened by our sins: let us fix this clearly in our minds. God is not frightened by our sins, he is greater than our sins: he is the father, he is love, he is tender. He is not frightened by our sins, our mistakes, our failings, but he is frightened by the closure of our hearts — this, yes, this makes him suffer — he is frightened by our lack of faith in his love. There is great tenderness in the experience of God’s love. And it is beautiful to think that the first person to transmit this reality to Jesus was Joseph himself. Indeed, the things of God always come to us through the mediation of human experiences. Some time ago — I don’t know if I have already told this story — a group of young people who do theatre, a pop theatre group, ahead of the curve, were struck by this parable of the merciful father and decided to create a pop theatre production on this theme, with this story. And they did it well. And the story is that, at the end, a friend listens to a son who is estranged from his father, who wanted to return home but was afraid that his father would kick him out and punish him. And the friend, says to him: “Send a messenger to say that you want to return home, and if your father will receive you, he should put a handkerchief in the window, the one you can see as soon as you take the last stretch of the path home”. And this was done. And the work, with singing and dancing, continues until the moment that the son turns onto the last stretch of the road and sees the house. And when he looks up, he sees the house filled with white handkerchiefs: filled with them. Not one, but three or four in every window. This is what God’s mercy is like. He is not deterred by our past, by the bad things we have done; he is only frightened by our closure. We all have things to come to terms with; but coming to terms with God is a beautiful thing, because we begin to talk, and he embraces us. Tenderness!

So, we can ask ourselves if we ourselves have experienced this tenderness, and if we in turn have become its witnesses. For tenderness is not primarily an emotional or sentimental matter: it is the experience of feeling loved and welcomed precisely in our poverty and misery, and thus transformed by God’s love.

God does not rely only on our talents, but also on our redeemed weakness. This, for example, makes Saint Paul say that there is also a plan for one’s fragility. In fact, he wrote to the community of Corinth: “And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me.... Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 *Cor* 12:7-9). The Lord does not take away all our weaknesses, but helps us to walk on with our weaknesses, taking us by the hand. He takes our weaknesses by the hand and places himself by our side. And this is tenderness.

The experience of tenderness consists in seeing God's power pass through precisely that which makes us most fragile; on condition, however, that we are converted from the gaze of the evil one who "makes us see and condemn our frailty", whereas the Holy Spirit "brings it to light with tender love" (*Patris Corde*, 2). "Tenderness is the best way to touch the frailty within us". Look at how nurses touch the wounds of the sick: with tenderness, so as not to hurt them further. And this is how the Lord touches our wounds, with the same tenderness. "That is why it is so important to encounter God's mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation" in personal prayer with God, "where we experience his truth and tenderness. Paradoxically, the evil one can also speak the truth to us": he is a liar, but he can arrange things so that he tells us the truth in order to lead us to lies, "yet he does so only to condemn us". Instead, the Lord tells us the truth and reaches out his hand to save us. However, "we know that God's truth does not condemn, but instead welcomes, embraces, sustains and forgives us" (*Patris Corde*, 2). God always forgives: keep this clearly in your head and your heart. God always forgives. We are the ones who tire of asking for forgiveness. But he always forgives, even the worst things.

It does us good, then, to mirror ourselves in Joseph's fatherhood, which is a mirror of God's fatherhood, and to ask ourselves whether we allow the Lord to love us with his tenderness, transforming each one of us into men and women capable of loving in this way. Without this "revolution of tenderness" — there is a need for a revolution of tenderness! — we risk remaining imprisoned in a justice that does not allow us to easily rise up again and that confuses redemption with punishment. This is why today I want to remember in a special way our brothers and sisters who are in prison. It is right that those who have done wrong should pay for their mistake, but it is equally right that those who have done wrong should be able to redeem themselves from their mistake. There cannot be sentences without a window of hope. Any sentence must always have a window of hope. Let us think of our brothers and sisters in prison, and think of God's tenderness for them, and let us pray for them, so they might find in that window of hope a way out towards a better life.

And let us conclude with this prayer:

Saint Joseph, father in tenderness,
 teach us to accept that we are loved precisely in that which is weakest in us.
 Grant that we may place no obstacle between our poverty and the greatness of God's love.
 Stir in us the desire to approach to Reconciliation,
 that we may be forgiven and also made capable of loving tenderly our brothers and sisters in their poverty.
 Be close to those who have done wrong and are paying the price for it.
 Help them to find not only justice but also tenderness so that they can start again.
 And teach them that the first way to begin again
 is to sincerely ask for forgiveness, to feel the Father's caress.
 Amen.

Special Greetings

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from the United States of America. I also greet the priests of the Institute for Continuing Theological Education of the Pontifical North American College. In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, let us pray that all of Christ's followers will persevere on the path towards unity. Upon all of you, and your families, I invoke the joy and peace of the Lord. May God bless you!

Lastly, my thoughts turn especially to *the elderly*, to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. The Week of Prayer for Christian unity which began yesterday invites us to persistently ask the Lord for the gift of full communion among believers. I offer my blessing to all of you.

APPEAL

My thoughts go to the people of the islands of Tonga, who have been affected in recent days by the eruption of an underwater volcano, that caused enormous material damage. I am spiritually close to all the people affected, imploring God for relief for their suffering. I invite everyone to join me in praying for these brothers and sisters.

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on the figure of Saint Joseph, we now consider his example of fatherly love and its importance in the life of Jesus. In the Gospels, significantly, Jesus always appeals to the image of an earthly father when speaking of his heavenly Father and his love. We see this especially in the parable of the prodigal son (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*), which speaks not only of sin and forgiveness, but also of the love that renews and redeems broken relationships. Like the prodigal son, we too are invited to acknowledge our sins and failings, but also to let ourselves be changed by the loving embrace of the Lord. God's tender love is also seen in the trust he places in us to carry out his will by the power of his grace, which works even through our human weaknesses. As a loving Father, God helps us to see the truth about ourselves, in order to make us grow to spiritual maturity in Christ. That is why it is so important to encounter his merciful love in the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of Reconciliation. Through Saint Joseph's intercession, may we learn to follow Christ and to be witnesses to the transforming power of his divine love.

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