

Reflection

The gift of fatherhood and a trust like St. Joseph's

By Joseph Lustig

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As we near the feast of St. Joseph, one could conclude that many Christians have a distorted image of the patron saint of fathers. Looking at artistic renditions of most saints could easily give the viewer a misleading impression. Scripture tells us St. Joseph was a carpenter, but it is hard to imagine a man doing carpentry work with his hands either folded or holding a lily. He didn't



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always have it that smooth. Few men have experienced a more radical change of plans. He finds his fiancé with child and it is not his!

He has to be angry, frustrated and confused, but he is not vengeful. He loves Mary so much and so unconditionally that he still wants to protect her.

Then that angel visits him in a dream and asks him to trust God. Joseph immediately does what God asks. Down through the centuries, there have been countless devotions to Mary. But her first, and probably her favorite, was when Joseph came back to her, told her he was going to stay and she would not have to face this alone.

Now remember this is a man like us in all things, including sin. Satan, who was bold enough to tempt Christ, would have had no problem pelting Joseph constantly with doubts and lies. Trusting God does not remove confusion. We do not trust God because we understand him or agree with him. We trust by obeying in spite of our confusion and fear. Joseph trusts, but trust is not painless.



Because St. Joseph's March 19 feast day falls during Holy Week this year, the observance has been moved to Saturday, March 15. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Now, all this time, only he and Mary know what is going on. And he has no proof, so he can't be sure.

Then this trip to Bethlehem comes at the worst possible time. Is Joseph thinking God has a sour sense of humor, or is he afraid God is going to blame him? He could be panicking about Judgment Day. "My Son was born in a stable. Is that the best you could do?" (It would have been fun to listen in on the conversation when Mary asked him if he made reservations.)

But finally that night, some outsiders show up and they deliver an awesome and comforting testimony. The shepherds know this

child is sent by God.

The word is spreading. At the Presentation, Simeon and Anna are talking. The Magi arrive. Not only is this child being revealed to Israel, the Gentiles are showing up, and they are bringing gifts.

Imagine that night after the Magi leave, Joseph is telling Mary, "This is all starting to make sense. Our son is going to be a great king loved by all people. I liked those Magi. Can you believe it? Gold, frankincense, and ... what are we supposed to do with this myrrh?"

He goes to bed expecting to get a good night's sleep. Wrong! Here comes that dream angel again. "Joseph, get up. Take Mary and Jesus and flee into Egypt."

"But we just got the gold. We don't speak Egyptian. What kind of demand is there in Cairo for Jewish carpenters who smell like myrrh?"

"Mary, wake up. We've got to go to Egypt."

"Joseph, you've been dreaming, go back to sleep."

"Herod wants to kill Jesus!"

"Herod doesn't know Jesus exists."

"Mary, the angel says we have to leave now!"

"How do you know you can believe this angel?"

"He's the same angel who talked me into marrying you."

"I'll be ready in 10 minutes. Start the donkey."

But the episode in Joseph's life that was the most frustrating had to be the trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was lost. (The longest a child was ever lost in our home was an hour. Twice. The same child. It was the longest hour of my life. I can't fathom what three or four days was like.) Joseph and Mary had to be frantic. When your child is lost, everything that could possibly go wrong plays over and over in your mind.

Joseph had to be hearing that Judgment Day voice again. "You lost my Son? I trusted you and you lost him. Maybe Mary should have married Zebedee."

When a parent finds a child, joy, fear and anger all crash together. A parent wants to both hug and scold the child. Before Joseph can say anything, Mary is demanding an explanation. (Interesting that throughout all of Scripture, Joseph never says anything)

Jesus plays it like every other 12-year-old. "Why were you looking for me? I wasn't lost. I was right here. I can't believe you were worried."

On the way back, Joseph and Mary understandably wondered why God was putting them through this. Hardly could they have imagined this would later be called a Joyful Mystery.

But the answer to their wonder becomes so obvious and clear. Our Father wanted what was best for Jesus. He prepares his Son for his calling the same way he prepares all of us for our calling: by sending us to a home with a father and mother. A place with dirty diapers and spilled milk. A place with money squabbles and interrupted free time. That is the only place where you will find people who do not have to understand everything in order to be committed. The only place you will find people willing to get up in the middle of the night, drop everything, and walk to a foreign country. Joseph's trust and commitment were mentioned earlier. He rose immediately and went to Egypt — an act quite admirable, but hardly unique. Virtually every dad everywhere would have done the same thing. Our failure as dads is not that we would not walk to a foreign country, but rather we often refuse to take time to step into the back yard.

Opening up to fatherhood is

not easy. There is always a cross on this side of glory. Often that cross is no more than being willing to trust. There is fear present knowing we have so little control and power. How difficult it is to sometimes let go and have absolute trust in the providence of our Father. But hindsight teaches trust is exactly what we shouldn't fear. It is when we try to trust only in ourselves that we become most frightened.

What a gift we have been given in fatherhood. It is as close as we can come in this life to tasting God the Father's love for us. When we think we are stretching ourselves by trusting in God, our Father, let us remember how much trust our Father has in us. In all our struggles, with all our weakness, and in spite of all our sins, God knows we can be fabulous dads.

We all treasure our sons and daughters. We are called to praise their Creator by rejoicing in them. Frustration, confusion, disagreement and pain did not escape St. Joseph and will not escape us. But we must look through all that and enjoy our sons and daughters. We must never let Satan blind us to what is real and important, to the mutual trust we share with our Father, to who our children are, and to who the real Father is in our family. Then with a trust like St. Joseph's, anything difficult in our family can be turned into a Joyful Mystery.

Begin that trust tonight by hugging your children and telling them how happy you are to be their dad. Then tell our Father the same thing.

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