

December 8, 2002
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

There is something strongly impressive in the Bible's final remark on the life of St. Joseph: "Then [Jesus] went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them . . . And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:51f). The Son of God was raised, that is to say, as any little boy should be raised, growing day by day in the practical and moral skills of life, the formation of character, even as He grew in height and build. While God's Son assumed humanity in His mother's womb, it was Joseph who taught Him what it means to be a man. Thus, Joseph was to leave the forming mark (charakter in Greek) of his own manhood on the God-Man. Jesus, in His home town, was known as "the carpenter's son" (ho tou tektonos huios-Matthew 13:55).

Few if any writers have shown as much exegetical insight into St. Joseph, I think, as Bernard of Clairvaux, who preached a homily on this saint back in the twelfth century. Bernard spoke of Joseph as "the man of virtue," who "deserved to be so honored by God that he was called, and was believed to be, the father of God" (meruit honorari a Deo ut pater Dei et dictus et creditus sit).

Detecting the subtle suggestions dropped in the Gospel of St. Matthew, Bernard compared St. Joseph to his Old Testament counterpart, Joseph the Patriarch. Both men, Bernard noted, were men of chastity, unwilling to touch women who did not "belong" to them. Each man, likewise, was driven into Egypt by the ill-will (invidia) of others, in the first case by the older sons of Jacob, by King Herod in the second. Both men were given divine messages in their dreams. The older Joseph "provided grain, not only for himself, but for all the people," while the later Joseph "received for safe-keeping the Living Bread from heaven, both for himself and for the whole world."

The genealogies of Jesus trace His lineage back to David, not through His Virgin Mother, but through Joseph, to whom Jesus had no biological relationship (Matthew 1:16; Luke 3:23-31). Thus, Jesus inherited the messianic title "Son of David," not through His mother, but through the man who served Him, literally, in loco parentis.

Bernard was impressed by the Davidic lineage of St. Joseph: "Truly of the house of David, this man (vir iste) Joseph truly descended from the royal stem, noble in lineage, more noble in mind. . . . Indeed was he a son of David, not only in flesh, but also in faith, in holiness, in devotion. The Lord found him as it were another David, a man after His own heart, to whom He could safely commit the most secret and most sacred purpose (arcanum) of His heart - to whom, as to another David, He manifested the deep and concealed things of His wisdom, and whom He would not permit to be ignorant of the Mystery which none of the princes of this world have known. To him it was given to see what many kings and prophets had longed to see, but had not seen, and to hear, but had not heard. And he was given, not only to see and to hear, but also to carry, to lead, to embrace, to kiss, to nurture, and to guard" (Super Missus Est Homiliae 2.16).

Every vocation is unique, surely, in the sense that the Good Shepherd calls each of His sheep by its own proper name. Still, there was something more particularly unique about the vocation of St. Joseph. Just how does a man learn the proper form and method for being the foster-father of God's Son and the spouse of God's Virgin Mother? One suspects that there are no manuals on the subject. Joseph was obliged simply to follow God's call wherever it led. Like Abraham, "he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). And if Abraham, in thus following God by faith, is called "our father" (Romans 4:12), there must be some sense in which St. Joseph serves as our foster-father.

With so distinctive and demanding a vocation, we might excuse Joseph if, on occasion, he sometimes felt anxious and insecure. The available evidence, however, indicates that this was not the case. In the Gospel of Matthew Joseph appears four times, and every single time he is sound asleep. Whatever troubles Joseph endured, they did not include insomnia. Joseph's vocation was not simply difficult; it was impossible. Consequently, he realized that all of it, in the end, depended on God, not himself.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>
Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
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