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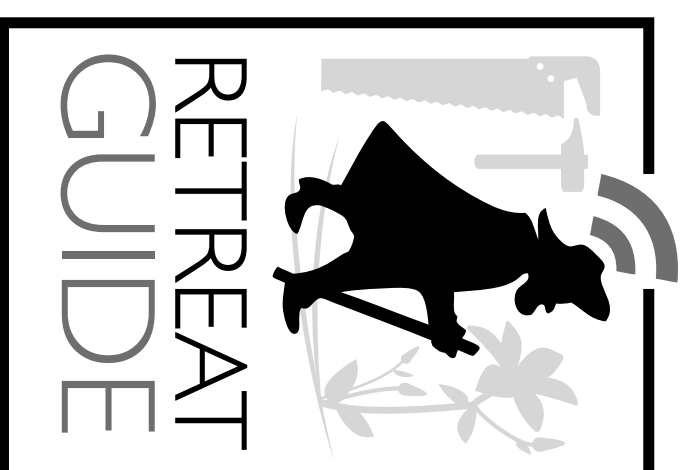
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THE FAITHFUL STEWARD

A LENTEN RETREAT GUIDE
ON ST. JOSEPH

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This booklet is a part of RCSSpirituality's *Retreat Guide* service, which includes free online videos and audio tracks available at **RCSSpirituality.org**.

INTRODUCTION

The Faithful Steward



RETREAT OVERVIEW

He is the universal patron and protector of the Catholic Church. He is the traditional patron of a happy death, of fathers and of unborn children, of immigrants and workers, of home hunters and people facing doubt and hesitation, and of dozens of countries, regions, and cities across the world. Who is he? St. Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth, husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and foster-father of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Why is St. Joseph such a popular patron, such an important figure for Catholics of all times and places? What do we really know about him? What does he have to teach us about what it means to follow Christ and experience the fulfillment that comes from spiritual maturity, the fulfillment we all long for?

Those are some of the questions we will explore in *The Faithful Steward: A Lenten Retreat Guide on St. Joseph*.

- In the First Meditation, we will reflect on how the Church's liturgy presents St. Joseph and the lessons contained there.
- In the Second Meditation, we will look at the artistic tradition surrounding St. Joseph, reflecting on the wisdom of its beauty and symbolism.
- And in the Conference, we will delve into the spiritual discipline of silence—something present in St. Joseph's example and too often absent in our own pursuit of deeper friendship with Christ.

This may seem a strange topic for a Lenten Retreat Guide, but reflecting on St. Joseph will bring us back to the

FIRST MEDITATION

Joseph's Wisdom



INTRODUCTION

Besides being mentioned along with the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Eucharistic Prayers during Mass, St. Joseph makes two major appearances in the Church's liturgy. Every March 19th is a liturgical solemnity honoring Joseph as the Husband of Mary. And Every May 1st is a liturgical memorial honoring Joseph as a working man and a patron of human work in general.

Unlike many other saints, we know very little about Joseph, besides what the Bible mentions. But the development of these liturgical traditions over the course of twenty centuries, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, opens up a spiritually enriching path for reflection. Let's explore it a little bit by digging into the prayers and readings the liturgy uses on St. Joseph's feast days.

STEWARDSHIP

The Mass for March 19th begins by applying to Joseph a phrase Jesus used in one of his parables. It calls Joseph the "faithful and prudent steward, whom the Lord set over his household" (cf. Luke 12:42).

Jesus used the image of a steward in more than one of his parables. It's an important concept for Christian spirituality in general, and delving into it can help us understand one reason why St. Joseph has become such a central figure in the Church.

A steward, in the biblical sense, is someone who has been given the responsibility to take care of the property and affairs of someone else. Stewards have real responsibility,

meaning they have the freedom to make real decisions, but those decisions have to be in harmony not just with what they would like for themselves, but with the wishes and hopes of the owner. A relationship of mutual trust exists between the owner and the steward. They share a mission. A faithful and prudent steward is someone who understands and perseveres in that mission.

ENTRUSTED WITH A MISSION

In his parables, Jesus uses that relationship to describe the connection between God and us. God is the owner, the lord, the creator of all things—the earth, the universe itself, human nature, and every human life. And that creation, which he has put under our care, has a purpose, a good and glorious purpose. He has shown us what that purpose is through his revelation—the commandments, the teachings of the Church, the life and example of Jesus—and he has given us his Holy Spirit to help us live out that purpose. But we remain free to accept and fulfill his plan as faithful stewards, as St. Joseph did, or else to take the gifts we have received and use them instead for selfish ends.

FOLLOWING A NOBLE EXAMPLE

What did St. Joseph do that made him a “faithful and prudent” steward? To put it in the simplest terms possible, he obeyed the Lord. God chose him to be the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the foster father of Jesus, the very Son of God. This was his mission in life. To accept that mission and carry it out required sacrifice and courage: He would be a true husband to Mary and

a true father to Jesus, but he would be so spiritually and emotionally, not physically and biologically.

It wasn't easy for Joseph to understand or accept this special calling. When Mary's pregnancy became evident, while they were betrothed but before they had come to live together, Joseph didn't know how to react. He knew he wasn't the father, but he also knew Mary, and he knew she would not have committed adultery. For some reason, God permitted him to wrestle with the situation on his own before sending an angel in a dream to explain that Mary had been visited by the Holy Spirit, and that the child to be born of her was the Messiah.

The only way Joseph was able to trust in that message from God was because, as the Bible describes, he was a “righteous man,” a just man. He had spent his lifetime seeking and heeding the voice of God. He had studied the Scriptures and learned to live on God's wavelength. And so at the critical moment, in the face of such an extraordinary situation, he was able to recognize the divine voice and trust it. The Lord entrusted to him, as to a steward, the Savior of the World and the Mother of God, and he accepted and fulfilled the mission of protecting, providing, and caring for them, laying aside his own plans, hopes, and comfort in favor of God's will. This is why St. Joseph is a model for all of us, a truly “faithful and prudent steward, whom the Lord set over his household.”

Here is how St. John Paul II explained it in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Person and Mission of St. Joseph in the Life of Christ and of the Church:

“Besides trusting in Joseph’s sure protection, the Church also trusts in his noble example, which transcends all individual states of life and serves as a model for the entire Christian community, whatever the condition and duties of each of its members... [T]he basic attitude of the entire Church must be that of hearing the word of God with reverence, an absolute readiness to serve faithfully. God’s salvific will revealed in Jesus. Already at the beginning of human redemption, after Mary, we find the model of obedience made incarnate in St. Joseph, the man known for having faithfully carried out God’s commands.

—*Redemptoris Custos*, 30

A WORKINGMAN’S WISDOM

Some of the events surrounding Joseph’s mission—like angels coming as God’s messengers in his dreams, like the Holy Family’s midnight flight into Egypt to escape the murderous intentions of King Herod, and like the visit of the Wise Men from the East with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh—were dramatic and exciting. But most of Joseph’s life and mission were not so sensational. Even though his wife was the Blessed Virgin Mary and his son was the Word of God made flesh, he spent the majority of his time working as a humble carpenter—more of a handy-man and jack-of-all-trades, actually, according to many historians—in a small, backwater town on the outer edge of the Roman Empire. In spite of being descended from nobility (he was of the royal family of King David) and having such a unique mission in salvation history, St. Joseph served God first

and foremost by working hard to provide for his family. And that’s the essence of the second liturgical memorial of St. Joseph. On May 1st, by honoring St. Joseph the Worker, the Church wants to remind all of us that honest hard work is not only an essential ingredient in every worthy human life, but also a privileged way to glorify God and build up the Kingdom of Christ.

CALLED TO WORK

From the beginning of the human race, God put the earth under our care. He told Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). Filling the earth and subduing it means, among other things, working hard, building things, discovering the laws of nature and cultivating nature’s potential. Human creativity is directly linked to our human capacity for work, and both of them are part of our calling. After original sin, both work and family life became more difficult, but their basic dignity and meaning remain, and if we live them with faith, love, and gusto, we can rediscover and rejoice in them, just as the Holy Family of Nazareth did.

This fundamental dignity of human work, however humble it may seem to us in our daily lives, comes across beautifully in the opening prayer for the Mass of St. Joseph the Worker:

“God, Creator of all things,
who laid down for the human race the law of
work,
graciously grant
that by the example of Saint Joseph and under his

patronage
we may complete the works you set us to do
and attain the rewards you promise.

CONCLUSION: AN ORDINARY GUY

Having St. Joseph as the universal Patron of the entire Church should give peace, comfort, and hope to all of us. Although he had such an extraordinary role to play in the history of salvation, he was one of the most ordinary of saints. He performed no miracles and made no spectacular splashes. All he did was hear and obey the voice of God and work hard to fulfill his normal duties. That's a path to holiness and happiness that all of us can relate to.

In the next meditation, we will look at some of the temptations that Joseph had to contend with, but for now, let's take some time to reflect prayerfully on what it meant for Joseph, and what it means for us, to be "faithful and prudent stewards" of the Lord our God and the mission he has given us. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When I have heard God's voice in my life most clearly? How did I respond and what happened as a result of it?
2. In what way has God called me to be his "steward"? What would it look like if I were more "faithful and prudent" in carrying out that mission?

3. What do I think of the necessary work I have to do (job, housework, taking care of family members, etc.)? What does God think of it? How can I live it more as St. Joseph lived his work?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO AID YOUR MEDITATION

“And the Lord replied, “Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute [the] food allowance at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so. Truly, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, to eat and drink and get drunk, then that servant’s master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful. That servant who knew his master’s will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely; and the servant who was ignorant of his master’s will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating shall be beaten only lightly. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.

—Luke 12:42–48
NABRE

SECOND MEDITATION

Joseph's Struggles



INTRODUCTION

St. Joseph appears frequently in Christian art, because some of the most popular subjects for painters and sculptors through the centuries have to do with the early life of Christ, when Joseph was present and involved as he protected and provided for Mary and the baby Jesus.

The Bible provides a lot of information about those events, but even so, some early Christians embellished the biblical accounts with legends of their own. Although nowadays most scholars discount these legends, often referred to as “apocryphal” stories about Jesus, Mary, and the early saints, they fed the popular imagination of Christians for many centuries. Some of the artistic symbols linked to St. Joseph are taken from these apocryphal legends.

TRUE SYMBOLS & IMAGINARY LEGENDS

For example, St. Joseph is often depicted as an old man, much older than his young wife Mary. We have no historical evidence to confirm how old Joseph was when he married the Blessed Virgin, but depicting him as aged helps make his extraordinary vocation to be a celibate husband more digestible. Another apocryphal image shows St. Joseph carrying a wooden staff that has broken out into blooming flowers. According to the legend behind that image, Mary had multiple suitors vying for her hand. To determine who would get the honor of becoming her husband, all the suitors left their staves in the Temple overnight. When they returned in the morning, St. Joseph’s staff had burst into bloom. That was taken as a sign that God had chosen him to be Mary’s husband.

We can find authentic truths behind these legendary tales. Whether or not Joseph was old in terms of years, he was old in terms of wisdom, and his wisdom guided him to be faithful to his unique calling as the spouse of the Virgin Mary. And whether or not his walking staff actually bloomed, we know for certain that he was indeed called by God to be the guardian of the Holy Family: his vocation truly was supernatural.

Besides images taken from apocryphal legends, St. Joseph is often depicted in Christian art with symbols that remind us more directly of his role as faithful and prudent steward, and as a humble working man who accepted God's plan for his life and persevered in it to the end. He is sometimes shown holding a white lily, for instance, which always symbolizes purity of heart—in his relationship as husband and father, he always sought to give as God wanted him to give; he never grasped for self-centered pleasures and honors. He is also shown holding the tools of the carpenter, a square or a plane, for example. These tools remind us that true nobility, nobility of spirit, is perfectly compatible with a normal working class lifestyle. Sometimes images of St. Joseph show him holding a walking staff, which reminds us of journey to Egypt and back again, in obedience to the angelic messages that God sent him—an obedience that endured and stood the test of time.

A CUSTOMIZED CROSS

Those are all common symbols associated with St. Joseph in art. And understanding their significance helps us appreciate those images, nourishes our own prayer life, and strengthens our desires to be faithful and prudent

stewards of the Lord. But another image, a much rarer one that seems to have emerged in the Middle Ages, can help us go even deeper.

We have a tendency to think that following God's will for our lives, as St. Joseph did, will bring us heaven on earth. We like to think that if we are obeying the commandments and being faithful to the duties of our state in life then everything will work out just fine. And on one level that is true: sin breeds misery, and when we avoid sin we avoid a lot of misery. But even if we are living faithful Christian lives, we are still doing so in a fallen world, a world where the spiritual battle between good and evil is raging, and will continue raging until Jesus comes again.

Faithfully following Christ and obeying God's will doesn't exempt us from that battle. It gives true purpose and meaning to our lives, and brings spiritual joy and wisdom that can only come from God, but it doesn't eliminate suffering, difficulties, and crosses. Jesus taught us that by his own passion and death, as well as by his words:

“Then [Jesus] said to all, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me ... For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.”

—Luke 9:23–24; John 12:24

In other words, accepting the mission that God gives each one of us, and persevering in it to the end, is hard. It's full of surprises and challenges that can easily discourage us, if we let them. And that's exactly what this uncommon medieval depiction of St. Joseph captures (artist's interpretation on the following spread).

THE DEVIL'S WHISPERS

It shows the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Mary is gazing lovingly at the baby Jesus, whom she has just laid in the manger in the cold and probably smelly stable cave where they had taken refuge. Joseph is shown sitting on a rock or a log a respectful distance from the wonderful event. And he is pensive. He is thinking about something. Close by him, lurking just out of his sight, is a little demon, a little devil with horns and bat-like wings. And the demon seems to be whispering something to Joseph. According to the artistic tradition, the devil is pouring accusatory thoughts into the mind of St. Joseph, tempting him to discouragement.

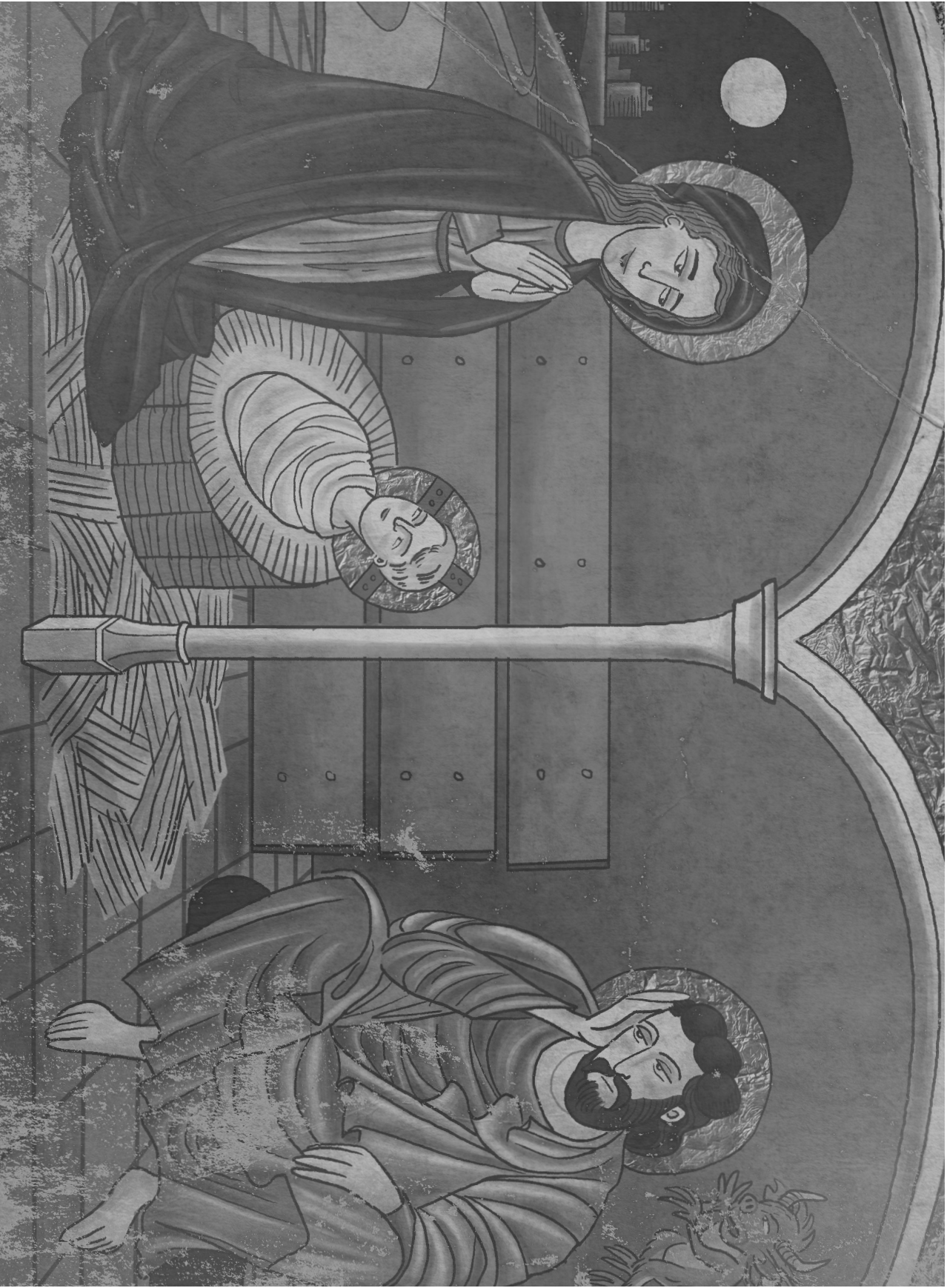
And that is very understandable. After all, Joseph was supposed to be the provider and protector of the Holy Family. Yet he couldn't even find a decent room where his young wife could give birth to the Savior. Caesar's census forced them to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and the inns there were so crowded that the best he could do was find a rustic shepherd's hideaway in the hills outside of town. From a purely human perspective, would anyone blame him for feeling like a failure? Certainly not. And that is exactly what the tempter accuses him of—failing in his mission to protect and provide for his young family.

A PERSISTENT TEMPTATION

That temptation must have accompanied Joseph throughout his life. When he and Mary went to the Temple to present their baby, according to the Jewish custom, they couldn't even afford to make the normal sacrificial offering of a lamb; they had to settle for offering two doves, the sacrifice of poor people. And then, to avoid Herod's persecution, Joseph and the Holy Family had to become refugees in Egypt. And when they returned to Nazareth, they were living on a subsistence level income. And the last scene in the Bible where Joseph appears is when he and Mary lost the 12-year-old Jesus on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, only to find him again after a desperate, three-day search.

These events were all hardships for St. Joseph, situations where he would have been tempted to doubt his own worth and give in to discouragement. He surely must have wrestled with God in prayer as he suffered them. Why would God permit such problems and difficulties? Why didn't God make his path easier and smoother? Was it his fault? Was he failing the Lord?

It is no coincidence that the most famous Joseph of the Old Testament was also a just man who suffered horrible hardships. He was sold into slavery by his own brothers, and then framed for adultery by his master's wife and thrown into prison. And yet, those very hardships led him, through God's providence, to a position in which he was able to save his family—and many other families—from a horrible famine. He didn't know that while he was wasting away in prison, but God did. Just so, even through St. Joseph's hardships, God was unfolding his plan of salvation.



Artist's Interpretation by Jason Bach

CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF PROVIDENCE

The little devil whispering in Joseph's ear, accusing him of being a failure—that's something we can all relate to. We all face similar hardships and sufferings, situations that we just don't understand. We too must wrestle in prayer to resist the temptation to discouragement, to trust that God knows what he is doing. In Joseph's case, all of his hardships became part of God's own revelation to the world of his love and redemption. They have nourished the faith of millions throughout the centuries. And that can be a source of encouragement for us. If God's providence was at work in the midst of Joseph's struggles, why can't it also be at work in the midst of ours? As we battle to fulfill our mission in life, contemplating St. Joseph can bring us comfort, and help us banish the whispers of discouragement coming from the enemy of our souls.


In the Conference, we will look at how the spiritual discipline of silence—a discipline exemplified by St. Joseph—can enhance our interior lives. But for now, let's take some time to prayerfully reflect on the reality of God's providence, and how our faith in that providence can be a shield against temptations to discouragement. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Reflect on what Joseph might have been thinking in the midst of his hardships. What would his conversations about them have been like with the Blessed Virgin Mary? What lessons can I learn from this?

2. What situations tend to whisper discouraging thoughts to me? How do I usually respond to those thoughts? How do I want to respond from now on?
3. When have I experienced God's providence most intensely? How much faith do I have in the reality of God's providence?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO AID YOUR MEDITATION

 Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span? ... So do not worry and say, "What are we to eat?" or "What are we to drink?" or "What are we to wear?" All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.

—Matthew 6:25–34

CONFERENCE

The Discipline of Silence



INTRODUCTION

St. Joseph is a central figure in the life of Christ and the life of the Church. That much is clear from what we have reflected on in the two meditations of this Retreat Guide. But here is an interesting fact. Even though he plays such an important role in the story of salvation, in all the Bible passages in which appears he never says a single word. He doesn't utter a single syllable. He is silent. He makes no noise. He only listens and obeys. In this sense, he is unique among the New Testament figures. Everyone else, from Anna the prophetess to the parents of St. John the Baptist, says something.

Throughout Christian history, saints and spiritual writers have reflected on this interesting characteristic. Those reflections have greatly contributed to identifying one of the spiritual disciplines considered absolutely necessary for ongoing spiritual growth: the discipline of silence.

In this Conference, we will reflect on the nature of silence as a spiritual discipline, its benefits, and the challenges we all face in living it out.

THE NATURE OF SILENCE AS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

We tend to think of silence as a negative thing. Maybe this comes from our childhood experiences, where teachers and parents sometimes imposed silence on us as a punishment. But in the tradition of Catholic spirituality, the discipline of silence is something else entirely. It is a necessary medium for communication, and communication is essential for love—the essence of the spiritual life.

Noise impedes communication. At a loud concert or in a noisy crowd, it's extremely difficult to communicate with the friend at your side. There is no space for meaningful words to be spoken or heard; they are drowned out by the noise. In order to have a meaningful conversation, we have to go somewhere without noise, somewhere with an atmosphere of silence that enables us to speak and to listen calmly and clearly.

The same dynamic happens in our relationship with God. Scripture often describes the voice of God as being like the sound of many waters (e.g. Ezekiel 43:2). The comparison calls to mind the ever-murmuring and moving waves of the ocean. In a sense, the ocean waters never stop speaking. God's voice is like that. His love for us is such that he never stops speaking to us; he never stops revealing his love to us; he never stops reaching out to us with words of wisdom, comfort, guidance, and encouragement. But very often, we do not hear these words resound in our hearts, because our lives are simply too noisy. The noise drowns out the voice of our Beloved, and his words to us—life-giving words, soul-renewing words—have no space in which they can resonate.

SILENCE CREATES ROOM FOR GROWTH

We all remember the Parable of the Sower, which Jesus used to teach us about how the Word of God—symbolized in the parable by the seeds—can grow and bear fruit in our lives. In the Parable, some of the seeds fall on the hard-packed ground of the frequently traveled path. The ground is so hard, in fact, that the seed cannot penetrate at all. So the birds—representing the evil

spirit—come and eat it up before it can even begin to germinate, grow, and bear fruit.

This is an image of a noisy soul, of a heart that has been worn down by the incessant cacophony of the world, a mind so frenetic that it has forgotten how to take time to slow down and simply listen.

The discipline of silence creates in our lives the necessary space for God's words to resound; it keeps the soil of our hearts receptive.

To use another comparison, we can think of a violin. The hollow space within the body of the instrument is what turns the vibration of the strings into music. If you were to fill the violin with sand, you could play the grandest concerto on those same strings, but no music would be produced.

The grace of God is always reaching out to us and wanting to produce the music of authentic happiness and holiness. But for that to happen, we have to remove the sand—the unnecessary noise—from our lives. This is the discipline of silence. Through this spiritual discipline, our friendship with Christ can deepen and grow, because it creates room for an ongoing conversation between our hearts and his heart, the kind of conversation that friends love to have.

LEARNING FROM THE MONKS

Whenever you visit a monastery or a convent, you feel immediately a sense of tranquility, order, and simplicity. This feeling releases tension in our minds and hearts, and

through it we find ourselves spontaneously drawn into a calm but joyful attitude of reverence towards God, and all of our good desires seem to grow stronger.

This atmosphere is a fruit of the discipline of silence cultivated with great care and sacrifice by the monastic community. Silence has always been valued in a special way by those called to this form of Christian discipleship, and it is one of the reasons why monasteries and convents are, and always have been, oases of peace and hope amid the chaos and despair of this fallen world.

LIVING THE DISCIPLINE OF SILENCE

That's what the discipline of silence is, and those are some of the benefits. But not all of us are called to be monks. So how are we supposed to live out this spiritual discipline in our busy, noisy, post-modern lives? How can we get the sand out of our violin if we are living in a perpetual sandstorm? The key is to understand the difference between external silence and internal silence.

Unless we are called to the monastic life, we cannot live perfect external silence. We cannot completely eliminate the noisiness that comes from living in a busy, hustle-and-bustle-filled world. But we don't have to. All we have to do is recognize that the fallen world, egged on by the devil, naturally tends to surround us with noise. Once we recognize that, we can begin to limit that noise, even if we can't eliminate it altogether. Each one of us lives a unique life, and we each face a unique set of external noise producers. But some categories of noise are fairly common to us all, so we can reflect on them together.

TAMING MEDIA NOISE

One common source of noise is the mass media. The mass media revolution has made it possible for us spend all of our waking hours literally surrounded by an incessant flow of news, entertainment, and superficial-social-network chatting. By their very nature, the mass media want us to always be plugged in. We don't need to go into details: we are all familiar with the phenomenon.

Part of the discipline of silence, then, must include reversing the roles here. Instead of letting the mass media set the agenda for what's on our mind all day, we must discipline ourselves. We must consciously choose what sources of information, which forms of entertainment, and how much social networking are actually helpful for our lives. We must consciously limit our exposure and intake so that the noise level decreases and these wonderful tools are put at the service of our Christian adventure, instead of dominating our lives.

A good way to start this process of disciplining our mass media use is simply to take one day a week and go completely offline—no media consumption or use at all. See what happens. Learn from it, and use those lessons to help make wise adjustments during the rest of the week.

THE CONSUMERIST CACOPHONY

Another paralyzing source of external noise in our consumer society is advertising. We are constantly being told that we need this new product, and that new product, and another new product. Producers and sellers

of products must create noise in order to compete in a free market. Each one strives to stand out from their competitors, utilizing either audible or visual noise.

But we don't have to allow ourselves to become victims of the ensuing cacophony. We can discipline our consumption of material things by buying not because of whims and fashions, but because of needs. We should identify our own legitimate needs and then search intelligently to fulfill them with adequate products. This protects us from becoming slaves of artificial needs invented and imposed upon us through the unceasing clamor of a consumer society.

CULTIVATING THE GARDEN OF TIME

Finally, we can combat unnecessary external noise by putting order in our own schedules. Not all of us can have the pristine order of a monastic schedule, but we have the capacity to build into our daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly schedules times dedicated to listening to God through prayer, through serene contact with nature, and through unhurried and uncomplicated investment in meaningful relationships. Committing ourselves to this kind of discipline is essential in order to escape from the relentless din of a culture increasingly built around sensational headlines and an endless succession of emergencies.

CONCLUSION: INTERNAL SILENCE

But external silence isn't the only arena. If we forget about internal silence, we will always find ourselves a bit

frustrated as we develop this discipline, because we can never really create a perfect external environment—some circumstances always remain outside our control.

Internal silence has to do with disciplining our thoughts and ideas, the things we spend time mulling over and reflecting about. Until we begin to cultivate a regular prayer life, we may not even realize that we have a constant internal monologue going on. But we do. We are always thinking about something. Ideas come into our minds and take root there, and they occupy our attention.

Internal silence consists of disciplining this ongoing flow of thought. Disciplining it doesn't mean controlling it absolutely; that would be impossible, and trying to do so could create damaging mental strain. But we can gradually learn to direct the flow of thought in our own minds.

Whatever thoughts come to mind, we can hold them up to the light of our faith, and align them accordingly. When a lustful, greedy, or arrogant thought pops up in our minds, for example, we can dismiss it and turn our attention to more worthy thoughts. When worries multiply and grow, preoccupying our minds and disturbing our hearts, we can bathe them in prayer, exercising our faith and trust in God. And in more general terms, we have the capacity to turn the attention of our minds to the truths that God has revealed, the blessings he has sent us, and the tasks he gives us, following the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who "... kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). The greatest help for growing in the internal discipline of silence is continuing to develop a life of prayer—prayer gradually transforms our natural internal monologue into a supernatural internal dialogue with God.

FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

Redemptoris Custos
by St. John Paul II

The Life and Glories of St. Joseph
by Edward Healy Thompson

Meditations Before Mass
by Romano Guardini

The Practice of the Presence of God
by Brother Lawrence

*Noise: How Our Media-saturated Culture Dominates Lives
and Dismantles Families*
by Teresa Tomeo

EXPLORING MORE

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