

POPE FRANCIS

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall  
Wednesday, 1st December 2021*

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**Catechesis on Saint Joseph - 3. *Saint Joseph: just man and husband of Mary***

*Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!*

Let us continue our journey of reflection on the person of Saint Joseph. Today, I would like to deepen his being “just” and “Mary’s betrothed spouse”, and thus provide a message to all engaged couples, and newlyweds as well. Many events connected with Joseph fill the stories of the apocryphal, that is, non-canonical gospels, that have even influenced art and various places of worship. These writings that are not in the Bible are stories that Christian piety provided at that time and are a response to the desire to fill in the empty spaces in the canonical Gospel texts, the ones that are in the Bible, which provide you with everything that is essential for faith and the Christian life.

The evangelist Matthew – this is important. What does the Gospel say about Joseph? Not what these apocryphal gospels say which are not something ugly or bad, no! They are beautiful, but they are not the Word of God. Instead, the Gospels that are in the Bible are the Word of God. Among these is the evangelist Matthew who defines Joseph as a “*just*” man. Let us listen to his account: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly” (1:18-19). Because those who were engaged, when the fiancée was unfaithful, or became pregnant, they could accuse her! They had to. And the women were stoned back then. But Joseph was just. He says: “No, I am not going to do this. I will go away quietly”.

To understand Joseph’s behaviour toward Mary, it is helpful to remember the marriage customs of ancient Israel. Marriage included two well-defined phases. The first was like an official engagement that already implied a new situation. In particular, while continuing to live in her paternal home for another year, the woman was in fact considered the “wife” of her betrothed spouse. They still did not live together, but it was like she was already someone’s wife. The second phase was the transfer of the bride from her paternal home to that of her spouse. This took place with a festive procession which concluded the marriage. And the friends of the bride accompanied her there. On the basis of these customs, the fact that “before they came to live together, Mary was found to be with child” exposed the Virgin to the accusation of adultery. And, according to the ancient Law, her guilt was punishable with stoning (cf. *Dt* 22:20-21). Nevertheless, a more moderate interpretation had taken hold after this in later Jewish practice that imposed only an act of repudiation along with civil and criminal consequences for the woman, but not stoning.

The Gospel says that Joseph was “just” precisely because he was subject to the law as any pious Israelite. But within him, his love for Mary and his trust in her suggested a way he could remain in observance of the law and save the honour of his bride. He decided to repudiate her in secret, without making noise, without subjecting her to public humiliation.

He chose the path of confidentiality, without a trial or retaliation. How holy Joseph was! We, as soon as we have a bit of gossip, something scandalous about someone else, we go around talking about it right away! Silent, Joseph. Silent.

But the evangelist Matthew adds immediately: "But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'" (1:20.21). God's voice intervenes in Joseph's discernment. In a dream, He reveals a greater meaning than his own justice. How important it is for each one of us to cultivate a just life and, at the same time, to always feel the need for God's help to broaden our horizons and to consider the circumstances of life from an always different, larger perspective. Many times, we feel imprisoned by what has happened to us: "But look what happened to me!" – and we remain imprisoned in that bad thing that happened to us. But particularly in front of some circumstances in life that initially appear dramatic, a Providence is hidden that takes shape over time and illuminates the meaning even of the pain that has touched us. The temptation is to close in on that pain, in that thought that good things never happen to us. And this is not good for us. This leads you to sadness and bitterness. A bitter heart is so ugly.

I would like us to pause to reflect on a detail of this story recounted in the Gospel that is often overlooked. Mary and Joseph were engaged to each other. They had probably cultivated dreams and expectations regarding their life and their future. Out of the blue, God seems to have inserted himself into their lives and, even if at first it was difficult for them, both of them opened their hearts wide to the reality that was placed before them.

Dear brothers and dear sisters, our lives are very often not what we imagine them to be. Especially in loving and affectionate relationships, it is difficult to move from the logic of falling in love to the logic of a mature love. We need to move from infatuation to mature love. You newlyweds, think about this. The first phase is always marked by a certain enchantment that makes us live immersed in the imaginary that is often not based on reality and facts – the falling in love phase. But precisely when falling in love with its expectations seems to come to an end, that is where true love begins or true love enters in there. In fact, to love is not the pretension that the other person, or life, should correspond to our imagination. Rather, it means to choose in full freedom to take responsibility for one's life as it comes. This is why Joseph gives us an important lesson. He chooses Mary with "his eyes open". We can say "with all the risks". Think about this: in the Gospel of John, a reproof the doctors of the law make to Jesus is: "we are not children from that", referring to prostitution. They knew how Mary had remained pregnant and they wanted to throw dirt on Jesus' mamma. For me, this is the worst, the most demonic passage, in the Gospel. And Joseph's risk gives us this lesson: to take life as it comes. Has God intervened there? I accept it. And Joseph does what the angel of the Lord had ordered: "He took his wife, but knew her not" – without living together she is expecting a son – "until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus" (*Mt* 1:24-25). Christian engaged couples are called to witness to a love like this that has the courage to move from the logic of falling in love to that of mature love. This is a demanding choice that instead of imprisoning life, can fortify love so that it endures when faced with the trials of time. A couple's love progresses in life and matures each day. The love during engagement is a bit – allow me to use the word – a bit romantic. You have all experienced this, but then mature love begins, love lived every day, from work, from the children that come... And sometimes that romanticism disappears a bit, right? But is that not love? Yes, but mature love. "But you know, Father, sometimes we fight..." This has been happening since the time of Adam and Eve until today, eh! That spouses fight is our daily bread, eh! "But we shouldn't fight?" Yes, yes, you must. It

happens. I am not saying you should, but it happens. "And, Father, sometimes we raise our voices..." It happens. "And there are even times when plates fly". It happens. But what can be done so that this does not damage the life of the marriage? Listen to me well: never finish the day end without making peace. "We fought. My God, I said bad words. I said awful things. But now, to finish the day, I must make peace". You know why? Because the cold war the next day is very dangerous. Don't let war begin the next day. For this reason, make peace before going to bed. "But, Father, you know, I don't know how to express myself to make peace after such an awful situation that we experienced". It's very easy. Do this (the Pope caresses his cheek) and peace is already made. Remember this always. Remember always: never finish the day without making peace. And this will help you in your married life. To them and to all the married couples who are here. This movement from falling in love to mature love is a demanding choice, but we must choose that path.

This time too, let us conclude with a prayer to Saint Joseph.

Saint Joseph,  
you who loved Mary with freedom,  
and chose to renounce your fantasies to give way to reality,  
help each of us to allow ourselves to be surprised by God  
and to accept life not as something unforeseen from which to defend ourselves,  
but as a mystery that hides the secret of true joy.  
Obtain joy and radicality for all engaged Christians,  
while always being aware  
that only mercy and forgiveness make love possible. Amen.  
Thank you.