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## JOSEPH: A UNIQUELY DIFFERENT IMAGE OF MANHOOD

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### Abstract

Joseph is a uniquely different man in a patriarchal society. He is a man of strong will who always silently listened to the divine voice. What made him special is his unconditional faith, humility, courage, and obedience. Such a life made him the shade of the heavenly Father, the textbook of Jesus, protector of heavenly gifts, and a male feminist.

**Keywords:** Heavenly Gifts; Josephology; Male Feminist; Jesus' Textbook; Shade of the Father

### Introduction

The Catholic world looks forward to a strong and deep Josephology. Popes, bishops, theologians, scholars, etc., try to highlight the significance of St Joseph in the Church. One of the earliest such examples is Pope Pius IX's proclamation of St Joseph as the patron of the Catholic Church on 8 December 1870. The latest example in this series is the declaration of 2020-2021 as 'St Joseph Year' by Pope Francis in his apostolic letter *Patris Corde*. The theological studies on Joseph are a growing discipline in the contemporary ecclesiastical arena. In fact, Marian theology has become an adequately mature discipline and this gives way to a

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Josephology. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century added a whole new chapter of Josephology to the Catholic theological spectrum.<sup>1</sup> Starting of journals, wide range of articles, and the inception of study centres substantiate this view.

The sole aim of this chapter is to discuss Joseph as a uniquely different man in a patriarchal society. Major focus is on his faith, humility, courage, and obedience. Along with this, Joseph is seen as a father, *guru*, protector, and male feminist. Pope Francis says that Joseph is the shadow of the heavenly Father here on earth. Mary and Jesus are under this shade. This is a call of every father in every family – to be a shade for others. We will see how Joseph played this role in a uniquely different way.

### **Patriarchy**

The concept of patriarchy is not strictly a biblical invent or construct. It gets academic attention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In general terms, patriarchy is male dominance. The term does not appear in the Bible. However, biblical studies through the lens of ‘patriarchy,’ helps one find the play of male dominance. The biblical scholars have taken it over.<sup>2</sup> Our discourse is neither to investigate the characteristics of patriarchal society nor to check the traits of male dominance in the Bible. Rather, we focus on the life of Joseph, the foster father of Jesus to see how he had been a different man in a patriarchal society. In light of the view that Joseph was called to be the husband of Mary and the father of Jesus, our thesis is that he was a man, husband, and father with difference.

We have very little details about Joseph in the Bible, wherein he is only a silent actor. His silence even made him to be called a silent or hidden saint.<sup>3</sup> Other than the Bible, few other documents nominally mention about him. For instance, the second century Protoevangelium of James introduces Joseph’s life before he knew Mary. The third century text, namely the Infancy Gospel of Thomas portrays Joseph as an ideal parent. Other text that survives is a fifth century work in Greek called *Joseph the Carpenter*, a compilation of the stories about Joseph. Besides, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew

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<sup>1</sup>P. de Letter, “The Theology of St. Joseph,” *The Clergy Monthly* (March 1955) 1.

<sup>2</sup>C.L. Meyers, “Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, 1, 8-27.

<sup>3</sup>Wyatt North, *The Life and Prayers of St Joseph*, Washington: Wyatt North Publishing, 2010, 10.

and the Gospel of the Nativity of Mary also mention the life of Joseph.

### **Man of Unconditional Faith**

One of the most important factors that makes Joseph a distinct male in a patriarchal society is his faith. Joseph's faith is compared to that of Abraham. His deep faith is well exhibited in and through his patience, purity, and wisdom like that of Jacob, Joseph of Egypt, and Solomon respectively.<sup>4</sup> In an utterly confused time he could clearly comprehend what was revealed to him. He had a thousand reasons to abandon his faith; neither it happens, nor he remains to be static in his faith, but he develops a strong faith.

In the nativity icon of Christ, it is well explicated how hard Joseph had to toil to come to the path of true faith amidst temptations and confusion. In the icon there are many characters - Child Jesus, Mary, Joseph, angels, three Magi, Old man, etc. In the icon, Joseph is depicted sitting at a distance from Mary and the child. He is tensed and could not grasp the birth of Jesus and the virginity of Mary. The old man in the icon is devil. He shows a dried stick and says to Joseph that it is impossible for the stick to flower, and so is the birth of Jesus from a virgin. Joseph overcomes all these dilemmas and protects Mary and the child.

The medium of God's communication with Joseph is dream. He believed in what is conveyed to him; neither had he questions, nor did he fear gossip.<sup>5</sup> In his first dream (Mt 1:20-21), the angel told Joseph not to be confused and afraid of what happened with Mary for it was the work of the Holy Spirit. This is indeed an annunciation to Joseph. In the second dream (Mt 2:13), the angel informs him that his family is in danger and should leave Bethlehem. Joseph is asked in the third dream (Mt 2:19-20) to come back from Egypt to Israel. In the fourth dream (Mt 2:22) angel gives instructions further to safeguard his family. Dreams are far from realities. Yet, Joseph, blindly takes into account what is told to him in his dreams and follows the instructions. For, when he was asked not to be afraid, he believed the words of the angel—he was never afraid of anything

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<sup>4</sup>Maurice Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, trans., Sophia Institute Press: Manchester, 2017, 12.

<sup>5</sup>Frederick L. Miller, *Saint Joseph: Our Father in Faith*, New Haven: Knights of Columbus Supreme Council, 2008, 13.

ever after this; left Bethlehem when asked; came back to Israel; and following the traffic signal given by the angel, took a diversion. It was, therefore, his strong faith that enabled him to take the messages he received in dreams at face value.

His faith was not less than that of Mary. They both made an identical act of faith. Mary believed that she was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was also invited to believe this, and he did it. When the Jewish religious and spiritual leaders failed to discern and accept Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, probably Joseph became the first Jewish man to see Jesus first, and to accept him to be the promised Messiah. Pope John Paul II writes: “[...] Joseph is the first to share in the faith of the Mother of God and that in doing so he supports his spouse in the faith of the divine annunciation. He is also the first to be placed by God on the path of Mary’s ‘pilgrimage of faith.’”<sup>6</sup>

### **Humility Personified**

Joseph is humility incarnate and this makes him a special man. As far as his humility is concerned, Joseph can even be compared with Moses and John the Baptist. As Moses views the Promised Land from Mount Nebo (Deut 34:1-4) and dies there unable to enter what he glimpses, Joseph greets at a distance the glorious earthly career of his divine Son. We find a similar example in the life of John the Baptist as well. After having prepared the way for Jesus he slowly withdraws from the scene even turning his face against the question if he is the long-awaited Messiah (Jn 1:25). This is the same with what Joseph does, for he makes “room for our Lord after having fulfilled the office of foster father, teacher, and protector of Christ’s youth.”<sup>7</sup> In a patriarchal society, Joseph does not seem to be striving to establish his presence. Rather, he was keen to pay attention to God’s dreams for him than to his. It is interesting to see him sitting aside, and gently watching Mary with the child in her hands, and the people who worship Jesus. This is indeed gentle protectiveness.

Comparisons to substantiate Joseph’s humble character do not end. Regarding virtues, Joseph resembles, says Francis de Sales in his sermon, the date palms. Though this tree is the king of trees, it is humble among others. When all the trees exhibit their flowers in one or other season of the year, date palms keep their flowers in a pouch.

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<sup>6</sup>*Redemptoris Custos*, 5.

<sup>7</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 48.

It shows its flowers in the heat of the summer. This indicates two types of people—people who strive towards perfection and people who do not; people who long for justice and people who want to live a worldly life. Joseph hides his virtues and when he has hard time to go, these virtues are revealed in him.<sup>8</sup>

In St. Bernard's view, Joseph decides to abandon Mary for the same reason Peter decided to go away from the Lord. Peter asks Jesus to go away from him for he is a sinner (Lk 5:8).<sup>9</sup> It is similar to the words of the centurion in Matthew 8:8. He says that he is not worthy to receive Jesus in his house. Joseph also had the same feeling. He thought that being an imperfect and sinful human being, he was unworthy to live with Mary who was holy and bearing the Son of God. So he wants to send Mary away in private. He would have been right in the eyes of the law even if he did it in public, but he does not do it because it would lead people to doubt the holiness and virginity of Mary. Moreover, even if Joseph declares what had happened, the Jews would not have believed and would have stoned Mary to death.

As a human person and husband of Mary, he was initially hesitant to receive Mary. It must also be due to the perplexity that haunted his mind over how motherhood and virginity go together. It is in this perplexity that God interferes in his life. God's messenger explains everything that happened. And now, "by means of this divine revelation, the saint himself became the unimpeachable witness of Mary's virginity. This was precisely God's purpose in the painful episode, to produce in Joseph a truly sublime witness to Mary's integrity."<sup>10</sup> In fact, the meaning and logic of the convergence of virginity and birth of Jesus in Mary was made clear to him when he became the father of Jesus while being a celibate.

### **Courage to be Disliked**

Joseph receives not only the mother, but also the child. Even when Joseph knows that he would be blamed and laughed at, he shows courage to receive a woman of infidelity, going against the Jewish tradition. His would have been a completely normal action if he had sent Mary away. He would have been nothing less than a perfect Jew and never a point of discussion since it is quite a normal and legal

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<sup>8</sup>Sermon of St Francis de Sales, Cf. Antony, *St Joseph*, 150.

<sup>9</sup>Daiel Keating, "St Bernard of Clairvaux on St Joseph and the Holy Family," *Prayer* (20 August 2021). Cf. <https://www.unleashthegospel.org/2021/08/st-bernard-of-clairvaux-on-st-joseph-and-the-holy-family/>.

<sup>10</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 64.

action. But he does the opposite preparing himself to face the challenges, and willing to take up the impending accusations on Mary. He tries to protect his family. In a patriarchal society Joseph did this not to continue the male dominance in and through him, instead it was a spontaneous response of a just man.

Joseph can rightly be called a courageous man. This is not only for protecting Mary and Jesus, but also for setting out on risky journeys when God demands. He gets out of the box, his comfort zone, that too for a legally irrelevant cause. Pope Francis says: “Don’t forget that the faithful caring for the life of the Child led to the flight into Egypt, the harsh experience of living as refugees – Joseph as a refugee, with Mary and Jesus – to escape the threat of Herod.”<sup>11</sup>

Joseph is often compared with the Joseph of the Old Testament. The first Joseph rightly interpreted the dreams and this put him in trouble. He became the watchman of his people in Egypt. The second Joseph decided to follow the dreams he saw knowing that this would put him in trouble. His own society will ignore him for his decision. Still, he resolved to be the watchman of Mary and Jesus. It was to protect the dignity of a woman, or even more, to save the lives of a woman and her child.

During suffering and humiliation, Joseph kept silence like the Old Testament Joseph. This is a quite different way from that of a male dominant society of the time where retaliating to the confrontations is the order. In the Old Testament, justice is understood to be strictly following the laws. Nevertheless, Joseph is called just even after disobeying the rules.<sup>12</sup> The reason for his disobedience is to defend a woman who got engaged with him, but found pregnant without his knowledge. This required great courage – to stand straight and face the impending isolation. Joseph, through his courageous action, asks “men to be strong and faithful husbands.”<sup>13</sup> He was indeed a strong and courageous man and in the litany of St Joseph we salute him ‘Joseph most strong.’

Pope Francis says in *Patris Corde* about creative courage. Pope observes that in difficulties one can either give up or creatively engage with it. The best example he puts forward is Joseph.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Pope Francis, General Audience, March 19, 2014.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Joseph Pamplany, “Joseph the Guardian,” in *St Joseph: Father and Teacher* [Malayalam], Aluva: S.H. League, 2021, 63.

<sup>13</sup>Miller, *Saint Joseph: Our Father in Faith*, 23.

<sup>14</sup>*Patris Corde*, 5.

According to him, God wanted to act by trusting the creative courage of Joseph. Being a Jew, who considers children as God's inheritance, he might have cherished the dream of building a family. But he had to marry a virginally conceived woman along with a child that was not of his flesh. He took up this challenge with great courage. It was with courage that he sought a place in Bethlehem for Mary to give birth to Jesus (Lk 2:6-7); it required a courageous decision from Joseph in order to flee to Egypt to save the life of the child from Herod (Mt 2:13-14); a bold step in taking a different way back to the land of Israel, preferring Nazareth to Judea to settle down since he was well aware of the cruelties of Archelaus who was the ruler in Judea (Mt 2:21-23).

### **Obedience to God**

Joseph is totally an obedient man. He obeys what he was asked to do. It is not only regarding the immediate revelations he receives in connection with the nativity of Jesus, but also regarding his vigilance in obeying the religious rules and fulfilling the requirements in the temple. The best example for this is the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple. As a man who worked hard as a carpenter to look after his family, Joseph is unable to offer a lamb as the rich were expected to do. Instead, he offered two turtle doves which the law permitted (Lk 2:22-24). It shows his readiness to obey the laws of Moses. It is indeed his strong faith that made him a man of silent obedience.

Obedience is also a self-sacrifice. Joseph does not believe in a God who acts according to the norms and regulations created by a society or religion. In such societies, God is forced to obey man – a fabricated God. Joseph tries not to create a God according to and for his own convenience and benefits, rather tries to discern God's plan for him. He is willing to sacrifice the privileges of a Jew and to obey God.

Along with his faith, his humility has also contributed to his obedience. It is true that in his obedience, he might undergo several criticisms like being incapable, silent, and a spineless man who does not have his own decisions. This does not pull him back. He knows that his obedience demands a sacrifice and only such an obedient one can give space to God in his life.

Although Joseph's is a unique vocation, he remains to be an ordinary, humble, and obedient man. At the same time, he is hailed as the man according to God's own heart. To be a man of God's choice, he has to be first obedient to the one who called him. Joseph is accountable and obedient to God alone. In his obedience, Joseph

becomes an instrument of the Holy Spirit. This further enables him to withstand the perplexities and questions regarding the virginity of his wife.<sup>15</sup> He knows what he was doing and thus consults his conscience, not the society.

Joseph's obedience to the commands of God makes him just. Indeed, he is free to deal with what happened, completely in light of law. The law allows him abandon Mary. Joseph, instead, decides to follow the will of God knowing that it would make one just in His eyes. He gives up the protection of the law in order to protect Mary. It is when Joseph shows mercy to Mary that he becomes just.

In obedience there is a total and unconditional submission. When he is instructed to name the son of Mary, he does it; and when he is asked to accept Mary as wife, he does it (Mt 1:24). In his obedience, as Pope Paul VI said, he "turned his human vocation to domestic love into a superhuman oblation of himself, his heart and all his abilities, a love placed at the service of the Messiah who was growing to maturity in his home."<sup>16</sup> This ordinary man dedicates himself fully to the incarnation of the Son of God and to his salvific plan.<sup>17</sup> Being obedient is not against being manly. Joseph is an ideal man and is a challenge to the men who are ruled solely by their own reason and logic. His unique call humbles him and makes him a perfect servant of God. Next to Mary, Joseph is venerated in the Church. Among the creatures Joseph possesses a place next to Mary. Pope Pius IX acknowledges Joseph as the most faithful servant of God.<sup>18</sup>

### **Joseph, the Father – Shade of the Heavenly Father**

There are different opinions about the age of Joseph at the time of marriage. Some say he was a young and handsome man; others say he was an old man with beard; yet some others are of the opinion that he was already a mature man.<sup>19</sup> Artists of the first centuries mostly portrayed Joseph as a young man having no beard and moustache. If Joseph was presented to be a young husband, people would not believe in his celibacy. Thus, it may be to emphasize his celibacy that later he is presented as an old man with grey beard and

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<sup>15</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 67.

<sup>16</sup>Homily (19 March 1966): *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, IV (1966), 110.

<sup>17</sup>*Patris Corde*, Introduction.

<sup>18</sup>*Quemadmodum Deus*, Dec 8, 1870.

<sup>19</sup>Isidoro degli Isolani, *Summa de donis Sancti Joseph*, Rome: Typ. Polyglotta, 1887, 83-83. Taken from Antony, *St Joseph*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2021, 29.



moustache. Nevertheless, it is also believed that he was not very old, for in the Jewish custom the age gap between the bride and the bridegroom should not be too big. Moreover, the society has to believe that Joseph was the father of Jesus in order to avoid any possible scandal and confusion about the birth of Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

Going beyond this debate, in Pope Francis's view, Joseph was a loving, compassionate, obedient, courageous, and creative father.<sup>21</sup> Joseph is blessed enough to be called the father of Jesus who is God himself (Lk 3:23; 4:22; Mk 6:3; Mt 13:35; Lk 2:51; Mt 2:13-14; 19-20). The titles he enjoys are various: the legal father, the reputed father, the foster father, the adoptive father, and the vicar of the eternal Father. He is not the biological father of Jesus. However, Joseph's fatherhood is considered greater than the biological fatherhood.<sup>22</sup>

One of the titles particularly makes him uniquely different - the vicar of the eternal Father, which in fact makes him the shadow of the heavenly Father. This is an engaging, elevated, and a truthful representation. The chief characteristic of his unique vocation is his fatherhood. The heavenly Father is the type and origin of all fatherhood in Heaven and on earth (Eph 3:15). St. Paul indicates that every human father has the call to represent the image of the heavenly Father. Joseph had to live this role in a most characteristic and glorious manner for he was called to be the father of the Saviour. As far as this unique vocation is considered, there is a transferring of the royal right of the heavenly Father to an earthly father. Although he is not the biological father of his son, he is the master of the family like the divine Master to whom the Son is loyal (Jn 14:28). For this reason, Jesus is subject to Joseph, and the latter's position entitles him with the authority to be the head of the Holy Family. The Heavenly Father then gives directions to the earthly father, His shadow, to guide and safeguard the Holy Family.<sup>23</sup> From the first moment Mary received abundant grace from God, Joseph also started receiving correspondent graces to safeguard Mary and to live his vocation.

The fatherhood of Joseph bears the credit of virginal integrity, which makes him resembled to the Father further. Interestingly, and adding to the uniqueness of the fatherhood of Joseph, we see him as

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<sup>20</sup>Antony, *St Joseph*, 28-9.

<sup>21</sup>*Patris Corde*.

<sup>22</sup>Antony, *St Joseph*, 52.

<sup>23</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 53.

the father of the Son of the Heavenly Father, i.e., both the heavenly Father and the earthly father have one Son. Again, it was love, which the Father bestowed, that made Joseph the father of Jesus to perform his duties like a biological father.<sup>24</sup>

Joseph is a father not only for Jesus but also for Mary. He is a young man who wanted to love Mary like any other husband would love his wife; he wants to be loved back. But the very moment he realizes that Mary is greater than him, he becomes a different man. Joseph does not want to dominate and subjugate Mary and become a privileged patriarchal husband; rather he was striving towards becoming a creative father. Joseph considers protecting the freedom of his wife his primary duty.

It is true that the shadow of the heavenly Father is acknowledged and accepted both by Jesus and Mary in Joseph. Like Jesus, Mary also experienced in Joseph the visible representative of the heavenly Father. The shadow and glory of the heavenly Father that Jesus and Mary find in Joseph make them obedient to him.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in the fatherhood of Joseph, Jesus and Mary recognize the will of eternal Father. In their interactions with Joseph, they had been interacting with the heavenly Father.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Guru, Jesus' Textbook***

Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God clearly envisions a new mode of justice. This is what he has been teaching all through his life. Jesus is the teacher of higher righteousness which surpasses the Old Testament understanding of righteousness. Kingdom of God is based on new ethics/morality. Where does he learn it all from? The law-abiding Joseph is his *guru*. This assumption is because Joseph practices what Jesus is yet to preach.

Joseph is a true teacher to Jesus in many ways. Jesus's first lessons of respecting women might be from his father Joseph. He might have learned from him to imbibe the spirit of law rather than being adamant to literally following it. Mary might have shared the whole story about her calling, virginal conceiving, journey to Bethlehem, flight to Egypt, return to Nazareth, etc., to Jesus. Jesus learned many things from Mary about his father, especially the many heroic decisions Joseph had taken on different

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<sup>24</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 54-55.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. CCC, 532

<sup>26</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 54.

confusing and dangerous occasions. It must be from his carpenter father that Jesus learned the dignity of labour which truly helped him better understand the working class, the poor, and the marginalized.

In Jesus' interaction with the adulterous woman, we find him forgiving her (Jn 8:1-11). According to the Jewish law, she must be thrown to death. She is presumably caught in the very act of adultery. Surprisingly, there is no mention about the man who engaged with her in the action. This is one of the rude faces of a male dominant society where laws are made by men and practically for their own convenience. It is a similar situation that his mother also had to undergo. Yet his father, who goes beyond the script of the law and finds the spirit of the same, forgives her.<sup>27</sup>

Pope Francis highlights Joseph as an educator. He says that we shall look at Joseph as a true model for educators, for in Jesus' journey of growth 'in wisdom, age, and grace,' he guards and accompanies Jesus. After receiving such training, however, Jesus criticizes the pharisees and Sadducees calling them hypocrites. They fast twice a week and give tithes of everything. They are so adamant in following religious rules and are content with performing some rubrics. This indicates that Jesus never demands literal following of the rules, but he is for the spirit of the law (Mt 23:23). Joseph, in Pope Francis' words, "taught the young Jesus to listen to the Holy Scriptures, especially accompanying him on the sabbath to the synagogue of Nazareth."<sup>28</sup>

A good father is a good teacher too, leading the child to life and its realities. It is not by putting it behind, not by over-protection, and not by establishing ownership over it. True father makes the child capable of taking decisions by granting it freedom. This is the responsibility of a father. Every child is the bearer of a unique mystery that can only be brought out with the help of a father who respects that child's freedom.<sup>29</sup>

## **Protector of the Two Greatest Gifts of Heaven**

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<sup>27</sup>Cf. Hormis Mynatty, "Joseph the Guardian," in *St. Joseph: Father and Teacher* [Malayalam], Aluva: S.H. League, 2021, 125.

<sup>28</sup>Pope Francis' general audience, 19 March, 2014.

<sup>29</sup>*Patris Corde*, 7.

Joseph had a serious responsibility to perform – to protect the two greatest gifts the world has ever seen, Mary and Jesus. Protection of Mary predominantly means safeguarding her virginity. John Chrysostom hails Joseph as the patron of virgins. Mary reveals to St. Bridget that Joseph is the most zealous champion in defending her virginity. Joseph is a silent partaker in the history of incarnation. His participation is indirect as he is expected to fulfil certain conditions required for the incarnation. As the husband of Mary, Joseph had to protect her virginity because “it was of paramount necessity that the conception and birth of Christ should be virginal.”<sup>30</sup> Joseph fulfils this duty devotedly before and after her marriage with her by being a fortress around her. This must indeed be a reason for Mary’s gratitude to and love for her virginal spouse. Joseph perhaps becomes a unique man who is loved and respected by his wife for safeguarding her virginity.

Joseph had to be the husband called to protect the virginity of Mary. There is a mutual protection here as they presented their virginity to each other. He becomes a creative husband.<sup>31</sup> As mentioned earlier, artists generally depict Joseph as an old man in order to safeguard Mary’s virginity from criticism. It can also be interpreted as an indication to the normativity of the family life in any society which idealized family and propagation of the race. This definitely included the physical relationship between the couples. Therefore, it is in order to avoid any room for doubt regarding the physical relationship between Joseph and Mary that he is depicted very old.

Joseph was a man at whose disposal there was a woman, Mary his wife. Yet, she continues to be a virgin. He knows the will of God for Mary and he protects Mary as she was. Thus, his conviction regarding the mission of Mary makes it clear that it was not his old age what protected her virginity. He was a young man and a challenge to all men; role model who humbly and strongly exhorts to respect freedom and choice of every woman.

While acknowledging that Joseph protected Mary, there also arises a question. Why does God need Joseph to be the father of Jesus? If it is a miraculous birth, only Mary needs to be part of it. Not exactly; it is ideal that Mary has the protection of a man; Jesus has a father, in the eyes of the world. A father’s protection is always necessary in a

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<sup>30</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 57; also Cf. CCC, 437.

<sup>31</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 63.

family. Nevertheless, he could not be a father biologically, but a foster/legal father. Therefore, Joseph's fatherhood was at the cost of his liberty, choice, and dreams about life. God knows that only Joseph can be a different man—a man of love, care, forgiveness; a man who can prefer God's dreams to his own; and a man who can perform the role of a father in the best way. Surpassing all this human logic, Joseph remains to be a God chosen miracle to protect Mary and Jesus.

He is a man who accepted life with all its turmoil, struggles, desperations, etc. Only a strong man can embrace what was avoidable, that too not for him. Not running away, he faced realities with open eyes, and took up responsibilities. He had no over expectation; he showed special consideration to the weak; and he was ready to follow the will of God.<sup>32</sup>

### **Joseph, the Male Feminist**

Joseph's approach to the religious rules and customs is different from that of the Pharisees. The pharisaic mentality is that of criticism, and they assess the others through the lens of regulations. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for this attitude. In a system of exaggerating the shortcomings of others and legitimizing oneself, Joseph takes the opposite direction which makes him different. He knows that Mary is legally and morally unfitting for him, but he does not make it public. He keeps the secret in his heart for he does not want to defame Mary. There are two options before him: abandon Mary in secret or hand her over to the law. Joseph boldly redefines the man-centred morality. This is not easy; this is a single person challenging a socially and religiously acknowledged tradition. Undeniably there is a shift from the understanding of eye for an eye to justice with mercy.

Next to Mary, Joseph becomes part of the salvific history. John Paul II says that Joseph joined and assisted Mary in this history.<sup>33</sup> In a patriarchal society a man is assisting the mission of a woman is unusual. "The divine messenger introduces Joseph to the mystery of Mary's motherhood. While remaining a virgin, she who by law is his "spouse" has become a mother through the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Joseph is appointed to serve and protect a woman and her child. Think of a man who lets his wife to be a virgin and

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<sup>32</sup>*Patre Cordis*, 4.

<sup>33</sup>*Redemptoris Custos*, Introduction.

<sup>34</sup>*Redemptoris Custos*, 3.

guards her fame in a society where women could easily be divorced. They do not survive if they are not completely linked to the patriarchal household. Very rarely they inherited property; even there, the husband has the complete authority over it.

Joseph receives Mary unconditionally. In a society, where women's dignity is not in the purview of law and debates, Joseph takes a leap. He poses a challenge to his society as well as the contemporary world where women are exploited; where women are considered impure and unclean during menstruation; and where they are not adequately honoured. But "in giving Joseph the Blessed Virgin as spouse, God appointed him to be not only her life's companion, the witness of her maidenhood, the protector of her honour, but also, by virtue of the conjugal tie, a participator in her sublime dignity."<sup>35</sup>

In such a context, first of all, looking at the gospel texts of both Matthew and Luke, one can also say that Joseph is the first to share in the faith of the Mother of God and that in doing so he supports his spouse in the faith of the divine annunciation. He is also the first to be placed by God on the path of Mary's "pilgrimage of faith."<sup>36</sup> Secondly, Joseph did not blame Mary for the loss of Jesus at the festival site. After the festival, Joseph and Mary come back along with their relatives and other inhabitants of Galilee and Nazareth. After a day's travel they realize that Jesus is not with them. He is not found with their relatives or in the groups of pilgrims returning from Jerusalem. His parents decide to go back to Jerusalem in search of Jesus. As they are not quite sure that he would be in Jerusalem, on the way they had to be looking for him. Till they reach the temple they do not get any piece of information about him.<sup>37</sup> Imagine the agony that Mary and Joseph might have gone through. Having found the boy in the temple, Mary exclaims with a mixed feeling of sorrow and joy 'why he had done it to them.' Jesus says that he should be in his Father's house. Joseph's manliness and fatherhood are indirectly questioned. Silence is Joseph's response because he already knew that his Son would be busy with the Father's business (Lk 2:48-49).<sup>38</sup>

In short, the way Joseph accepts, defends, and protects Mary tells us that he was a male feminist who highly esteemed the dignity of women. Joseph can be the spokesperson of the liberation of women.

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<sup>35</sup>*Quamquam Pluries*, Pope Leo XIII, 1889, no. 3.

<sup>36</sup>*Redemptoris Custos*, 5.

<sup>37</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 40.

<sup>38</sup>Meschler, *The Truth about Saint Joseph*, 41.

Joseph's sense of justice tramples over the rigid laws. As long as there are men like Joseph, the struggles towards liberation of women are alive. St Paul says that man is the head of the woman (1 Cor 11:3). It is true that Mary really belonged to Joseph with all that she was and possessed. As the head of Mary and the family, Joseph performs his duty perfectly; still, he remains to be the servant of the same woman and family.

The conclusion we derive is that whatever Joseph has done makes him a different man. It is with a different charisma, which is fitting to his call, that Joseph approached his mission. This mission is to perform certain unusual things in his life. He is married, but he remains to be a celibate; he has a wife, but he is to protect her virginity; he has a son, but not of him. Besides, the titles like 'shadow of the heavenly Father,' 'vicar of the heavenly Father,' etc., make him a unique man.