

# *Celebrating the Year of Saint Joseph*

## **“With a Father’s Heart”**

### **Living the Gift of Fatherhood in Africa Today in the Light of Saint Joseph**

**Anthony Waruru**

In his apostolic letter “*Patris Cordè*” released on the 150th anniversary of St Joseph’s proclamation as Patron of the universal Catholic Church, declared by Pope Pius IX in 1870 on the feast of Immaculate Conception, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, announced December 2020 until 8<sup>th</sup> December 2021 as the *year of St Joseph*. Pope Francis invites us to reflect on seven attributes of the “silent” St Joseph, namely; a beloved, tender, obedient, accepting, creatively courageous, working, and a father in the shadows.

To commemorate the year of St Joseph, the Philothea Missionary Society has organized a series of webinars. Starting in **March**, we shall reflect on *St. Joseph as the protector of the Church and Spouse of the Most Virgin Mary*. This theme is central to why Pope Francis declared St Joseph’s year and core to the critical role that St Joseph plays in the Church. As the Virgin Mary’s spouse, St Joseph had to protect her dignity, and by extension, the bearer of God and indeed the Church since the Virgin Mary was the bearer of Christ who is the head of the Church.

In **April**, we shall reflect on *St. Joseph as the Pillar of the Family*. In tune with fatherhood’s theme in Pope Francis’ letter, St Joseph takes the central role of being a pillar for families. Following his example, fathers are reminded to take on this God-given role of being pillars for families. In the construction industry, a pillar is an essential part of a building. It holds upright other parts of a building that could otherwise collapse. The role of a father as a pillar of families today is critical. Nearly one out of four households in Africa are female-headed. Often, the cause of this inordinate situation is poverty, immorality, and calamities such as war. God intended that children are brought up by both parents (the mother and father). However, this is often not the case in present-day Africa. Poverty drives men to go looking for money in urban areas of other places with economic activities that can provide income. Immorality is the misery in our African society today. Extramarital sex often leads to unintended pregnancies and single parenthood. Extramarital sex is not uncommon in our present-day society, where, unfortunately, waiting for marriage is no longer fashionable. Figuratively, a three-legged stool was a common feature in homesteads in African culture and preferable because of stability and comfort. Thus the third part is always important. Pope Francis states in his apostolic letter that “Fathers are not born, but made.” Therefore, a man does not acquire a father’s role by merely bringing a child to the World but taking active responsibility in taking care of the child is necessary.

In **May**, the theme of *St. Joseph as Model of Workers* takes central stage. In this theme, the role of a father in balancing work and family is vital. The African society is faced with a significant challenge of lack of employment for the bulging youthful population. The “catch 22” situation is such that balancing work and family has become increasingly challenging for the middle class. Compounded by an increasing cost of living, an imbalance between work

and family is imminent. Fathers often work for long hours to make ends meet. Thus, juggling work and family responsibilities becomes hard. However, every man's question should be whether having little time for family at the expense of work is necessary. An imbalance in either direction has repercussions. Too much work deprives the family of a father's leadership, guidance to the children and can lead to the head of the family's premature death. Besides, Pope Francis proposes that St Joseph's model as a "Father in the shadows" implies fathers' presence to overshadow their children, guiding them in every way they can. However, fathers should not be "overprotective or possessive" but should allow children to have a certain level of freedom to explore on their own and have their own space. Such is the delicate balance between work and family.

Come **June**, we shall reflect on *St. Joseph as the Just Man*. Justice is one of St Joseph's virtues. In the African family context, justice does not take a different form than is universally acknowledged. It only stands for "doing what is right." Doing what is right simply means that a fault would not be exposed in the eyes of God and man. As a just man, St Joseph was faced with a dilemma when he learned that Mary, who he was betrothed to marry, was already pregnant. To "right a wrong" and being a just man, St Joseph didn't want to put her to shame and wanted to divorce her in secret. "And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:19). Men in the family and society at large are often faced with such challenging situations. Reflecting on doing the right thing even when faced with divergent voices is critical for uprightness and righteousness. Indeed, many such opportunities are sacrificed at will. Today, many African men are faced with choices between evil and good: to be corrupt or honest, lie or get caught, cheat or be chaste, and many more moral and legal decisions.

**July:** In several parts of Africa, July tends to be a cold month. It is a month when being warm towards others and self-giving in service does not cross the mind of many. Regardless, we shall reflect on *St Joseph, the model of self-giving love* first to family and extending the same devotion to the Church. The embers of self-gift sparks in the domicile church "the family" and spread out to the entire Church in service. As a father, denial of bodily comforts for the family's sake is a norm in many African settings. When you walk around in many market places in Africa, you will often see hardworking men toiling, pulling carts, carrying heavy loads on their shoulders and backs. This mortification of the body is a choice, a sacrifice, and is often in service for others as much as it is in order to put food on the table for the family. Such denial of bodily comforts exemplifies what St Joseph had to embrace in self-gift as the foster-father of Jesus both in service of the family and the Church. The African man is faced with the noble task of supporting the family and the Church through self-giving. Such a choice does not need coercion and is necessary for the growth of the Church. The primary church unit (the family) needs such sacrifice from fathers - domestic fatherhood, while the Catholic Church needs men who sacrifice to be religious, priests, bishops, cardinals.

**August:** This month is dedicated to the theme of "*St. Joseph the Chaste Spouse.*" During the month, we shall reflect on St Joseph's fatherhood as a model of purity to the youth and the service of the Church. Chastity is one of St Joseph's virtues. Chastity is a character trait that embodies St Joseph's temperance and is very well matched with "silence" as his other

character trait. For the youth, temperance controls human desires for pleasures such as sexual desires. The Church also dedicates August to the “Immaculate Heart of Mary,” which is also described as the Blessed Virgin Mary’s interior life, including her joys, sorrows, and hidden perfections. In the book “You Joseph,” Fr Vernet brings out critical aspects of these two hearts (Joseph’s and Mary’s) meeting in filial and pure love. Many youths today, both young men and women, ought to look at the virtue of chastity common between St Joseph and ever-virgin Mary and mirror that in courtships, spousal relationships, or as they discern religious vocations.

In **September**, we shall reflect on *St. Joseph and the challenge of poverty in the African family*. About 85% of Africans live on less than \$5.50 per day, making poverty a topical issue in Africa. We shall discuss how fathers can model after St Joseph as a father who should provide for his family. In the Holy Father’s letter “Patris Corde”, the working father’s theme is highlighted well. We live in challenging times even in countries and settings where finding work to feed for the family was not a problem in the recent past. The year 2020 was challenging for many families around the World. Many fathers lost their jobs and means of livelihood. Modeling after St Joseph, African men can find joy and dignity in “eating bread that is the fruit of one’s labour.” The get-rich-quick schemes such as the pyramid schemes have caused untold suffering to many men and women alike. Appreciating the dignity of work is critical. This calls for the availability of opportunities, access to capital for small-scale businesses and medium-sized enterprises.

**October:** In this month, we shall continue with the theme from September along the lines of “*man as the provider*.” We shall delve into exciting aspects of the *creative, courageous, and protective* man and a family *guide*. In the old days where men played the role of hunting, courage was a paramount quality. In ancient Africa, armed with a bow, arrows, spear, and possibly a club, a man had to be courageous to hunt and bring back meat for the family. Courage is a virtue many men can emulate from St Joseph. It may not be a prominent virtue since St Joseph is referred to as the “silent saint.” Through his courage, he guided the family to safety in times of grave danger (when the family had to flee to Egypt, their journey back to Israel). Many married men fret when their wives are about to give birth. Yet, such moments demand a man’s creativity, such as when St Joseph had to be creative to find a manger where the holy Virgin Mary could give birth.

**November:** “*St. Joseph the Guardian*.” This theme is central to St Joseph’s role in the salvation of humankind. Jesus needed a foster father who would provide him (in his human nature) food, clothing, and shelter. However, St. Joseph’s role did not end at providing the basic human needs. He had to be the guardian of Jesus, “the consecrated.” He knew his role right from when the Angel appeared to him and reassured him of his mission. St Joseph had to protect a vulnerable and young virgin Mary, the holy one of God - Jesus. Therefore, in this month, we shall reflect on St. Joseph’s role as the guardian of the consecrated women and men of God, the vulnerable widows and children.

**December:** Finally, in this month, as we close the year of St. Joseph, we shall dwell on his *spirituality* and primarily based on the spirituality of fatherhood; *obedience, love, faithfulness,*

*patience, suffering, and tenderness.* All these aspects embodied in the interior life that St Joseph lived and continues to live in us are central to our faith today.

We at the Philothea Missionary Society invite you to journey with us through the monthly webinars that we have lined up for you. Do not let this year of grace pass you by.

**St Joseph, master of interior life, teach us to pray, to suffer, and to be silent.**