

YEAR of SAINT JOSEPH



“Show yourself a father, and guide us in the path of life”

REFLECTION - JUNE 2021

Joseph as “Protector”

Mt 2:13-18

Refugee Week, 20-26th June 2021

“Within days, or even hours, violent oppressors will occupy your town centre.” For refugees around the world, this scenario typifies an immediate threat. With no time to respond, they abandon livelihood, community and homeland to escape civil war, political unrest, religious persecution, effects of climate change and exploitation or systematic abuse of basic human rights. Their desperate attempts to find refuge are often not final solutions but new beginnings. A long journey into the unknown is marked by fear, danger and daunting obstacles.

Mid-2020 data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that worldwide numbers of forcibly displaced people surpassed 80 million. According to their statistics, 26.3 million were refugees, an additional 4.2 million were recorded as asylum-seekers and tens of millions of others classified as internally displaced or stateless.

From Matthew’s Gospel narrative of Jesus’ birth and the roles of Joseph and Mary, we learn of the many challenges faced by this young family. Joseph followed the example of his ancient Biblical



Fathers of Faith — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — under the guidance of the angel’s visionary message: “Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you” (Mt 2: 13).

Joseph’s protective response to Herod’s imminent threat to the life of his newborn son Jesus, mirrored that of many parents among today’s displaced people. At short notice, Joseph got up to protect his young family from danger, “For Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him,” and in the dark of the night, “took the child and his mother” (Mt 2: 14). He embarked on an escape into the unknown; a journey involving fear, danger and an uncertain future. At the same time, it was a venture filled with deep hope and trust in God’s providence that it would lead to safety and a better place for Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

For the family, settling in a new place was just the beginning. Soon he would discover that being separated from home and immediate family meant that the fundamental means of social support was no longer available. Joseph and Mary would also have had a sense of being lowly strangers stranded in a new place under an unknown local language and unfamiliar cultures and customs. As a family still dealing with the trauma of flight and estrangement, those challenges would have impacted heavily on Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Similar conditions and circumstances continue to confront the 80 million refugees and displaced people today.

Joseph demonstrated his commitment to safeguard his family and face the new reality foretold in his dream as he followed God’s call to go to Egypt, “and remained there until the death of Herod” (Mt 2:15). Like so many displaced parents who care for their families in our contemporary world, Joseph protected and supported Mary and Jesus. Joseph’s example is an inspiration for us to generously embrace the encounter with our displaced brothers and sisters who are likewise seeking refuge and security for their families. The Gospel account encourages us to compassionately listen to their stories of suffering, isolation and hopelessness.

Pope Francis, in this year’s message for World Day of Migrant and Refugees *Towards an Ever Wider “We”*¹ said “The truth however is that we are all in the same boat and called to work together so that there will be no more walls that separate us, no longer others, but only a single

1 Francis, “TOWARDS AN EVER WIDER “WE”, Message for the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2021” (2021). https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20210503_world-migrants-day-2021.html

‘we’, encompassing all of humanity.” He emphasises the importance of welcoming refugees and migrants and offering them protection. A generous, hospitable spirit reflects the universality of our Church and contributes to her enrichment and growth. “In encountering the diversity of foreigners, migrants and refugees, and in the intercultural dialogue that can emerge from this encounter, we have an opportunity to grow as Church and to enrich one another.”

On a personal level, I have been privileged to meet and listen to the stories of many brave and courageous parents, children and young people who have ventured with hope. They, like Joseph and many of our own forebears, took a dangerous journey, and faced enormous pressure and trauma. Many challenges and struggles were endured in order to provide a safe and secure future for their children. Listening to the recently arrived and longer-term migrants and refugees can help us to appreciate Joseph and Mary’s own experience and — in the spirit of Refugee Week and September’s 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees — increase our understanding of Pope Francis’ call to respond to the needs of our new neighbours so that together “we” can continue to create an ever greater “us”.

Fr Khalid Marogi is the Director of the Australian Catholic Migrant & Refugee Office.

